AUTHORS, AUDIENCES, AND ADVOCATES … BUT ATHLETES FIRST:

BLOGGING AND THE PARALYMPIC MOVEMENT

by

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Abstract

When the Paralympic Movement is discussed, it is predominantly described as both an extension of the Olympic Movement and an uncorrupted version of Olympism. Yet to define the Paralympics only in reference to the Olympic Movement is to ignore its rich history and the unique factors that continue to inform the practice of disability sport. In this research, I collaborated with five Paralympians to create a blog that discussed disability sport and the Paralympic Movement. Collectively, the team published posts on disability sport-related topics and recruited readers to the site. Over a period of 14 months, the blog was visited 9,700 times by individuals in more than 90 countries, resulting in 339 posted comments.

I conducted interviews with blog team members and with 20 individuals who were reading and commenting on the blog. Transcripts of the interviews as well as the posts and comments were thematically coded to address the following questions:

• How and why do individuals choose to interact with the blog and what are the perceived outcomes of their participation?

• How do blog users (readers and writers) understand the relation between the discussions occurring on the blog and their individual online and offline actions to promote, advocate for, and/or transform para-sport?

• How do participants (readers and writers) define their involvement in the Paralympic Movement and what do participants perceive to be the ‘key’ issues that the social movement must address?

Drawing on new social movement theory and literature into the use of online communication by social movements, I address how blogs are being employed within the Paralympic Movement and the value they have in promoting and advocating for disability sport. The findings discuss blogging as an opportunity for: (1) athletes as authors to share resources, discuss ideas, and provide support to other athletes, (2) members of the Paralympic movement to connect with various audiences and provide outsiders with a ‘window onto para-sport’, and (3) disability sport advocates to call out or challenge individuals, organizations, practices, and policies that are perceived to be discriminatory and as contributing to the marginalization of athletes with disabilities.
Preface

This research was approved by the UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board: Certificate Number H11-00290 (Principal Investigator: Dr. Laura Hurd Clarke).
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<th>Full Form</th>
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<tr>
<td>IOC</td>
<td>International Olympic Committee</td>
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<td>IPC</td>
<td>International Paralympic Committee</td>
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<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organization</td>
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<td>NSO</td>
<td>National Sport Organizations</td>
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<td>PAR</td>
<td>Participatory Action Research</td>
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Acknowledgements

It is an old joke that rowers move forwards while looking backwards. Requisite sport metaphor aside, I do need to take a moment to acknowledge and thank everyone who has supported and mentored me these past five years.

This project was a collaborative effort and I have a lot of people to thank. First and foremost on the list has to be Courtney. When she asked me to guide her at the 2010 Paralympic Games, she set me on a new path and, because of her, I have met the most incredible people and had some truly amazing opportunities. Thank you Courtney — we make a good team and I look forward to finding out what project you’ll have me tackling next. We both owe a huge thank you to Meyrick. His blog was the inspiration for AthletesFirst and many of our best ideas came from watching him at work. Thank you also to the blog team: Blair, Jason, Josh, and Stuart — even when you didn’t know exactly what Courtney and I were proposing, you were willing to take a risk and sign on with us. The blog project wouldn’t have worked without you. Thanks for the excellent posts. Thank you also to the many readers and guest writers worldwide who made the AthletesFirst blog what it was. I was constantly blown away by your commitment to the project and to each other — the posts and comments were thoughtful and thought-provoking.

Dr. Laura Hurd Clarke has been my doctoral supervisor these past five years (and supervised my master’s degree prior to that). I am not sure either of us really knew what we were getting into when I first walked into the Annex but I am grateful she agreed to take me on anyway. It would be impossible to list all the ways she has informed this work; let it suffice to say I am forever indebted to her. As a mentor she has been exemplary and offered constant support and encouragement even while exhorting me to do better. I have also been very fortunate to have Drs. Wendy Frisby, Rachelle Hole, and Brian Wilson as my supervisory doctoral committee. It was while taking Wendy and Brian’s classes that I first conceived this project. I am very grateful to them for introducing me to new concepts and new literature and for their patience as I struggled to make sense of everything I was learning (when Wendy asked the class to define power I wrote down the equation \( P_{\text{ave}} = \frac{\Delta W}{\Delta t} \) … the transition from studying the mechanics of sport to studying sport culture was not always easy). Rachelle joined the committee more recently but her guidance in the final stages of this project has been invaluable. I thank them all for generously sharing their time with me.

I cannot possibly name all the Annexers who have been my companions on this journey. Despite nature’s best attempts to evict us we’ve survived the infestations, floods, deep freezes, and plagues. I have benefitted enormously from the advice and assistance of other students. I am particularly indebted to my roommate Cathy and to Erica and Alex for their friendship and support (particularly the late night pizza parties and the last minute proofreading).

I have never been able to exercise my mind unless my body was suitably exhausted. I couldn’t have possibly made it this far without the support of my teammates on the UBC varsity rowing team. The early morning practices were the perfect start to every day and the late afternoon
sessions were my favourite way to unwind. Craig – I thought my rowing career was done and then I came to UBC and you helped me realize I was just getting started. Thanks for taking on this ‘long term project.’ You, Liz, Sheryl, and the whole UBC rowing gang have made Vancouver my home these past seven years and it’s incredibly hard to think about leaving the Thunderbirds.

The Nordic Racers and the UBC Nordic Ski Team have also been a large part of my life these last few years. Being a part of the NR’s para-nordic committee has been an incredibly rewarding experience and I’ve been blown away (and challenged) by the intellectual debates of the UBC Nordies enroute to the trails.

My aunt Paula and my friend Nathalie have been my family here on the coast. Thank you for the home-cooked meals, the walks/runs on the seawall, and the endless encouragement.

I will be forever grateful to my parents, Mo Bundon and Michelle Carr and to my sister, Johanna, for their love and support. They know I don’t do ‘emotion’ well and I’m not one to gush but it’s incredibly powerful to know your family is standing with you no matter what road you take. ‘Well Andy, if that’s what is going to make you happy…’

During my doctoral degree I was fortunate enough to be the recipient of a Canadian Graduate Scholarship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. I am also grateful to the Canadian Athletes Now Fund (CANFund) for financially supporting Courtney and me as we trained for and competed at the 2010 Paralympic Games.

Well you know what they say about university — it was the best thirteen years of my life. Now what?
This dissertation is dedicated to teammates past and present, in particular to the 2010 para-nordic ‘development’ team.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Almost every athlete has ideas about how you can make the system better.

– Josh

1.1 The Researcher Recruited

I first met Courtney in 2008 while recruiting participants for my master’s research project on the use of alternative medicine among Canadian national team athletes. I wanted to include para-athletes in the sample but the truth was that, despite my many years as a competitive athlete, I had very little knowledge of disability sport and even fewer contacts within the Canadian para-sport community. I emailed my former cross-country skiing coach (I had a vague memory of him coaching a few para-nordic athletes) and he introduced me to a club in the Vancouver area with an active program for athletes with disabilities. Their coach agreed to allow me to give a short recruiting spiel at the team’s next training session with only one condition — I had to bring my skis. Though my pitch was only marginally successful (only one para-athlete called me in the following week to volunteer for the project), I would later look back upon that evening as the single most significant moment in my career as a researcher. The short story is that I went to recruit athletes and instead I was recruited. Courtney, a four-time Paralympian in the sport of athletics, was trying to make the switch from discus throwing to cross-country skiing with the goal of competing at the 2010 Vancouver Paralympic Games. In 2008, she had already been on the national para-nordic development squad for two years and she had had some success nationally and internationally. However, as an athlete with a visual impairment, Courtney required a guide to race with her and direct her on the trails and she had recently found out that her current guide was about to retire. She needed someone to train with in the final push to qualify for the Paralympics. My arrival at that practice could not have been more fortuitous for either of us. We skied together that evening and again in the weeks that followed; a few months later, she asked me to guide her at a world cup and we have been skiing together ever since.

Courtney and I are both products of the Canadian sport system. I started competing in rowing at age 10 and was on the provincial rowing team by age 13. Courtney moved from her

1 Participants in this project made the decision to have their real names used. Please see section 3.3.3.2 for a discussion of this decision.
hometown in northern British Columbia to Burnaby at age 16 to (successfully) pursue a spot on the 1992 Canadian Paralympic team. Between us, we have competed for nearly 40 years at a national and international level, participated in three Western Canada Summer Games, six Jeux du Canada Games, six Paralympic Games, and countless provincial, national, and international championships. In fact, it is surprising that our paths did not cross sooner. It turns out we were often at the same event, staying in dorms just down the hall from each other. On many levels we spoke a common language, had similar experiences, and shared many beliefs about sport … or did we?

As an athlete with a visual impairment, Courtney’s experience of sport was both similar to and different from my own. While the actual practice of sport was generally the same, throughout her career, Courtney had the additional task of having to advocate for disability sport and, in many instances, for her very right to participate. Though I was certainly no stranger to the ways in which power circulates within the sport system or the means by which dominant discourses operate to privilege some athletes above others, the outright discrimination that Courtney and many of her teammates had encountered was utterly foreign to me. As a skier and a consummate competitor, I was drawn to the challenge of learning to guide and to the opportunity to race with Courtney at high-level events. As a sport sociology student and as an athlete who has always been interested in the workings of the sport system, I was fascinated by the invitation to participate in a side of sport that most able-bodied people never get to experience. I had a thousand questions about what I was observing and, fortunately for me, Courtney was more than happy to entertain them. Although I was the guide on the trails, in every other respect Courtney was guiding me, particularly through our lengthy discussions during the many hours we spent together in the lead up to the 2010 Paralympic Games.

There were two main catalysts for this project: the first was the conversations that Courtney and I were engaging in, and the second was the rise in popularity of blogging among athletes. As we prepared for the Paralympic Games, Courtney and I observed that many of our teammates were starting to blog. Though these sites were generally a means of staying in touch with friends and family, raising funds to pay for competitions, or attracting sponsorship, some athletes were publishing posts that critically reflected upon their experiences in their sport. With these examples in front of us, Courtney and I decided to start a blog that provided a forum to discuss disability sport. We wanted the blog to be a platform for continuing the discussions that
we were already having while allowing for athletes and others to join the conversation. We also decided to recruit an editorial blog team of other para-athletes who would share the task of writing blog posts. This was the idea behind the creation of the AthletesFirst blog.

1.2 The Paralympic Movement?

Though the AthletesFirst blog was the cornerstone of the project described in this dissertation, it was not the whole of the project. Rather, the blog was a means of exploring and interrogating broader issues including the notion that disability sport is about more than just people with disabilities doing sport. We (the blog team) were operating from the assumption that Courtney was not the only athlete with a disability who had had to advocate for her right to participate in sport. We were arguing that many (though not necessarily all) athletes with disabilities would have encountered situations where the overwhelmingly able-bodied sport system failed to meet their needs. We were contending that it was not only possible but also probable that other individuals would also be interested in coming together to discuss the ways that sport could be used to promote inclusion rather than further perpetuating the marginalization of people with disabilities. In short, we were interested in engaging with members of the Paralympic Movement.

The label of social movement has been applied to collectives as diverse as religious sects, political organizations, single-issue campaigns, riots, and revolutions (Diani, 1992). It has been used to describe groups with memberships that range from a few hundred to several million. However, despite the many ways in which the term has been deployed, there is some consistency in how the term has generally been defined. Social movements are networks of individuals, groups, and organizations united around commonly held beliefs, ideas, or opinions, that engage in collective action with the intent of opposing/promoting social change (Diani, 1992). Emphasizing that social movements are a form of collective action that exists outside of established institutions or political structures, Snow, Soule, and Kriesi (2004) offer this definition:

Social movements can be thought of as collectivities acting with some degree of organization and continuity outside of institutional or organizational channels for the purpose of challenging or defending extant authority, whether it is institutionally or
culturally based, in the group, organization, society, culture, or world order of which they are a part (p. 11, italics in original).

Diani (1992) and Snow et al. (2004) both emphasize that although organizations can have an important function within social movements and might provide social movement actors with a stable point around which to rally, organizations are not in and of themselves social movements. These are the definitions of social movements that have informed my understanding of the concept and that have shaped this project.

My first encounter with the term ‘the Paralympic Movement’ was in reading David Howe’s 2008 book entitled The Cultural Politics of the Paralympic Movement: Through an Anthropological Lens. Prior to this, I was certainly familiar with the history of the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) (briefly described in Chapter 2 of this document) and I knew that the word ‘Paralympic’ was part of the IPC’s brand. But I had never really considered that the Paralympics could be part of a movement. Using the term the Paralympic Movement seemed to me an assertion that the IPC was part of something that extended far beyond hosting a Paralympic Games every other year. In investigating the term, I found that the IPC’s Website included the tagline “The Official Website of the Paralympic Movement”, provided a “History of the Paralympic Movement”, and encouraged visitors to follow the Paralympic Movement on Facebook and Twitter. Additionally, I noticed that press releases made by the IPC concluded with the statement “The International Paralympic Committee (IPC) is the global governing body of the Paralympic Movement.” It seemed clear to me that the IPC, an international non-profit

2 The full text included at the end of every IPC press release reads: “Notes to the Editor: The International Paralympic Committee (IPC) is the global governing body of the Paralympic Movement. The IPC supervises the organization of the Summer and Winter Paralympic Games, and serves as the International Federation for nine sports, for which it supervises and co-ordinates the World Championships and other competitions. The IPC is committed to enabling Paralympic athletes to achieve sporting excellence and to develop sport opportunities for all persons with a disability from the beginner to elite level. In addition, the IPC aims to promote the Paralympic values, which include courage, determination, inspiration and equality. Founded on 22 September 1989, the IPC is an international non-profit organization formed and run by 174 National Paralympic Committees (NPCs) from five regions and four disability specific international sports federations (IOSDs). The IPC headquarters and its management team are located in Bonn, Germany.”
organization run by 200 members, was suggesting that they not only owned the Paralympic name and brand but that they also owned the Paralympic Movement.

The problem with the assertion that the IPC is the governing body of the Paralympic Movement is that it is not at all clear that an organization can own or ‘govern’ a social movement. In fact, the definitions of social movements provided earlier indicate that organizations are only one of the stakeholders involved in social movements. Diani (1992) positions organizations as one of the actors that form a social movement alongside individuals and loosely knit groups and Snow et al. (2004) contend that social movements may include organizational elements but also require some degree of autonomy or distance from formalized organizational or institutional structures. Della Porta and Diani (2009) go so far as to suggest that social movements end when organizations come to dominate the movement and when being part of the social movement is confused with one’s allegiance to or membership in a particular organization. The difference, according to Della Porta and Diani (2009), is that “strictly speaking, social movements do not have members, but participants” (2009, p. 26) and that while members are identified when they claim belonging to a particular organization or group, participants are identified by their actions. An individual’s participation in a social movement is an ongoing and constant negotiation. Thus, Della Porta and Diani (2009) contend:

The participation of the individual, detached from specific organizational allegiances, is not necessarily limited to single protest events. It can also develop within committee or working groups, or else in public meetings. Alternatively (when the possibility arises) one may support a movement by promoting its ideas and its point of view among institutions, other political actors, or the media. However, the existence of a range of possible ways of becoming involved means that the membership of movements can never be reduced to a single act of adherence. It consists, rather, of a series of differentiated acts, which taken together reinforce the feeling of belonging and of identity (p. 26).

However, while an organization is not in and of itself a social movement, Snow and McAdam (2000) have observed that many organizations act as sponsors of social movements, particularly in the early stages of a movement’s development. This sponsorship can include the provision of resources to the emerging social movement as well as the granting of access to a pre-existing network of individuals (organization members) who might be enticed to join the movement. As explained by Snow and McAdam (2000): “Successful movements rarely create
compelling collective identities from scratch. Rather, they redefine shared identities within established social settings as synonymous with an emerging activist identity” (p. 56).

The notion that the IPC is part of (and certainly central to) the Paralympic Movement but is not the entirety of social movement is more consistent with how the term the Paralympic Movement is used in the literature. According to Legg and Steadward (2011), while the IPC defines the Paralympic Movement from an organizational perspective, this definition is very much open for debate:

To date, an in-depth understanding of the Paralympic ‘movement’ or ‘Paralympism’ has not been published, although it is used widely. This is despite the fact that those using it appear to be basing their understanding of the ‘movement’ on an undefined set of values and beliefs (Legg & Steadward, 2011, p. 1099).

In my own reading and in talking to teammates, I have heard the term used to reference the activities of athletes with disabilities who will never compete at the level of the Paralympic Games and all sorts of programs, events, and initiatives that have only the most tenuous ties to the IPC. Furthermore, in the academic literature, the Paralympic Movement is discussed in terms of the historical and present day socio-cultural context in which disability sport is practiced, a level of analysis that required researchers to extend their gaze far beyond the ‘organizational’ Paralympic Movement (cf. Bailey, 2008; Legg & Steadward, 2011; Schantz & Gilbert, 2008). In these instances, the description of the Paralympic Movement meets Diani’s (1992) definition of a social movement in that it is a network of (loosely bound) individuals, groups, and organizations who individually and collectively promote opportunities for individuals with disabilities to engage in sport and oppose practices that use sport to marginalize or oppress people with disabilities.

When Courtney and I originally came up with the idea of creating a blog to discuss disability sport and decided to recruit the blog team, it was this second (non-institutional) definition of the Paralympic Movement that we had in mind. We were experimenting with the idea that blogs might have a function to play within social movements by providing social movement actors with a space where they could interact with others regardless of whether or not those others had formal ties to the IPC and the Paralympic Games. The AthletesFirst project,
previously mentioned, was designed to capitalize on the growing trend of athletes blogging, but it was also intended to contribute to the emerging understanding of how blogs and other forms of online communications were being used within social movements, could be used within social movements and, perhaps most importantly, could provide an additional means or entry point for individuals to become involved in social movements. With those considerations in mind, the research questions that framed this project were as follows:

**RQ1:** How and why do individuals choose to interact with the blog and what are the perceived outcomes of their participation?

**RQ2:** How do blog users (readers and writers) understand the relation between the discussions occurring on the blog and their individual online and offline actions to promote, advocate for, and/or transform para-sport?

**RQ3:** How do participants (readers and writers) define their involvement in the Paralympic Movement and what do participants perceive to be the ‘key’ issues that the social movement must address?

### 1.3 Dissertation Outline

This dissertation documents the AthletesFirst blog project from conception to execution. In Chapter 2, I begin with a brief history of the Paralympic Movement starting with the Stoke Mandeville Games hosted at a rehabilitative hospital for injured war veterans in the years following World War II through to the present day relationship between the IPC and the International Olympic Committee (IOC). This is followed by a review of the new social movements literature and a discussion of the ways in which social movement actors have adopted digital technologies, including blogging. I then explore how the use of online technologies has mimicked older strategies employed by social movement members and also afforded them the opportunity to engage in previously unseen forms of action. I conclude the literature review with an overview of the ways in which sport has been implicated in the study of new social movements.
In Chapter 3, I provide an overview of the premise and objectives of participatory action research (PAR) with particular attention paid to how PAR has been taken up within the field of disability studies and a discussion of why PAR has been deemed an appropriate methodology for this work. Also included in this chapter is an outline of the design of the project that includes: profiles of the blog team members, a summary of the steps taken to create and maintain the blog, an outline of the tactics employed to recruit readers to the blog, a description of the interviews undertaken with blog team members and with 20 individuals who read and commented on the blog, and an overview of the data analysis process. I end Chapter 3 with a reflection on the unique methodological considerations and challenges of using participatory methods in an online environment and as an able-bodied researcher studying disability sport.

I present the findings, arrived at following a thematic analysis of the interviews, blog posts, and online comments, in three chapters. In Chapter 4, entitled ‘Authors,’ I explore the experiences of the blog team as they designed the blog, selected topics, wrote posts, and responded to readers’ comments. I further outline the objectives of the authors writing the posts and the outcomes they were hoping for as a result of their involvement in the project. In Chapter 5, the focus shifts to the blog readers as I describe who blog authors and readers perceived to be the audiences for AthletesFirst. Based on interviews with 20 blog readers, I examine why individuals were reading the blog and whether or not they understood themselves to be the intended audience (and also ask ‘If they were not the intended audience, who was?’). In the last chapter of findings, Chapter 6, I build upon the preceding chapters and consider the ways in which the AthletesFirst blog was used by authors and audiences to promote and advocate for disability sport. This use of the blog as a form of advocacy is further discussed with reference to how blogging has generally been adopted and deployed within the Paralympic Movement.

In the final chapter, Chapter 7, I synthesize the findings in view of the three research questions. Exploring the substantive, methodological, and theoretical contributions made by this project particularly with regards to the use of blogging within the Paralympic Movement, I discuss the practical implications of conducting participatory and qualitative research online and the ways in which individuals and groups are using blogs as a form of advocacy within social movements. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the project and suggestions for future areas of investigation.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

I think you [come to] realize that this whole Paralympic thing is a lot bigger than yourself and it’s a really neat thing to be part of ... I think that the whole Paralympic Movement thing does go beyond the Paralympic Games and I like to think that people can identify with that.

– Jason

The following review of the literature begins with a short history of disability sport and the Paralympic Games. In this chapter, I explore the context in which the Paralympic Movement came into being with particular attention paid to the rise of the Disability Rights Movement. This is followed by a discussion of the key theoretical approaches used in the study of social movements including considerations as to how, when, and why social movement actors are using online spaces and Internet technologies. I then describe how the theoretical frameworks established by social movement scholars have been applied to blogging as a form of social activism, as a site for the formation of collective identities, as a tool for community building, and as a space for collective action. Included in this discussion is a deliberation as to how Internet technologies and online media have forced scholars to reconsider the very definition of social movements: their goals, tactics, and membership. I conclude by identifying the gaps in the literature that this project endeavours to address theoretically, methodologically, and substantively.

2.1 The Origins of the Paralympic Movement

Disability sport has its roots in the medical facilities built at the end of the Second World War to house and rehabilitate wounded veterans (Anderson, 2003; DePauw & Gavron, 2005; Howe, 2008). While individuals with disabilities were certainly participating in sports prior to the 1940s, the war was the catalyst that led to the creation of organized sporting events specifically designed for people with disabilities (DePauw & Gavron, 2005; IPC Website, n.d., History of Sport for Persons with a Disability). Histories of disability sport and the Paralympic Games have identified three main reasons for this development: (1) large numbers of injured war veterans were centralized in rehabilitative hospitals (particularly in the United Kingdom but also elsewhere in North America and Western Europe); (2) many of the veterans had been socialized to sport through the school systems and had positive associations with sport; and (3) there was
considerable pressure on the hospitals and medical professionals to speed the recovery of these war veterans and make them, once again, productive members of society (Anderson, 2003; Howe, 2008; IPC Website, n.d., History of Sport for Persons with a Disability; Wolbring, Legg, & Stahnisch, 2010). It was in this context that Dr. Ludwig Guttman, a neurologist working at the Stoke Mandeville Hospital in England, decided to host a sport event modelled on the Olympic Games. Guttman, chancing upon a group of orderlies and patients playing a modified form of polo with wheelchairs and walking canes, was inspired to explore the use of sport as a form of rehabilitative therapy (Anderson, 2003). His patients, he postulated, would be more receptive to participating in sport than they were to more traditional forms of rehabilitative exercises (Anderson, 2003). What distinguished Guttman’s dream from other instrumental uses of sport is the particular model that he chose for his project, namely, the Olympic Games. In 1948, the Olympics were being held in London, England, approximately 70 kilometres from the Stoke Mandeville Hospital. While Guttman could have limited sport in the hospital to strictly rehabilitative purposes, he instead chose to host a competition on the exact same day that the Olympic Games were opening. He stated that in addition to developing the abilities of his patients, he believed that sport could raise the profile of injured veterans in the eyes of the general public (Anderson, 2003; Brittain, 2009; Howe, 2008). His words and actions clearly indicated that he saw sport as a means of mitigating the marginalization of individuals with a disability and reintegrating them into public life. The Stoke Mandeville Games continued to grow over the years as patients from other hospitals, both in the United Kingdom and from other countries were invited to participate. While there were no formal ties with the IOC at that time, the Stoke Mandeville Games adopted many of the elements associated with the Olympic Games and eventually the move was made to hold the Stoke Mandeville Games in a different city every fourth year, preferably the same city that was hosting the Olympic Games, thus solidifying in many peoples’ minds that the Stoke Mandeville Games were the Olympics for the Disabled³ (Brittain, 2009).

David Howe, a leading sociologist in the field of disability sport (as well as a long-time athlete on the Canadian Paralympic Team), identified three moments in the history of Paralympic

³ See Brittain (2009) for an overview of the use of Olympic terminology by the Paralympic Movement.
sport and stated that if the first phase of the movement was embedded in hospitals and narratives of rehabilitation, the second phase can best be described as sport as participation, and the third phase as the rise of elite or high performance disability sport (Howe, 2008). This second phase commenced in the early 1980s and was characterized by a dramatic surge in the number of sporting opportunities available for individuals with disabilities as well as the formation of a number of International Organizations of Sport for the Disabled. Organizations for people who used wheelchairs as well as for those with visual impairments, amputations, and cerebral palsy eventually joined forces with the International Stoke Mandeville Wheelchair Sports Federation that was created in 1960 for the purpose of coordinating and organizing the Stoke Mandeville Games which had grown to include 23 nations and over 400 athletes (IPC Website, n.d., Rome 1960). This new conglomerate was originally named the International Coordinating Committee for World Sports Organizations, but in 1989 was renamed the International Paralympic Committee.

It also bears mentioning that, even during this phase of rapid growth, not all groups were equally welcomed or encouraged to participate. The military history of the Stoke Mandeville Hospital meant that the overwhelming majority of early participants (i.e. hospital patients) were men. Although women were never actively excluded from the games, they were certainly underrepresented in the early days of the event and accounted for only 66 of the 375 competitors at the 1964 Tokyo Paralympics. As disability groups other than injured war veterans joined the IPC, the number of female Paralympians has increased although they have yet to reach parity with their male counterparts in terms of numbers. Women made up only 34 per cent of the competitors at the 2008 Beijing Paralympics (Brittain, 2009) and only 24 per cent at the 2010 Vancouver Paralympics (Smith & Wrynn, 2010). Furthermore, women are conspicuously absent from leadership roles within Paralympic sport (Smith & Wrynn, 2010).

\[\text{In comparison, women accounted for 40 per cent of the competitors at the Winter Olympics in that same year.}\]
\[\text{There are only five sports on the program at the Winter Paralympic Games (biathlon, cross country skiing, curling, downhill skiing, and sled hockey) and the total number of competitors is quite small when compared to the Summer Paralympic Games (approximately 500 athletes at the winter event versus nearly 4,000 athletes at the summer event). Though all of the sports are technically open to men and women, very few sled hockey teams include any females on their rosters.}\]
Additionally, the membership of the IPC has generally privileged *physical disabilities*. Though the International Sports Federation for Persons with Intellectual Disability was a founding member of the IPC and a number of athletes with intellectual disabilities participated in the Paralympic Games from the 1980s through to the 2000 Paralympic Games, the inclusion of individuals with intellectual disabilities has always been a contentious issue within the Paralympic Movement. When it was revealed that the gold medal-winning Spanish basketball team from the 2000 Sydney Paralympics had misrepresented the mental ‘abilities’ of their players, the IPC’s response was to immediately eliminate all events for athletes with intellectual disabilities at future games until a more robust classification system could be established (Brittain, 2009). A limited number of events for athletes with intellectual disabilities were reintroduced to the program for the 2012 London Paralympic Games but the fields were small and many nations failed to send a single representative in these events. While the discussion as to which individuals and groups are included/excluded in the Paralympic family cannot be fully addressed here in the literature review, I think it is important to note that the partnerships and alliances that formed during this early period played a role in shaping the present day constituency of the Paralympic Movement.

Additionally, though the history of these organizations and their subsequent activities is well documented, what is often overlooked is the context in which this rapid expansion and development of disability sport occurred — specifically the global rise of the Disability Rights Movement. Campbell and Oliver (1996) wrote that while people with disabilities were without a doubt “self-organizing” (p. 18) long before, the 1960s marked the rise of what is commonly recognized as the Disabilities Rights Movement as individuals with disabilities and their allies rallied around issues of employment and independent living. The Disability Rights Movement was only one of many movements organized around socially marginalized identities (e.g. race, gender, and homosexuality) that came of age in the 1960s to 1980s in response to the social conservatism of the 1950s and building on the momentum of the Civil Rights Movement (Campbell & Oliver, 1996; Meekosha, 2004; Scotch, 1989). While it would be a gross generalization to claim that these movements had the same goals, they nonetheless influenced

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6 In 2000, an IQ of 75 or less was the criteria used to judge an individual’s eligibility to compete in events for athletes with intellectual disabilities (Brittain, 2009).
each other in that they jointly contributed to a political environment where collective action around human rights-based issues was possible (Scotch, 1989). The tactics and successes of specific social movements provided a language or a framework that other social movements could adopt and it is this context that allowed the Disability Rights Movement to reframe disability as a socially constructed concept rather than one that was medically or biologically situated. Meekosha (2004) explained that:

The fundamental challenge [of the disability rights movement] lay — as it had for other marginalized social sectors — in replacing biological determinist views of the social presence of disabled people, with recognition of the social and political ways in which their oppression has been constructed. The ‘social model’, as it came to be known, argued that whatever the individual’s impairment or apparent difference from some socially sanctioned ‘norm’, their capacity to operate in society was primarily determined by the social recognition of their needs, and the provision of ‘enabling’ environments (p. 723).

The Paralympic Movement and the Disability Rights Movements are not synonymous yet they are clearly linked. The impetus for both movements can at least partially be attributed to the increased number of war veterans in North America and Europe following the Second World War, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War and both movements came of age during a period marked by a rise in social movements related to identity politics (further discussed later in this chapter) (Anderson, 2003; Malhotra, 2008). However, the relationship between the two movements has largely been tumultuous and marked by tension (Braye, Dixon, & Gibbons, 2012; Howe, 2008; Purdue, 2013; Purdue & Howe, 2012a; Purdue & Howe, 2012b). Howe (2008) explained that, at least in the early years of the Games, “Paralympians were broadly seen as charity cases” (p. 36) and, as a result, the Paralympic Games were often portrayed as regressive in the context of the Disability Rights Movement. The criticism was that sport, with its unapologetic emphasis on bodily perfection, reproduced instead of challenged the biological determinist view of disability that the Disability Rights Movement had fought so hard to reject (Brittain 2004; Brittain, 2009; DePauw, 1997; Howe, 2008; Purdue & Howe, 2012a). According to Howe (2008):

If disability is a social construction, a product of medicalization, as those who advocate a social model of disability suggest, it is perhaps not surprising that so little attention
within disability studies has been paid to the practice of sport that has traditionally classified bodies on medical grounds (p. 63).

Brittain (2004) concurred that the tension between sport and disability is embedded in our very understandings of what these two things mean and is not easily reconciled:

Sport is designed to highlight and revere extremes of bodily physical perfection and, under these circumstances, it is possible to see why, for some people, the idea of elite sport for people with disabilities, and in some cases, any sport at all, is an anathema (p. 438).

Furthermore, there is a complicity in sports whereby physical prowess or muscular power (not to mention masculinity) is tied to social power within the institution and bodies that are deemed less able are subsequently accorded less value (Dworkin & Messner, 2002; Kane, 1995). The result is what Purdue and Howe (2012b) have termed the “Paralympic paradox” (p. 194), the tenuous position occupied by impaired athletes as they are pressured to showcase their athleticism (distancing themselves from devalued disabled identities) to able-bodied audiences and to simultaneously perform as athletes with a disability to disabled audiences as a show of solidarity with disability communities and disability rights agendas.

Despite the contradictions and tensions that separate the two movements, there is significant crossover between the Paralympic Movement and the Disability Rights Movement. While certain factions within each social movement view the movements as fundamentally and irreconcilably opposed, others have chosen to focus on the goal that both share — namely ending the marginalization of individuals with disabilities. Certainly advocates of disability sport have used the legal precedents won by the disability rights activists to push for policies advancing and institutionalizing the practice of disability sport (Fay & Wolff, 2009; Rioux, 2011; Wolbring et al., 2010). For example, in 2006, Sport Canada released a policy entitled Sport for Persons with a Disability with the stated intent of “facilitat[ing] the full and active participation of persons with a disability through sport, and [contributing] to social inclusion through these activities” (p. 4). This document indicated that, in 2004, there were 159 distinct programs being delivered by government departments and agencies with the expressed goal of promoting the inclusion of
people with disabilities in Canadian society. In the context of these policies, the term social inclusion is used as a “condensation symbol” (Edelman, 1985, p. 6), a concept or maxim that evokes an emotional reaction in the audience and that is assumed to be a desirable objective without ever being properly defined. For example, at one point in *Sports for Persons with a Disability*, it is stated that the policy is in keeping with the *Human Rights Act* and other legislation that require federal government departments to promote inclusiveness. The document also detailed that, in 2004 (when the policy was being developed), 35 departments and agencies collectively had 159 programs “related to the inclusion of persons with a disability” (p. 5). Thus, the power of a condensation symbol is in its ability to represent a value-laden discourse as generally accepted and unproblematic, thereby silencing meaningful debate and obscuring taken-for-granted assumptions (Edelman, 1985). In the context of the *Sports for Persons with a Disability* policy, the use of the term inclusion and the reference to other government led programs serves to frame access to sport as a human right on par with access to education, health, and employment — and as such presents sport as a worthwhile project for disability rights activists. By extension, any criticism of disability sport is posited as an attack on the rights of individuals with a disability and on the Disability Rights Movement as a whole with no mention being given to the ways in which sport can itself and systemically has marginalized disabled bodies. Though in many instances disability rights activists have refused to engage with the Paralympic Movement or sport policy in general, believing elite sport culture to be ultimately counterproductive to disability rights in a broader societal context (Braye, Dixon, & Gibbons, 2012; Peers, 2009; Wedgwood, 2013), there are cases of disability communities that have leveraged the publicity afforded to disability sport in order to achieve particular objectives. For example, various groups have used the threat of scrutiny by global audiences to pressure governments to ratify conventions on the rights of people with disabilities and to hasten the construction of accessible infrastructures prior to hosting a Paralympic Games (Blauwet & Willick, 2012; Darcy, 2003; Kidd, 2010; Wedgwood, 2013).

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7 It should also be noted that although the policies focused on inclusion of people with disabilities in sport, little attention was paid to which people with disabilities were being included. Even in these so-called inclusive policies, barriers associated with gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status were rarely addressed.
These are the tensions that characterize what Howe (2008) referred to as the third moment of the Paralympic Movement — the age of elite disability sport. As those organizations tasked with the promotion and delivery of disability sport argued that athletes with disabilities have a right to the same resources, supports, and competitive opportunities as their able-bodied counterparts, they also inherited the task of portraying athletes with a disability as no different from their able-bodied peers. In other words, claiming the privileges afforded to elite athletes required a move towards what DePauw (1997) termed the “(In)Visibility of DisAbility in sport” (p. 428), a focus on the sporting ability of the athletes and a simultaneous de-emphasis of their disabilities. The IPC has been complicit in this shift towards a high performance model of disability sport and has, in recent years, strengthened its ties with the IOC (Brittain, 2009; Howe, 2008; Purdue, 2013). The IOC is now responsible for selecting the host city for the next Olympic and Paralympic Games and represents the IPC in many major negotiations. While on the one hand this partnership has certainly guaranteed the ongoing viability of the Paralympic Games from a financial and logistical standpoint, it has also been widely criticized for making the IPC dependent upon the much stronger IOC and, therefore, less free to pursue its own goals and mandates and has raised concerns that “there is perhaps a tendency for the identity of the Paralympic Movement to become subsumed by the Olympic Movement” (Purdue, 2013, p. 8).

2.2 Theoretical Perspectives on Social Movements

As stated in Chapter 1, social movements are networks of individuals, groups, and organizations united by a shared identity and/or shared concerns, values, and beliefs and that work collectively to promote or oppose social change. The study of social movements has been the study of how people come together (unite) and what tactics they deploy in the pursuit of improving the society in which they live. The conditions that provide the impetus for mobilization, the means by which the members organize, and the strategies that social movements employ have been the focus of many sociological works and numerous theoretical frameworks have been developed to explain these processes — each one privileging and focusing attention on particular aspects of collective action. Yet for all their differences, one thing has remained remarkably consistent — the study of social movements has been a study of *togetherness* and, as Earl and Kimport (2011) state, “the togetherness that made collective action
collective [has been] quite literal: people were together in *cause, space, and time*” (italics my own, p. 124). Online platforms are challenging this notion of togetherness in that they allow individuals to come together for a cause, while not requiring them to be physically in the same space or chronologically in the same time. Consequently, this shift from offline to online togetherness has forced scholars to revisit the very definition of social movements. The challenge that sociologists now face is to define what it means for social movement members to act together when the medium through which they are communicating does not require actors to be in close physical proximity. In the following section, I provide a summary of the ways in which membership in social movements has been defined, the theories that have been used to explain individuals’ reasons for joining, the conditions necessary for social movements to mobilize, the tactics deployed by social movement actors, and the criteria by which the success of movements has been measured. I then discuss the existing literature concerning online communications and spaces — and what it means to be a social movement actor when the action is virtual.

2.2.1 From mobs to movements

Buechler (2004) wrote that “for much of the twentieth century, there was a consensually designated subfield [of sociology] called ‘collective behavior,’ and social movements were seen as one subtype of collective behavior along with panics, crazes, crowds, rumors, and riots” (p. 47). The emergence of social movement theory as a field in its own right coincided with a moment in time characterized by the rapid rise and spread of numerous rights-based social movements that were striving for social justice for individuals marginalized because of race, gender, sexuality, or ability. Earlier theoretical frameworks exploring collective action and mass behaviour had largely characterized individuals as arational or irrational actors momentarily caught up in a mob mentality (in the case of riots, single-issue campaigns, or protest events) and were unable to explain how some of these emerging movements sustained momentum for years at a time and developed highly organized networks capable of engaging in complex and strategic actions (Buechler, 2004; Jenkins, 1983). While the social movements of the 20th century did indeed have specific instances of protest, action, and riot, these emerging collectives also engaged in quieter tactics and demonstrated a capacity for long term planning. Participants distributed pamphlets, provided services, and engaged in many other activities all ultimately geared towards forwarding the agenda of the social movement — behaviours that outright defied
the characterization of participants as irrational actors who made spontaneous, unreflexive decisions to take part in collective action.

It was in this context that the rise of resource mobilization theory and associated neo-Marxist models occurred. Resource mobilization theory emphasized the rationality of individual actors who consciously weighed the costs of participating in collective action against the potential rewards of such behaviours. Members strategically pursued actions that were perceived to be in the best interests of the social movement and as the most likely to obtain the sought-after societal changes (Jenkins, 1983). In addition to recognizing that participation in a social movement could be a rational and logical decision, resource mobilization theory also shifted the focus from the individual level to a study of how social movements organized into centralized, formalized, and even institutionalized structures to create opportunities for collective action, effectively make use of resources, and to mount sustained challenges to cases of social injustice (Jenkins, 1983). While resource mobilization theory was not the only framework being used to study social movements, this model dominated much of the social movement literature throughout the later part of the last century and provided an appealing alternative to earlier theories of collective action (Buechler, 1993, 1995).

Just as resource mobilization theory arose out of a particular moment in time and a need to explain the types of social movements that were appearing on the scene, the 1980s and early 1990s marked another shift in the history of social movement studies. Buechler (1993) has stated that this period was one of turmoil and debate during which numerous alternative frameworks were developed to address the shortcomings of resource mobilization theory. Under attack was the basic assumption that the impetus for social movements is a struggle over resources — a struggle to mobilize existing resources in order to achieve control over more resources (Buechler, 1993). Resource mobilization theory was also criticized for downplaying the role of collective identities, the formulation of grievances, and the articulation of ideologies. These are factors that Buechler, among others, claimed are more important to individual actors than any “utilitarian calculation of costs and benefits” (Buechler, 1993, p. 230). Furthermore, resource mobilization theory did not account for the diversity that individual actors demonstrated when assessing the personal cost of getting involved and the value of what could be accomplished. According to Buechler (1993), while some of the critiques of resource mobilization theory were simply that it failed to consider movement diversity and cultural constructions because of its
preoccupation with the ability of the group to leverage resources, the fundamental flaw of resource mobilization theory lies in its characterization of the rational actor. Buechler (1993) stated:

This assumption makes not just a conceptual but also an ontological claim about a social world of isolated, independent monads that freely enter into contractual arrangements based on self-interest (p. 231).

2.2.2 A call for new social movement theory

New social movement theory emerged out of the debates surrounding resource mobilization theory with the promise that it would provide a better framework for understanding collective action based on culture, ideology, and politics (Buechler, 1993, 1995). Pointing to the rise of rights-based social movements striving for social justice for individuals marginalized because of race, gender, sexuality, or ability, new social movement theory contended that it was possible for individuals to unite around symbolic concerns instead of purely material concerns (Buechler, 1995). However, I should be clear that new social movement theory was not only a different framework for studying social movements, it was also an assertion that the social movements that were emerging in the second half of the 20th century were fundamentally different from earlier forms of social movements and thus required new theoretical perspectives. Therefore, new social movement theory⁸ was not exactly dismissing earlier social movement theories but rather claiming that social movements were evolving. As described by Melucci (1980):

The new social movements are struggling, therefore, not only for the reappropriation of the material structure of production, but also for collective control over socio-economic development, i.e., for the reappropriation of time, of space, and of relationships in the individual’s daily existence (p. 219).

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⁸ Some authors, including Melucci (1980), refer to new social movement theories in the plural in recognition that there are a number of different ways in which new social movement theory has been applied and different theorists have chosen to emphasize different aspects.
Drawing on the work of Melucci and other early proponents of new social movement theory, Buechler (1995) identified six characteristics or themes that could be used to distinguish new social movements from earlier social movements and other forms of collective action. Buechler (1995) asserted that new social movements are those movements that:

1. Consider symbolic as well as instrumental action.
2. Privilege processes that encourage autonomy and promote self-determination.
3. Work towards postmaterialist goals rather than the redistribution of material goods.
4. Problematize the process of creating collective identities around common interests.
5. Recognize the social construction of grievances or marginalizing processes.
6. Acknowledge that centralized organization forms are not necessary to social action and that “submerged, latent, and temporary networks” (p. 442) can also provide the basis for collective action.

Although earlier conceptions of social movements defined movements as collectives of individuals with clearly demarcated borders delineating social movement insiders/outsiders (not to mention which resources were available to the group), new social movements were deemed to have much more amorphous, dynamic configurations. Melucci (1985) described the shift from resource mobilization theory to new social movement theory as a shift from studying social movements as static objects of analysis to studying social movements as a web of ongoing negotiations between actors. In particular, Melucci (1985) wrote:

Currently one speaks of a “movement” as a unity, to which one attributes goals, choices, interests, decision. But this unity, if any, is a result rather than a point of departure; otherwise one must assume that there is a sort of deep “mind” of the movement, instead of considering it as a system of social relationships… But movements are action systems in that their structures are built by aims, beliefs, decisions, and exchanges operating in a systemic field. A collective identity is nothing else than a shared definition of the field of opportunities and constraints offered to collective action: “shared” means constructed and negotiated through a repeated process of “activation” of social relationships connecting the actors [italics in original] (p. 793).
Better suited to addressing the interrelatedness of social movements, new social movement theory allowed for the possibility that one social movement might give rise to another or that a movement could break into a multitude of factions as sub-networks of participants pursued particular courses of action. For example, current day movements have formed around reproductive rights, equality in the workplace, women in sport, etcetera, and yet participants in these movements may have different understandings of the relationships between their present day advocacy projects and the women’s rights movement of the 1960s (or to even earlier feminist movements such as the suffragettes). Likewise, some social movements have amalgamated or joined forces, borrowed strategies, and/or recruited participants from other social movements in what Meyer and Whittier (1994) referred to as ‘social movement spillover’:

Because social movements aspire to change not only policies, but also broad cultural and institutional structures, they have effects far beyond their explicitly articulated goals. The ideas, tactics, style, participants, and organizations of one movement often spill over its boundaries to affect other social movements [italics in original] (p. 277).

In this way, new social movement theory provided a framework allowing for a more organic understanding of social movements as complex networks in contrast to resource mobilization theories which, when they considered inter-movement relations at all, most commonly focused on the competition for scarce resources between groups (Meyer & Whittier, 1994).

2.2.3 Critiques of new social movement theory

New social movement theory has also been criticized on a number of fronts, most notably for making too much of the ‘newness’ of emerging social movements while failing to recognize the continuities between these movements and earlier forms of collective action (Pichardo, 1997; Shakespeare, 1993). For example, though many of the ‘new’ social movements are understood to have organized around shared identities with the intended goal of challenging mainstream views of marginalized and stigmatized groups (a postmaterialist goal), they also work towards materialist goals (Shakespeare, 1993). For example, Shakespeare (1993) notes that it would be impossible to separate feminism from the issue of equal pay or to understand the disability movement without recognizing its role in the fight to have more resources channelled
towards people with disabilities. On a similar note, though these new social movements might not be as overtly political as earlier movements that fought for citizenship rights (for example, the right to vote or own property), neither are they as apolitical as new social movement theory seems to suggest (Shakespeare, 1993). Rather, as stated by Shakespeare (1993), these movements have generally sought to broaden the definition of what it means to be political:

Part of the important challenge of the liberation movements has been to widen the concept of the political: to suggest that personal, domestic and social relations are as political as voting and democratic representation. This is clearly not the same as a lack of concern with politics. Moreover, as such constituencies are marginalized from the political process, unrepresented either by political parties or corporate interests, there is often little choice but to operate this way (p. 259).

New social movement theory has also been criticized for being overly focused on protest events (Earl & Kimport, 2011). The emphasis on protests by new social movement theorists can, at least in part, be attributed to the difficulties associated with identifying the boundaries of a social movement that is, by definition, composed of fluid networks and actors in an ongoing process of defining their involvement in the movement. The result has been that many researchers have focused on protest events that are the moments in time when social movement actors come together and become highly visible (as opposed to studying the messier moments that precede protest when the membership and the goals of the movements are less clearly delineated) (Earl & Kimport, 2011). While protest is certainly fundamental to any discussion of social movements, this approach risks overlooking the rich opportunities offered by new social movement theory including the possibility of observing the moments that precede action when movement actors are still deciding what form their engagement will take. It limits the analysis to a formulaic equation of what tactics were employed and what successes or failures followed.

That being said, the aforementioned criticisms have more to do with how new social movement theory has been taken up rather critiquing the actual theory. New social movement theory proposes that sociologists broaden their approach to studying social movements to include the symbolic, cultural, and postmaterialist concerns of social movements. It does not require an outright rejection of the other areas of analysis that were the focus of earlier social movement theories, nor is there much evidence that this is happening. As observed by Davis-Delano and Crosset (2008) most social movement researchers adopt ideas from more than one theory and the
difference between the theories are more a matter of emphasis rather than a complete paradigmatic shift. As for being overly focused on protests, this is the result of the challenges involved in designing studies capable of addressing the complexities of new social movement membership — it is easier to study protests than to try and make sense of the interactions between social movement actors (particularly when some of those actors might have very loose ties with other movement actors). However, despite the difficulties, there are many examples of excellent research that captures the intricacies of new social movements without reducing them to protest events and that have explored “how ideas, individuals, events, and organizations are linked to each other in broader processes of collective action, with some continuity over time” (Della Porta & Diani, 2009, p. 5).

2.3 The Internet, New Social Movements, and Online/Offline Action

Having provided an overview of new social movement theory, I focus now on how the Internet has confounded, challenged, and ultimately extended our understanding of what it means to participate in a new social movement. To start off, it may be useful to review a few key terms. While there is a popular tendency to use the terms ‘the Internet’ and ‘the Web’ interchangeably, they are not synonymous. The Internet refers to the global network by which computers in different locations are able to communicate with each other and transfer information using a standardized system of protocols. For most people, the Internet is beyond their understanding — or perhaps more accurately beyond their need to understand. Just as I can operate any number of machines (including my car, an elevator, and a bank machine) without understanding how the machine operates, I am able to use the Internet without any understanding of the technicalities involved. The World Wide Web is how most of people use the Internet — it is the interface that translates the information transmitted on the Internet to computers (and tablets and telephones) into a format that individuals are able to access, namely Web pages. It is important to make this distinction because, while the Internet is a system of networks transmitting information, the Web is where we go. It is simultaneously cyberspace, the information superhighway, and the digital frontier and the metaphors used to understand the Web have implications in turn on how it is used and what other uses are considered possible. It has been described as both a cultural artifact and a site where culture occurs (Hine, 2000) and that tension between the Web as an object and
the Web as a space has some fascinating implications for sociologists studying social movements. In the first sense, the Web is a tool that can be used by social movements to mobilize actors and to further certain actions; in the second sense, the Web is the site where the action happens.

In their book, *Digitally enabled social change: Activism in the Internet age*, Earl and Kimport (2011) stated that, “some scholars see activism as actually occurring online, while others see activism as limited to offline collective actions that may at most be facilitated through online organizing tools or only advertised online” (p. 11). They suggested that the difference between these two orientations was best understood by exploring how social movements leverage the affordances of the Internet. The concept of affordances comes from the sociology of science and has been described as the middle road between realist approaches such as technological determinism (the view that technologies themselves can impact the social world) and constructivist approaches (which refers to the assumption that technologies and the uses to which they are put are socially constructed). Technological affordances, according to Earl and Kimport (2011), “have the benefit of simultaneously acknowledging the real material opportunities and constraints that technologies impose on users at a given moment while also acknowledging that without people using a technology in various ways, what it offers is meaningless” (p. 36). In other words, technologies, such as email, instant messaging, and platforms such as Google, Facebook, Twitter, and Wordpress, do not in themselves alter the social world but, they do facilitate new forms of communication and, through their design, make some uses more likely than others. Affordances, then, can be defined as “the actions and uses that a technology makes qualitatively easier or possible when compared to prior like technologies [italics in original]” (Earl & Kimport, 2011, p. 32). According to this view, social movements that conceptualize the Internet merely as a means of doing what they had previously done more efficiently or more effectively fail to take advantage of the affordances of the Internet. In contrast, those activists and social movements that leverage the affordances of the Internet are able to not only optimize existing forms of action, but also to create genuinely new forms of action online resulting in new directions and possibilities for success.

While Meikle (2002) did not use the concept of affordances per se, he arrived at a similar conclusion when he argued that many (if not most) social movements were “backing into the future” (p. 143), despite the numerous opportunities for new types of activism made possible by
the Internet. In other words, Meikle contended that many activists were using new technologies in ways that were reminiscent of tactics and strategies employed in the past. The most common example of this trend is the ‘e-petition’. Petitions are a common tactic employed by social movements looking to change or challenge a policy and entail the gathering of signatures to indicate broader public support for the proposed action. The e-petition employs the same strategy but automates all or part of the process by making use of Web-based technologies (Earl & Kimport, 2011). Providing a means of amassing a huge number of signatures without face-to-face solicitation, Websites such as PetitionOnline host petitions created by individuals, who then circulate the link by email and social media networks and encourage people to sign the petition online. The e-petition is an example of Meikle’s backing into the future or what Earl and Kimport (2011) have referred to as the “supersize” (p. 29) effect of e-tactics — using the Internet and the Web to reach a greater number of people, often in a shorter period of time and with fewer resources (specifically volunteer hours and printing and postage costs). Although the scale of the action has changed, the actual tactics have not — and no particular reconsideration of social movement theory is required.

2.3.1 Theory 2.0 and leveraging the affordances of the Internet

In contrast to the supersize model of online activism where Internet technologies are used to extend the scope and the speed of activism without fundamentally changing what it is that social movement members are doing, Theory 2.0 is the name Earl and Kimport (2011) gave to forms of Web activism that marked a departure from existing offline models and entailed underlying processes that were fundamentally different from previous understandings of social movements. They have argued that the task at hand for Theory 2.0 is to explore:

How little or how much theories and explanations built primarily around protest and social movements in the 1960s through 1980s need to change in order to explain Web activism. More bluntly, are we as able to explain various online actions as we are to explain traditional protests in the streets? And if not, what needs to change in our theories? (p. 23)
While Earl and Kimport (2011) claimed that Theory 2.0 is a concept that could be used to expand and critique various theoretical frameworks applied to the study of social movements, they focused much of their book on explaining how the Internet changes and extends our understanding of resource mobilization theory. Returning to the idea of leveraging affordances, they contended that there are two primary affordances offered by the Internet that are relevant to the study of online protest. The first is that the Internet, when properly utilized, can drastically reduce the costs associated with organizing and participating in protests. These costs can be very literal — for example the costs associated with publishing and distributing printed materials or the costs of attending an event (time away from work, transportation, etcetera). They could also be more elusive — the personal costs or risks incurred by the individual because of his/her involvement (stigmatization, arrest and imprisonment, physical injury, etcetera). According to Earl and Kimport (2011), it is not that costs are irrelevant in online social movements, it is rather that the costs, once assumed to be constant or fixed, are significantly reduced by using Internet technologies. By extension, when the costs to participate are low, as per resource mobilization theory, individuals are more likely to participate.

However, there is a second affordance offered by the Internet that is less well addressed by resource mobilization theory; namely, the possibility that people can come together while being geographically distant from each other. The Internet negates the need of ‘copresence’ in social movements — people working together in time and space to achieve a common goal (Earl & Kimport, 2011). Internet communication means that I am just as ‘close’ to an individual sitting in an office across the street from me as I am to another person halfway around the world. Furthermore, the Internet allows for (and even privileges or encourages) asynchronous communication; although a few forms of online activism require participants to be online at the same time, most offer participants an opportunity to engage at their leisure (Baym, 2010). For example, it is possible to write a post online while eating breakfast and to read the responses when returning home from work in the evening. Not only does this reduce the cost of participation in that individuals are now able to engage during their free time but, more significantly from a Theory 2.0 viewpoint, it changes how individuals participate — online discussions remain visible long after the original speakers have logged off (Earl & Kimport, 2011). In this sense, conversations that have traditionally been thought of as ephemeral become
online cultural artifacts (Hine, 2000) produced by social movement actors that can be revisited again and again.

The affordances offered by the Internet also challenge the supposition that there is an ideal organizational model for social movements — some of the most successful (or at least the most notorious) online movements have been the brain child of individuals or small groups with little or no prior experience in activism (Earl & Kimport, 2011). Resource mobilization theories propose that the success of a social movement is often dependent on a few central individuals who have acquired specialized skills and made a career of activism as it were. In contrast, Earl and Kimport (2011), and others, have reported that online campaigns are frequently the work of “lone wolf organizers” (p. 157) who are just as likely to have backgrounds in computer science or engineering as they are to have had previous political experience (Earl & Schussman, 2002; Schussman & Earl, 2004).

When discussing the affordances offered by the Internet, resource mobilization theories are able to explain some of the ways social movements are using the Internet but new social movement theories offer a much richer avenue of analysis. The decentralized, autonomous, independent types of action observed online are in accordance with Melucci’s (1980, 1985) description of new social movements. Furthermore, the assertion that costs can be drastically reduced by using Internet technologies does indeed alter the cost/benefit equation made by individuals considering engagement, as stated by Earl and Kimport (2011), but it also begs the question: if the cost is zero (or so low as to be negligible), what other factors do individuals consider when deciding whether or not to participate in collective action? Not everyone engages all the time so there must be other processes at work in the decision to become involved, such as the formation of collective identities and the recognition of common forms of marginalization. These processes are largely ignored in resource mobilization frameworks, but are integral to new social movement theory.

2.3.2 The Web and the public sphere

While the birth of the Internet can be traced back to military and governmental projects in the 1960s, the World Wide Web has a very different history. It was, from its earliest conceptualization, described as a space that offered new avenues for democracy and public
engagement (Berners-Lee, 2010). Understanding the significance of this characterization of the Internet requires first exploring the role of public speech and debate in creating democratic environments via Habermas’ concept of the public sphere. Habermas (1964) referenced the coffeehouses frequented by 18th century bourgeois society when he first coined the term public sphere. The coffeehouses acted as informal grounds where individuals would gather for the purpose of debate and deliberation around issues of common concern. Habermas proposed that it was within these public spaces that private individuals came together to form a public body — a collective capable of “transmit[ting] the needs of bourgeois society to the state, in order, ideally, to transform political into ‘rational’ authority” (Habermas, 1964, p. 53). That is to say, these public spaces of interaction were where public opinion was formed and were a prerequisite for groups looking to engage in actions ultimately leading to changes in public policy.

However, the democratic nature of the public sphere as originally conceptualized by Habermas was widely criticized for privileging white, bourgeois males and failing to address the exclusion of women and the working class (among others) from the assembly of citizens (see, for example, Fraser, 1990). Habermas himself recognized the exclusionary nature of the coffeehouse societies and, in later works, reconceived the public sphere more generally as a particular form of communication and deliberative debate rather than a specific place (Dahlberg, 2005). This shift was not sufficient to satisfy Habermas’ critics who still felt the public sphere was exclusionary in that it privileged certain types of debates and discourses while also marginalizing other voices (Dahlberg, 2005). According to Dahlberg (2005), criticisms of the public sphere generally take one of three forms: first, that the public sphere discounts aesthetic-affective modes of communication in favour of rational-critical discourse; second, that the concept of the public spheres presumes it is possible to separate power from public discourse and thereby masks how exclusion and domination affect the deliberations; or third, that the objective of the public sphere is to arrive at a consensus rather than allowing for or including dissenting voices.

Yet Dahlberg (2005) states that while Habermas’ original vision of a public sphere may indeed have been exclusionary, a more nuanced model can easily address these criticisms and provide a useful theoretical framework. He contends that the public sphere can accommodate many forms of communication that are performative, affective, or persuasive in nature; that the public sphere does not specifically require that participants make arguments that “privilege a particular ‘rationalist’ form of discourse, one that encourages representational accuracy, logical
coherence, and a dispassionate (disembodied) contestation of opinion” (Dahlberg, 2005, p. 113). Rather, explains Dahlberg (2005), the public sphere requires that participants enter with the goal of persuading others with their arguments rather than with the intent of coercion. In the idealized public sphere, participants are welcome to speak passionately and attempt to convince others with the force of their arguments but they also enter into a contract to actively listen to others and to allow themselves to be persuaded — acknowledging what Habermas termed the “unforced force of the better argument” (1996, p. 306). Furthermore, the end goal of the public sphere is not to achieve consensus, but rather to arrive at a point where all individuals feel that they have had an opportunity to participate and be heard.

Fraser (1990) concurs that the criticisms of Habermas’ model should not obscure its potential. She explains that, for all its flaws, the concept of the public sphere remains a useful theoretical tool in that it recognizes talk as a form of political participation. Fraser (1990, 2007) proposes that a new public sphere be envisioned as a democratic framework where it is possible to produce and disseminate discourses that are critical of state activities. She asserts that while the public sphere has, to date, “tacitly assumed the frame of a bounded political community with its own territorial state” (2007, p. 8), a reformulated “critical theory of the public sphere [italics in original]” (p. 9) is possible.

Reformulating the public sphere, according to Fraser (1990), means first recognizing the role of public spheres in relation to hegemonic power relations. While much as been made of the opportunities that public spheres afford to citizens in terms of facilitating their engagement as political actors, Fraser (1990) points out that the ability of the dominant groups to frame certain matters as public and of “common concern” (p. 71) and others matters as individual or private matters (and thus unsuited to open discussion and deliberation) is an example of hegemonic power in operation. Additionally, public sphere deliberations can serve to reinforce unequal power relations through the formulation of public opinion. “Public opinion, writes Bates (1975), is strictly linked to political hegemony. It is the point of contact between civil society and political society, between consensus and force (p. 363). When dominant groups are capable of framing (1) what concerns are open to public deliberation and, (2) presenting their values as common sense and thus indisputable (e.g. the better argument), then the public opinion formed in the public sphere will support the interests of the dominant group (Bates, 1975). Fraser (1990) concurs with Bates and states that:
It is not possible to insulate special discursive arenas from the effects of societal inequality and that where social inequality persists, deliberative processes in public sphere will tend to operate to the advantage of dominant groups and to the disadvantage of subordinates (p. 66).

Furthermore, their domination will have been legitimized by the participation of citizens in the process while ignoring that the configuration of that process was already shaped by hegemonic relations.

However, Fraser argues that it is possible for marginalized groups to formulate their own counter-hegemonic public spheres and that a “plurality of competing publics better promote the ideal of participatory parity than does a single, comprehensive, overarching public” (Fraser, 1990, p. 660). These groups, which Fraser (1990) terms “subaltern counterpublics” (p. 67), create “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinate social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser, 1990, p. 67). The concept of counterpublics is relevant to the discussion of new social movements politics in that social movements actors are an example of a group that may at times form an alternative public sphere for the purpose of discussing and debating issues that are of concern to the group but that are largely unrecognized by mainstream society. Fraser (1990) explains that, for such groups, alternative public spheres can serve a dual role in that they act as spaces where social actors are able to come together to form networks and consolidate collective identities and they simultaneously provide the opportunity for actors to strategize and plan actions that engage with mainstream society.

The ability to communicate and connect online is the reason that the concept of the public sphere has become so entrenched in discussions of the democratic potential of the Web (Papacharissi, 2010). Through the use of computer-mediated communication and Web-based platforms, individuals are able to speak with others who were previously inaccessible due to various barriers including but not limited to geographical distance, social location, and physical impairments (limiting mobility or verbal communication, for example). Dalhberg (2001) more explicitly addresses how the Web has been characterized in discussions about the public sphere and states that “the decentralized communications enabled through Web publishing, electronic bulletin boards, e-mail lists and chat rooms does seem to provide public spaces for rational discourse” (p. 616). The Web is simultaneously portrayed as the means to search out individuals interested in engaging in deliberative communication and as the venue where these debates take
place. However, actual empirical explorations of how the Web is being used have led Dalhberg and others to conclude that we should not confuse the potential of the Web as a space for public deliberation with the actual ways in which it is being used, ways which often lead to fractured and superficial discussions rather than the deliberate debates proposed by the public sphere (cf. Dalhberg, 2007; Papacharissi, 2002). There is certainly evidence of dominant discourses and hierarchies being reproduced rather than challenged on the Web as oligopolies such as Google co-opt vast realms of cyberspace and as online forums and chat rooms fail to engage participants in meaningful discussions (Dart, 2009; Meikle, 2002; Real, 2007). For example, Dart (2009) studied the use of blogs during the 2006 FIFA World Cup Finals and concluded that while the promise was that blogs would provide fans with a new opportunity to ‘participate’ in the World Cup by publishing their own stories, the majority of the blogs published were hosted by traditional media outlets and major corporate sponsors. The few independent blogs that existed had far smaller audiences than the corporate blogs. Real (2007) states:

Given these trends toward convergence and consolidation of ownership, the likelihood of a Spiral of Silence emerges, one in which fringe, minority voices get less hearing and are gradually brought into conformity. Similarly, as dominance of the Web reverts, as seems to be happening, toward the media monopolies, the hegemony of the privilege over Web content and value will marginalize less powerful groups as it has in other media (p. 194-195).

However, while Dart (2009) and Real (2007) describe the Internet as a space to be colonized and inhabited by media corporations, there are alternative metaphors for understanding how power circulates online. The Internet has also been compared to a hydra, the many-headed beast from Greek mythology — every time a head is severed from the body two new ones spring up to replace it (Dyer-Witheford, 2002). The metaphor of the hydra points to the difficulty of controlling or subverting a medium that by its very design fails to present a single target upon which to act. This is the view adopted by Meikle (2002) who wrote:

With the Internet going mainstream, we have an electronic media where corporations are on the back foot — not just because the technology is new, but also because the technology inherently supports decentralization, many-to-many and two-way communication. Instead of activists having to subvert a centralized media technology, it’s the corporations madly trying to subvert a decentralized technology, and so far largely failing (p. 95).
Clearly one needs to be cautious of not overstating the democratic potential of the Web while at the same time being alert to the creative and progressive uses of Internet technologies.

2.3.3 Finding and building community on the Web

Empirically, there is evidence that new social movements are using the Internet, although the picture is far from complete (cf. Kahn & Kellner, 2004, for a summary of movements that have employed online strategies). Returning to the earlier observation that until quite recently, collective action has required face-to-face interactions between actors, many online theorists have focused on how relationships form on the Web and how individuals negotiate the task of creating and maintaining an online identity. This negotiation of a shared identity, as well as the ability to form meaningful relationships with other actors, is a critical step in an individual’s decision to participate in collective action and ultimately in the creation of a social movement (Diani, 1992). As previously stated, when the costs associated with or barriers to participation are low, as is the case in many forms of online activism, the incentive to engage becomes the primary consideration. In this scenario, individuals will join in when they perceive their involvement to have value — for example, they believe that their participation will directly contribute to the success of the action or that their participation will be personally meaningful. The question that needs to be addressed is, is it possible to develop these types of meaningful relationships in a virtual world?

The development of new technologies has always engendered a divide between those who see the technologies as liberating and affording new opportunities and those who fear they will interfere with our existing ‘real’ relationships. Thus, Baym (2010) has asserted the following:

When first faced with a new barrage of interpersonal communication media, people tend to react in one of two ways, both of which have long cultural histories. On the one hand, people express concern that our communication has become increasingly shallow. For many, the increased amount of mediated interaction seems to threaten the sanctity of our personal relationships. For others, new media offer the promise of more opportunity for connection with more people, a route to new opportunities and to stronger relationships and more diverse connections (p. 1).
However, Baym (2010) contended that these two views are overly simplistic and that as the new technologies move from novel to normal in people’s daily lives, how individuals understand the potential of the technologies becomes increasingly nuanced. As an example, Hine (2000) reported that early projects examining the Internet as a site where culture is produced found that computer-mediated communication was a poor substitute for real world or face-to-face communication and that relationships produced online were limited or superficial. The conclusion of these studies was overwhelmingly that “aggression and misunderstandings could be expected where people were limited to text based [computer-mediated communication]” (Hine, 2000, p. 9). However, these early studies were methodologically problematic in that they mainly consisted of assigning a task to two groups — one group that would complete the task using face-to-face communication and a second group that would use only computer-mediated communication. The conclusion was invariably that the groups employing computer-mediated communication were less successful (Hine, 2000). The assumption underlying these studies was that the type of tasks people undertake online are the same as the tasks they are already performing offline. The more interesting question is whether or not computers are facilitating communication where communication previously did not exist. Baym (2010), in her book, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*, presented quite a different view on the role of computer-mediated technologies in the social world. Drawing on empirical studies as well as her own experiences of communicating over the Internet, Baym (2010) considered the myriad of ways the Internet was being used by individuals and groups to build community, unite around common identities, and maintain and develop one-on-one relationships. She arrived at the conclusion that simply because a relationship is formed online, that does not mean it will necessarily be more superficial or less valued than an offline relationship, although it might very well be different.

In addition to questioning the value of online relationships, the use of the word ‘community’ to describe online groups has also been widely criticized by theorists who question the authenticity of online relationships and who caution against mistaking communication within groups (particularly text only communication) for meaningful interactions (Baym, 2010). Yet despite these criticisms, Rheingold’s (1993) conceptualization of the ‘virtual community’ has been remarkably resilient — it has resonated with how individuals describe their online
interactions with others and the sense of belonging that they experience (cf. Chayko, 2007). While communities have most commonly been assumed to be geographically bound, Baym (2010) has contended that there are other more enduring characteristics of communities that are transferable to online settings: space, practice, shared resources and support, shared identities, and interpersonal relationships. In the paragraphs that follow, I will consider how these characteristics of communities might be understood in the context of online, computer-mediated communication.

While space is most commonly assumed to be a physical space, as previously discussed, the Web is often also conceptualized as a space, namely, cyberspace. The term cyberspace was coined by William Gibson in his 1984 novel *Neuromancer* and immediately caught on in the popular imagination. The term succinctly captures what users already knew, that the Web, while nebulous in nature, is nevertheless a place we can go. Cyberspace is, as stated by Hine (2000), the site of culture online. The dominance of the spatial metaphor (as opposed to, for example, metaphors of linkages or flows) is easily observed in the language used to describe the Internet and online activities: people go online, visit Websites, stumble across sites, and find pages under construction. Time and distance may be obscured and meaningless online, but space is everywhere.

The second characteristic of communities online that Baym (2010) explored is the notion of practice. Practices, according to Baym (2010), are the routinized, habitual, and often unconscious behaviours that community members share. Not surprising, given the text-based nature of much online communication, one of the more easily observable examples of practices online is the use of language (Baym, 2010). “Online speech communities,” stated Baym (2010), “share ways of speaking that capture the meanings that are important to them and the logics that underlie their common sensibilities” (p. 77). Through repeated interactions, groups develop acronyms and shorthand that make their conversations near unintelligible to outsiders. While these developments serve a practical function (cutting down on the need to type out repetitive phrases), they also serve as a means for group members to differentiate between community members and outsiders. Baym (2010) gave the example of Twitter where regular users quickly learn to write and read the common abbreviations and use hashtags. These practices, Baym (2010) claimed, are both mandated by the technological affordances of Twitter (messages are limited to 140 characters, links are automatically shortened, search functions for hashtags are
built into the platform, etcetera) and also a means of distinguishing regular users from occasional visitors. Beyond these speech practices are the niceties observed by community members — for example the practice of adding #RT (Retweet) to tweets that the author hopes will reach as large an audience as possible, the act of ‘follow backs’ whereby individuals follow others who have followed them, or the practice of sending out a #FF (Friday Follow) listing the names (handles) of Twitter accounts worth sharing.

In addition to practices, another way of conceptualizing community is to consider it as a network that provides services and resources to community members. These services can range from the material, for example using online networks to find places to stay when travelling, to the less tangible, such as providing emotional support to community members struggling with illness (Baym, 2010). Indeed, there is a long history of online support network communities for individuals experiencing illness or other challenges (Akrich, 2010; Brown et al., 2004; Josefsson, 2005). While some critics have questioned whether or not an individual can really provide meaningful support to someone geographically distant, countless studies have indicated that receiving and providing support is a key reason for going online (cf. Josefsson, 2005; Seale, Ziebland, & Charteris-Black, 2006). Furthermore, while virtual communities can be geographically dispersed, it is interesting to note that online networks sometimes parallel (and reaffirm and support) existing offline communities (Kavanaugh et al., 2005). For example, individuals might use email to communicate with neighbours, look up program information on the community centre’s Website, or use Facebook groups to organize events at their church. Even the largest of online networks often provide some sort of opportunity to identify group members who may be living nearby and, therefore, on hand to share more material resources.

2.3.4 Collective identities and online relationships

Earlier, I stated that the (ongoing) negotiation of collective identities is a key characteristic of new social movements. But how and why do collective identities matter online? Meekosha (2002) uses the example of the Women With Disabilities Australia network to explore how women turned online to build a community that recognized their intersecting identities as feminist women with disabilities:
Identity formation for individual women emerges through action in the world and responses from the world. Thus women with impairments, whose life experiences have often been traumatic, and who see only negative reflections of themselves in their interactions outside the community, may turn to each other for support and validation. Then there is a process of redefinition, in which the hate they experience in their lives is transformed into an affirmative solidarity (p. 80).

The Internet can facilitate this process by providing a venue for individuals who are unable to meet face-to-face or who feel unable (or scared) to speak in the offline world with an alternative space to meet, to connect and to interact with others — these interactions serve to affirm their identities on an individual and a collective level (Meekosha, 2002). When these collectives of individuals start to share stories of marginalization, injustice, and exclusion and to recognize that their grievances are systematic, structurally embedded, and shared by others, it is then that social movements ensue. Baym (2010) has made the point that in addition to this collective or shared identity, “the shared sense of who ‘we’ are” (p. 86) that may precede the formation of a particular community online, there are also the identities that arise out of repeated interactions. Over time, individuals will start to assume roles within the group through repeated behaviours. For example, an individual may assign herself the task of welcoming newcomers while others take on the responsibility for starting new discussions, sharing resources, or moderating debates, among other possible roles (Baym, 2010). Contradictory as it might sound, it is through this differentiation of roles that individuals bond as a group and collective identities are formed (Baym, 2010).

At the same time, interpersonal, that is one-to-one, relationships can also play an important role in conceptualizing communities and social movements. The Internet has often been touted as having facilitated communication from one-to-many, such as, for example, the single blogger who makes a post online to be read by thousands or a YouTube video made using a home Webcam that suddenly goes viral. This type of communication has attracted much attention for its novelty; prior to the Internet, opportunities to communicate one-to-many were limited, particularly for private citizens. However, while the Internet has opened up new possibilities, one-to-one or one-to-few interactions remain the most common forms of communication (Baym, 2010). Email, instant messaging, video calls — these are the mainstay of computer-mediated communication (Baym, 2010). Even within an online group or community, it
is common for paired relationships to develop as members start dialogues publicly and continue them privately. Baym (2010) has argued that these pairings are important if individuals are to feel the “connectivity” (p. 89) that Rheingold described as part of virtual communities. While these paired relationships are not always visible to the other members of the group, Baym (2010) has asserted that “interpersonal pairs provide a social mesh that underlies and helps to connect the broader Web of interconnection within the group more closely” (p. 90).

2.4 Searching For an Online Public Sphere

One of the challenges for researchers conducting online research is that their field of study is constantly changing. While, as previously discussed, the Web can be conceived of as a cultural artifact, it differs from other ‘real’ world artifacts in that there is no guarantee the object of study will still exist tomorrow — or that it will be easily found a second time. The same challenge applies when the Web is considered a site where culture is performed; other ethnographic field sites change relatively slowly but a virtual field of study can change in an instant. In addition to the changing architecture of the Web, it is also necessary to consider changes in how the Internet is being used in a societal context: could researchers ten years ago have foreseen Facebook or Twitter? And will studies on the use of Facebook or Twitter have any relevance 10 years from now? In the opening chapter of her book, Blog Theory, Jodi Dean (2010) addressed this dilemma:

A problem specific to critical media theory is the turbulence of networked communications: that is, the rapidity of innovation, adoption, adaptation, and obsolescence. The object of one’s theoretical focus and critical ire quickly changes or even vanishes (p.1).

Despite this challenge, Dean (2010) did not despair or discourage scholars from entering the field — quite the opposite. She stated that it is all too easy to become caught up in the momentum of the rapid changes, trapped in a cycle where there is only time to react but never time to critically think, and that it is the responsibility of critical theorists to slow down and produce work of substance that “anchors its analyses of technologies, users, and practices in an avowedly political assessment of the present” (p. 3). The studies that continue to resonate do so
because they focused not on the specific technologies and associated technological affordances but rather on the meaning that individuals and groups assigned to their use of the technologies in question (Dean, 2010). This allows for a nuanced understanding of how and why individuals and groups have used technology and also a better sense of what technologies they are likely to use in the future.

2.4.1 Blogs and the public sphere

If the Internet can indeed support a new form of public sphere where private individuals can gather to engage in discussions contributing to the formation of collective identities, facilitating the recognition of common grievances, and suggesting possible avenues for collective action, are there particular configurations of the Web that are needed? While the previous section cautioned against focusing on any one form of Web platform for fear the resulting work will quickly become obsolete, Barton (2005) has claimed that there are three main forms of online writing that have the potential to provide a platform for the proposed virtual public sphere: wikis, online bulletin boards/forums, and blogs. Although the exact design of these platforms is constantly changing, each one has a set of characteristics that have remained fairly immutable and thus allow for the technology to be recognized in each of its various iterations. Blogs, in particular, have repeatedly been identified by Internet theorists as having the technological affordances required for the creation of a new form of online public sphere (cf. Barlow, 2008; Kaye, Johnson, & Muhlberger, 2011; Papacharissi, 2002).

A Web log — or a blog as it is more colloquially known — is simply a name given to a particular type of Web publishing platform. In the simplest of terms, a blog is a Webpage (or a set of pages that link to a home page) where posts are made in reverse chronological order so that the most recent content appears at the top of the home page. The advantage of blogs is that they are easy to create and even easier to update without requiring any extensive training in Web design. Blogging software is available for purchase or as freeware and there are many options for anyone looking to create a blog, including the popular Google Blogger (free to anyone with a Google account) or WordPress (which comes in a free version with the option to purchase custom designed upgrades). What many people do not realize is that blogging software is so versatile that it has replaced traditional Websites for countless organizations, companies and
media networks. For example, the Website of the Globe and Mail (and most newspapers) is actually blogging software — the posts are the news articles and as new content goes up, the old content is automatically pushed to archives on linked pages. Most of the Websites for the University of British Columbia are also blogs, including the home page for the School of Kinesiology.

While blogging platforms have certainly caught on for a variety of functions, when people discuss blogs they are generally not referring to the Websites of media outlets or major institutions. The iconic blog format has a few easily recognizable features: the home page (with the most recent post front and centre), the menu bar (with links to an ‘about the author’ page, archives and photo galleries), and the side bar (with a blogroll that links to other blogs recommended by the author and the logos of supporters, sponsors, or paid advertisers). Despite being infinitely customizable, many, if not most, bloggers have not strayed too far from the common default design. In other words, although the technologies might permit other configurations, the technological affordances of blogging software have made some designs more likely and the adherence to this design is further reinforced through communities of practice and an unspoken agreement that blogs should look like blogs (Dean, 2010; Rettberg, 2008).

Another key feature of blogs, and perhaps the reason that blogs have been the focus of so much attention when discussing the possibility of an online public sphere, is the comment feature. When an author makes a post on a blog, he or she has the option of turning on a feature that allows readers to post comments. Other options include ‘widgets’ (small pieces of code that can add features to the design of a blog) that enable sharing — the reader can, with the single click of a button, indicate that they ‘liked’ the post and/or they can share the link to the site on Facebook, Twitter, Google+, by email, or through various other social media platforms. In short, blogs offer readers the opportunity to engage with the author and also with other readers. The democratic potential of blogs is further evidenced by the fact that blogs are (with a few exceptions) public sites. Once a post is made online it becomes publicly visible to anyone with an Internet connection (and the same applies for comments and likes/shares made by readers). In theory, blogs provide an opportunity to publish and engage in conversations that bypass traditional barriers of cost, geography, and social location leading Dart (2009) to contend that,
“for some people, blogging is inherently democratic as it empowers individuals to create their own content and publish to a global audience” (p. 109).

Yet despite the promise that blogs will facilitate democratic deliberation and will become the medium of choice for new social movements looking to engage members in discussions, empirical evidence that this is actually happening is limited. For example, as previously mentioned, Dart (2009) conducted a study of blogging during the 2006 FIFA World Cup Finals. The premise of the study was that blogging, which was just coming into its own during that period of time, would offer fans a new way to participate in the event:

The Internet was seen as allowing fans a greater voice and sense of participation and democracy in their sport, with democratization used in this essay to denote greater numbers of football fans telling their own World Cup stories, rather than relying on the mainstream media (Dart, 2009, p. 110).

Essentially, blogs would afford fans the opportunity to become producers of sports media rather than just consumers and thereby open up new avenues for them to engage with the sport event that they love. However, while Dart’s original intent was to identify independent, embedded bloggers (bloggers in attendance at the event and not employed to cover the event), he found very few bloggers that met this criteria. Instead, he found that it was the multinational corporations — media networks and event sponsors — hosting the majority of blogs. The content on these corporate blogs was, in some cases, generated by fans writing and submitting posts about the World Cup. In addition to this fan generated content, many media networks and sponsors had taken the additional step of hiring ‘faux bloggers’, professional writers who adopted the lifestyles and image of independent bloggers but whose blogs “[acted] as little more than PR and advertising platforms” (Dart, 2009, p.118).

Furthermore, the claim that blogging is a democratic forum is typically based on two premises: (1) that anyone can start their own blog and, therefore, reach a global audience and (2) that anyone can comment on a blog post and thereby participate in the public deliberation. However, as Dart (2009) and others have observed, anyone might be able to create a blog, but not everyone can attract an audience. As Dart (2009) reported, it takes time for a blog to build an audience base and independent bloggers blogging about the World Cup attracted far smaller
audiences than the blogs hosted by corporate sites. The corporate sites, in most instances, were able to simply add a blog component to their Websites and direct their existing audience to the new content (for example, the BBC 2006 World Cup blog was accessed via the pre-existing BBC Sport Web site). The issue of tracking the readership of blogs is an ongoing debate with many claiming (with only the merest hint of irony) that more people are writing blogs than are reading them and that the average blog has a readership of one — the blogger himself (Leonard, 2006). The second premise, that anyone can participate in the online discussions, has also been called into question as we start to understand how bloggers moderate and censor reader responses. As Dart (2009) observed:

Part of the essence of event-based blogging is to involve others and solicit responses, with bloggers needing to generate stories and strike up conversations with others in the blogosphere. Blogs have been characterized as platforms for dissenting voices and therefore the moderation of comments becomes a significant issue for the blog host (p. 118).

Dart was first alerted to this problem when study participants expressed their disgust that the comments they made on blogs (both those written by independents and those hosted by corporations) were either never posted or were removed by site moderators because they expressed opinions that were different from the ones expressed by the author or were critical of the mainstream media and the media networks hosting the blog sites. Dart (2009) concluded that:

The centrality of the communication process in blogging does suggest that freedom of speech is being exercised. Even when there are few responses to a lead post, there is the appearance that a participatory democracy is operating. Supporters of blogging highlight how it allows for an unprecedented means of expression (from below), and bypasses the mainstream media; however, this in itself is insufficient to claim that blogging is democratic (p. 118).

Dart (2009) went on to state that “although the claim is that ‘anyone can blog,’ the reality is that one’s comments need to be approved by a moderator, or one has to set up their own blog (and join the other 100 million) and face the likelihood of being lost in the blogosphere” (p. 119).
While Dart’s work clearly indicated that the democratic potential of event-based blogs is questionable at best, there are other genres of blogs that more closely approximate an online public sphere. For example, Keller (2012) conducted in-depth interviews with four girls who contributed to *FBomb*, a blog specifically targeting young feminists. Drawing on Fraser’s (1990) model of the (reconceptualized) Habermasian public sphere as a space where subaltern counterpublics provide counter narratives and on literature from the field of youth culture studies, Keller (2012) considered blogs as a space where “girls are enacting political agency and blurring the lines between producing and consuming media cultures” (p. 432). Keller (2012) reported that the girl bloggers she interviewed were using their blogs explicitly and creatively to engage in feminist dialogues that they felt were absent from their offline lives. The bloggers described how they fostered debates and conversations by making posts that compelled and invited readers to respond. Furthermore, the bloggers stated that the ability to make and read comments was what made the blog valuable in their eyes. They stated that they enjoyed reading the comments as much as they enjoyed reading the posts, they felt the ability to identify regular readers and have ongoing conversations in the comment sections gave them the sense of belonging to a community and, unlike the corporate blogs in Dart’s study, they felt no need to censor comments from readers who expressed dissenting opinions — rather they felt that these disagreements were an important part of the discussion. They particularly valued posts and comments that were based on personal experiences and that evoked strong emotional reactions from their readers (Keller, 2012). Keller (2012) makes the important point that these young women were not working towards a singular goal:

> While I have positioned girl feminist bloggers as a counterpublic, I don’t want to imply that they are a monolithic group, but instead occupy shifting positions of power and agency while living in a culture where girls continue to be excluded from formal politics and citizenship rights (p. 443).

What united these girls and made them a community was not a commitment towards a particular goal or the recognition of a single collective identity, but rather a broader commitment to participating in dialogues that allowed participants to exercise agency, challenge dominant cultures, and engage in political debates from which they were otherwise barred or, in other words, to participate in an online alternative public sphere (Keller, 2012).
Far from the corporatized, mega-media dominated world presented by Dart (2009), Keller viewed the blogosphere as a space where individuals who were marginalized and excluded from other forms of political engagement could experiment with being political agents and cultural producers rather than consumers. In terms of blogging as a form of participation in a new social movement, the four young women interviewed by Keller (2012) expressed different ideas about what it meant to be a feminist as well as different understandings of how their current activities fit within feminist movements. Keller (2012) suggested that this ambiguity was not because the young women were not participating in feminist projects but rather arose from the tendency of third wave feminism to be characterized by “a kind of ‘messiness’ that complicates the notion of a unified social movement with a clear agenda and boundaries” (p. 433). The young bloggers writing for FBomb were clearly using blogs in the second sense, as a site for cultural production; their online discussions could include calls to action but more importantly they were action.

Della Porta and Mosca (2005) have also explored how social movements adopt Internet practices, reporting that there are three distinct effects that the Internet has had on social movements. The first effect of the Internet on social movements is that it is used “in the organization and the logistics of demonstrations, and as a means for different groups to keep networked” (p. 167). This first use is clearly an example of the Internet being used as a tool to extend the reach of the social movement while at the same time reducing the cost of communication. The second use of the Internet according to Della Porta and Mosca (2005) is as “a specific means for the direct expression of dissent and protest” (p. 167). Specifically, the Internet provides a new space for action including the practices described by Meikle (2002) as backing into the future but also for new forms of action that are inherently and irrevocably digital and have no offline equivalency. The third use of the Internet is as “a cognitive function, enabling information to be disseminated and public opinion to be sensitized on issues scantily covered by mainstream media, and also reinforce collective identities” (Della Porta & Mosca, 2005, p. 167). What is becoming increasingly obvious is that these three functions are more commonly used in conjunction with each other rather than alone. For example, when social movement members use the Internet to circulate information, they are able take advantage of the low cost of production and distribution afforded by the technology. They are also disseminating the information in a public space where the act of sharing and the actual content of the
communication is visible to those outside the movement. Thus, the communication serves two roles — it reaches the intended audiences (existing members and potential allies of the movement) and it alerts outsiders to the issues and educates them about the activities of the movement.

Della Porta and Mosca (2005) further elaborated on how new social movements are using the Internet; specifically they found that ‘newer’ social movements with less established organizational structures were more likely to use the Internet to communicate, were active across a broader range of online platforms, and valued the Internet more than social movements with more hierarchical and organized structures. Additionally, they reported that those social movements that predated Internet communication were more reluctant to adopt new forms of computer-mediated communication and, when they did, were more likely to use it in ways that mirrored older forms of media communication rather than leveraging the new affordances of the technologies (Bennett, 2003; Della Porta & Mosca, 2005). Furthermore, they proposed that not only does the Internet support social movements that have less formalized structures and are based instead on loosely tied networks of actors, but there may be a feedback loop operating in that the Internet promotes or facilitates these types of social movements (Della Porta and Mosca, 2005). According to Della Porta and Mosca (2005):

The Internet empowers a series of fundamental functions of social movement organizations: it modifies their movements’ organizational structure (more and more networked, flexible and polycentric) and makes organizing demonstrations easier; it increases the possibilities for a direct intervention in politics through different forms of cyberprotest, it influences identity processes and helps to spread alternative information (p. 185).

In addition to influencing the structures of the movements, the Internet also influences the individuals involved. Della Porta and Mosca (2005) found that “social movement organizations tend to ‘socialize’ their activists to the Internet” (p. 186). While individuals may first be motivated to try forms of online communication in order to make contact or stay involved with members of a particular movement, in doing so they become more proficient at using the Internet, they start to see the value in using it, and they become more likely to use it in the future. Through their involvement in social movements, individuals develop new skills that may be of use to them in the future, be it in their personal lives or as they engage in further political action.
2.5 Sport-Related Social Movements

Davis-Delano and Crosset (2008) have argued that sociologists of sport have been studying sport and social movements since the late 1960s as illustrated by such examples as the literature on the women’s sport movement, the role of sport in the anti-apartheid movement, and the efforts by activists to eliminate the use of Native American mascots. Yet despite recognizing the intersections between sport and social movements, sociologists of sport were slow to apply social movement theory to the study of sport at least in part, because they were hampered perhaps by “the fact that many of the activists in sport-related social movements are embedded in movements whose focus is much broader than sport” (Davis-Delano & Crosset, 2008, p. 116).

Indeed, one of the challenges of the field has been determining what exactly it means to consider sport as a social movement given that most so-called sport-related social movements are situated within larger global social movements and the boundaries between different movements are not well delineated. The term sport-related social movement can actually be applied in two ways: first, as the activities undertaken by social movement actors that endeavour to change sport and second, as the use of sport by social movement actors to achieve social change that extends beyond sport (Davis-Delano & Crosset, 2008; Harvey, Rail, & Thibault, 1996; Wilson, 2007).

For example, individuals and organizations that identify with the women’s sport movement seek to change sport by engaging in actions that they hope will lead to more women and girls participating in sport (as athletes but also as coaches, administrators, and sport leaders) and they use sport as a site to highlight women’s abilities and initiate discussions of gender stereotypes with the intent of reaching mainstream audiences that are not directly involved in sport. Likewise, as previously discussed, projects that advocate for the inclusion of people with disability in sport can be viewed simultaneously as an extension of the Disability Rights Movement (all people, regardless of ability/disability, should have access to sport) and as a means of challenging mainstream discourses of disability.

2.5.1 Globalization and sport-related social movements

The role of sport in processes of globalization has been of particular interest to academics interested in sport-related social movements. Globalization, as described by Harvey and Houle
(1994), is not the homogenization of culture but rather the formation of new patterns of interconnectedness between individuals, groups, and/or corporations. These patterns “produce not a common perspective but a multitude of perspectives and diverse communities” (Harvey & Houle, 1994, p. 343) marked by a shared ethos, a common cause, or a collective identity rather than by more traditional nationalistic or geographically-bound identities and concerns. Globalization then is both a contributor to the formation of new social movements and is informed by new social movements. New social movements form networks that transcend national boundaries made possible through the globalization of communication technologies (i.e. the Internet) but, as social movement members interact with each other, they further reinforce/sustain those same channels of communication and facilitate the transfer of information, resources, practices, and values (Harvey & Houle, 1994).

In the context of sport, globalization has frequently been considered in terms of the transnational proliferation of sport economies, for example, the migration of professional athletes (cf. Magee & Sugden, 2002; Maguire, 2008). More recently, however, the focus has shifted towards an examination of the function of sport in global social movements such as the peace and development movement. This movement⁹ uses sport to promote international development goals, including improved education, conflict resolution, economic growth, and disease prevention (Darnell, 2012; Hayhurst, Wilson, & Frisby, 2011; Kidd, 2008). Darnell (2012) states that the discourses associated with the sport for peace and development movement “trade on and perpetuate the notion of sport as a ‘universal language’ and therefore as applicable and suitable for international development” (p. 5). In addition to being (allegedly) universally understood, sport provides social movements with a competitive advantage in that actors are able to capitalize on the pre-existing structures of global sporting cultures and industries in fundraising for, promoting, and delivering development programs (Thorpe & Rinehard, 2012). Furthermore,

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⁹ Though I use the singular term ‘movement’ it may be more accurate to speak of peace and development movements in the plural. While, as previously discussed, social movements are never homogenous groups but rather loosely bound networks of individual actors, this is particularly true when speaking of large global movements such as the peace and development movement, the environmental movement, or the labour movement. While movement members may have a shared commitment to a particular cause (for example, protecting the environment), there can be considerable variation in how smaller networks operating within these large movements and define their priorities.
in researching the use of action sports (skateboarding and surfing) in development work in politically unsettled regions, Thorpe and Rinehard (2012) observed that some sports “may be appealing to governmental agencies that see these sports as apolitical, and thus ‘safe’ channels for investing, and thus manoeuvring, within these volatile countries” (p. 124).

The danger with using sport to engage in development work is that very little critical thought is given to the ways in which sport has or can (re)produce unequal/unjust relations (Darnell, 2007; Thibault, 2009; Thorpe & Rinehard, 2012). For example, Thibault (2009) has identified numerous ways in which the globalization of sport perpetuates unequal power relations and can actually contribute to situations that sustain the perceived need for development projects rather than providing relief. Similarly, Thorpe and Rinehard (2012) have discussed how sport-related non-governmental agencies have been pressured to adopt the agendas of their funding partners, which has seriously compromised their ability to engage in the progressive work they originally set out to do. The risk that sport might be used to reproduce conditions of oppression rather than to promote emancipation or more progressive relations is hardly limited to the sport for peace and development movement. Though sport for peace and development is not the focus of this dissertation, I include it because the rich literature on this movement provides an excellent example of how sport is frequently discussed as though it is apolitical and, therefore, a blank canvas to be used by social movement actors in order to promote a particular cause or further an agenda. One needs only to return to the earlier discussion about how sport privileges certain bodily norms and thereby devalues bodies that fail to comply to these norms (i.e. disabled bodies) to understand that sport is not a value neutral practice and that studying any sport-related social movement requires considering not only what values sport is being used to promote (e.g. peace and development goals) but also what values are being promoted by the use of sport (e.g. the values of sport).

2.5.2 The ‘movement-like’ characteristics of sport subcultures

In addition to the growing body of literature concerned with sport-related social movements, Wilson (2012) has pointed to the rich tradition of subcultural studies in sport and has stated that sociologists of sport are increasingly attentive to the “movement-like” (p. 87) characteristics of these groups. Like new social movements, subcultural groups consist of loosely
bound networks of individuals who engage in common practices, come together in space, negotiate shared identities, and present symbolic challenges to “dominant meanings assigned to cultural practices” (Crosset & Beal, 1997, p. 76). In the context of sport, studying subcultures has included being attentive to how styles of dress, approaches to sporting competitions, and the use of particular equipment serve to position subcultural members as “‘oppositional’ when compared to more accepted and commonly practiced approaches to sport” (Wilson, 2012, p. 84). Notable examples from the field include Beal’s (1995, 1996) study of skateboarders and their resistance to traditional authority structures within sport, Wheaton’s (2000) exploration of the role of consumership in the negotiation of identity in windsurfing subcultures, and Thorpe’s (2005) analysis of gender relations in snowboarding groups.

Though subcultures and new social movements have many common elements, there is one key point on which they differ. Whereas social movement actors engage in deliberate tactics to promote (or oppose) social change, subcultures present a challenge to dominant or mainstream culture simply by existing. Subcultural group members’ alternative way of being disrupts the hegemonic messages that assert that the dominant group’s way of being is natural, legitimate, and common sense (Giulianotti, 2005). As Crosset and Beal (1997) explain “subculture is an area in which groups of people challenge dominant meanings assigned to cultural products” and in doing so “promote an opposing definition of reality, one which challenges the assumed naturalness and, therefore, the legitimacy of the dominant groups’ definition of acceptable behavior” (p. 76). However, while mainstream culture may change in response to the challenge presented by subcultural groups (a response that might include incorporating or suppressing the subculture), social change is not necessarily the intended goal of subcultural group members as it is for social movement actors. With this in mind, Giulianotti (2005) cautions that “sociologists must confer with social actors to obtain the meaning and motives behind social actions” (p. 58) rather than trying “to discern a hidden ‘resistance’ in all kinds of cultural practices” (p. 59). Accordingly, Giulianotti (2005) issued a call for a return to fieldwork by sociologists of sport stating that “too many analysts avoid fieldwork by doing ‘textual studies’ that decode popular culture in their terms, rather than those of social actors” (p. 60).

Despite this difference, Wilson (2012) has suggested that, in some instances, the distinction between subcultural groups and new social movements is a false dichotomy, particularly given that “the most recent research and writing on (sport) subcultures has
highlighted instances were subcultural groups are more political and more influential than ever before” (p. 86, italics in original). He proposed that subcultural groups might be thought of as “pre-political” (p. 85) in that the activities of subcultural group members might prepare them for future political engagement or participation in collective action. Similar to the description provided earlier of how young female bloggers have used the FBomb blog to constitute themselves as political citizens, Wilson (2012) has contended that individuals can “use subcultural activities as a way to find a language to express themselves and their concerns [and] to prepare themselves for active engagement with politics through the micro-political and personal identity work that takes place in subcultural contexts” (p. 85). Thus, subcultural groups, though not synonymous with new social movements, could potentially provide a training ground for future social movement actors.

2.5.3 Online studies and sport-related social movements

Having previously discussed the (potential) role of the Internet and Web-based communication in new social movements more generally, I will not restate all the ways in which the Internet is being used with sport-related social movements specifically. I will, however, outline the rapidly growing body of work by sociologists of sport who are using online methods (or combining online and offline methods) to study sport-related social movements. I will then conclude this review of the literature by situating the AthletesFirst project within the context of this rapidly developing field.

Online studies of sport-related movements have taken several forms. Notable work in the field includes Wilson’s (2002) study of the ‘anti-jock’ movement, a network of youth who express dissatisfaction or anger at the way in which educational institutions (specifically high schools) normalize hyper-masculine sport cultures and afford privileges to athletes who participate in these cultures (i.e. jocks). Wilson (2002) explored how, through the production and consumption of Websites and Webzines¹⁰, individual youths came to perceive themselves as part of a broader collective (a new social movement) that was both locally and globally situated. The

¹⁰ Webzine being the term used to describe online sites that are modeled after ‘zines’, the self-published, often underground magazines frequently associated with subcultural groups or social movement activists.
social movement is local in the sense that the youth were drawing on their personal experiences of pro-jock culture in their schools and communities and global in that, through their online interactions, they were starting to understand that their experiences were not isolated instances but connected to transglobal practices that served to reproduce certain masculine identities through sport.

MacKay and Dallaire (2012, 2013) have recently explored the Skirtboarders’ blog, a site produced by a crew of female skateboarders. Through the blog, the women produced and disseminated texts and videos that “contest[ed] dominant discursive constructions of sportswomen” (MacKay & Dallaire, 2012, p. 2). Responding to the call by Millington and Wilson (2010) that researchers employ methods capable of exploring online content from the perspectives of those who produce and/or consume the texts, MacKay and Dallaire (2012) conducted interviews with members of the skirtboarder crew and non-crew members who wrote for and visited the Website. They concluded that “without professing to be feminists” (p. 2), the skirtboarders produced and circulated feminist materials. In this way, the skirtboarders ultimately “expand[ed] girls’ and women’s space in the Internet skateboarding landscape” (p. 2) and “contribut[ed] to a larger movement promoting skateboarding among girls and women” (p. 13).

Millington and Darnell (2012) have described the Web as a battleground between Olympic stakeholders and Olympic resisters. Online, the IOC and the host committee of the 2016 Rio Games have circulated messages promoting the Games and linking them to international development projects while Olympic resisters and anti-globalization activists have used blogs and other platforms to contest and critique these same texts. Millington and Darnell (2012) explained:

> While the IOC and [Brazilian Olympic Committee] present an online vision of the Olympics that promotes the benefit awaiting host nations, particularly in the global South, internet communications also provides avenues for counter-hegemonic discourse that potentially disrupt these generally positive and often apolitical and ahistorical depictions (p. 15).

In this way, they have demonstrated that the Internet is a tool used *simultaneously* by dominant groups to reinforce/sustain hegemonic narratives and by subordinate groups to circulate counter-hegemonic challenges.
While the previously described projects are only three examples from the field, they illustrate the range of sport-related social movements that sociologists have studied using online (or online/offline) methods. They also demonstrate the diverse ways that sport-related social movement actors are employing the Internet. The anti-jocks used personal Websites and Webzines to find others who were also frustrated by the privileging of hypermasculine jock culture. Without the Web, identifying and communicating with like-minded individuals on a global scale would have been a nearly impossible task — and, without the Web, a researcher would never have been able to access these texts. In the case of the female skateboarding crew (the skirtboarders), they already had a local community as these were women who were meeting ‘in person’ to skate with each other. Yet they documented their activities (for example, by producing videos of female skaters doing tricks) and published them online and, in doing so, linked their local actions to a broader feminist project. Finally, Millington and Darnell’s (2012) work addressed some of the complexities of the Web previously discussed and demonstrated that even though corporations and transnational sport organizations are becoming increasingly savvy in their use of the Web, so too are the activists. Their analysis of the ‘official’ texts produced by Olympic stakeholders and the ‘unofficial’ texts produced by bloggers reaffirms that the Web is a contested space.

In conclusion, this last decade has seen a proliferation in the field of ‘online’ sport studies including a number of works that have employed social movement theory. Collectively, these projects have enriched understandings of how sport-related social movements operate and how individual actors understand their participation in the networks. It is in this context and with the aim of contributing to this emerging body of literature that I situate the AthletesFirst project.

2.6 Moving Forward

The purpose of this chapter was to position my research project and to identify the gaps this project aims to address. Substantively, I outlined the complexities of the Paralympic Movement that has at its core elements of a pro-elitist, high performance sport culture as well as ties with the social justice focused Disability Rights Movement. Theoretically, I discussed the various ways in which social movements have historically been understood and provided the context for the rise of new social movement theory. This was followed by an overview of how
members of new social movements are employing computer-mediated technologies and online spaces to extend their reach and further their objectives. I then explored the claim that online spaces can provide a new venue for a public sphere where individuals are able to debate and discuss topics of common interest in a democratic fashion. Finally, I outlined recent developments in the field of sport-related social movements and provided examples of recent empirical work that have explored the function of the Internet in communications between members of these movements.

The research project described in the following chapters seeks to extend and contribute to this literature. First and foremost, it explores the intersections of these fields by considering what types of engagement and action are possible when members of the Paralympic Movement set out to strategically create a blog that explored issues related to the practice of disability sport. This project addresses a gap in the existing research in that it provides novel insights into the ways in which athletes with disabilities engage in advocacy projects and what they perceive to be the key issues facing the Paralympic Movement. It also provides a unique empirical contribution to the field in that, while the previously outlined research has taken a largely ethnographic approach to studying blogs, this project starts with the decision to create a blog and to document the processes and decisions made en route. Additionally, it adds to a small (but growing) body of work that simultaneously engages bloggers and blog readers to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the way in which online spaces are collectively constructed and the blurring of the lines between producers and consumers. Finally, this project offers unique insights into the Paralympics as a social movement made up of individual actors. To date, the existing research on the Paralympic Games and disability sport has generally taken one of two approaches: it has either taken a wide-angle look at the Paralympic Games, the organizations involved, or the state of disability sport more generally, or it has focused in on the autobiographical experiences of individual athletes. This project addresses that gap by working in a participatory fashion with athletes with a disability in order to better understand their experiences with sport and their ties to a broader Paralympic Movement not only as individual participants but also as social movement participants.
Chapter 3: Methodology

*I want to be involved because I’ve always been just a participant. To discuss issues like this with other likeminded, bright individuals who are going to challenge me to think differently is a good thing.*

– Courtney

3.1 Introduction to Methodology

This chapter includes a description of the design of the project and a discussion of the rationale behind the methods used in the collection and analysis of the data. It also introduces the five athletes who acted as collaborators on the project and the 20 blog readers who responded to the call for interviewees. Finally, it explores the messy parts of the project: my own entry into the world of para-sport, the process that Courtney and I undertook to recruit the blog team, and the unique concerns that accompanied doing fieldwork in a project that blurred the line between online and offline worlds.

3.2 Participatory Action Research (PAR)

3.2.1 Reconfiguring power in the research process

Frisby and colleagues have situated the development of participatory action research (PAR) in the “rising dissatisfaction with positivist social science and organizational research, where researchers typically control the formulation of research questions, the data-collection process, the interpretation and communication of results” (Frisby, Crawford, & Dorer, 1997, p. 11). In contrast to these approaches, PAR disrupts traditional research hierarchies by including in the research process the individuals who are the intended beneficiaries of the research. In doing so, PAR changes the power relations that characterize the research processes and contests the assumption that knowledge is something produced in institutions by academics (Cargo & Mercer, 2008; Reid & Brief, 2009). In short, conducting PAR-based research means engaging in a project “where previously considered participants (or subjects) are (re)constructed as collaborators or coresearchers” (Evans, Hole, Berg, Hutchinson, & Sookraj, 2009, p. 896).

PAR research is not defined by a particular set of methods or data collection techniques but rather is characterized by adherence to core principles or values that guide the research
process (Greenwood et al., 1993). PAR research: (1) acknowledges the capacity of research participants to identify issues/research topics that are meaningful to them and their communities; (2) exposes how power operates in research projects and adopts practices that seek to redistribute power more equitably; (3) endeavours to build capacity and support growth in communities, and amongst research participants, and researchers; and (4) aims to translate knowledge into action that promotes/facilitates positive change (Cargo & Mercer, 2008; Evans et al., 2009; Frisby et al., 1997; Ponic, Reid, & Frisby, 2010; Reid et al., 2011; Reid & Brief, 2009; Stoudt et al., 2012). According to Stoudt et al. (2012), research projects that are attentive to these core values overturn the notion that distance leads to objectivity and hence to legitimacy in research and offers instead a “scientific counter-story; a radical imagination of a public science, conducted by and for the people most intimately affected by inequity” (p. 181). Simply put, researchers doing PAR contend that rather than striving for objectivity and guarding against bias, academics should be engaging with the individuals who have intimate and personal understandings of the phenomenon under investigation.

Though participatory research methods could technically be applied in any number of situations, with all sorts of communities or groups, PAR has most frequently been used within emancipatory research paradigms and employed in the context of individuals and/or communities who have experienced the effects of marginalization and oppression. Not only are participatory methods seen as having the potential to benefit these communities by producing knowledge that is locally situated and meaningful to those engaged in the projects, but PAR researchers also attempt to redress the historical (and ongoing) ways in which certain groups have been excluded from formal research institutions. For example, within the field of disability studies, there is a growing interest in PAR in acknowledgement that people with disabilities have often experienced alienation in educational settings and have subsequently been denied meaningful roles in academia and other research processes (Goodley & Moore, 2000; Kitchin, 2000). PAR is also described as particularly valuable to groups where access to education or employment is low because PAR can potentially provide these individuals with “access to valued social roles” (Frisby et al., 1997, p. 12). For example, by participating as collaborators or coresearchers, individuals might learn new skills, gain experience, build confidence, or form networks that could facilitate their entry into the workforce or volunteer force, encourage them to
pursue further education, or contribute to a greater sense of inclusion in their community (Reid, Tom, & Frisby, 2006).

However, deciding to employ participatory methods does not mean that projects will necessarily live up to the emancipatory ideals to which they aspire. PAR introduces complexity into the research in that it “requires academic researchers to relinquish some of their power within the research process” (Reid et al., 2011, p. 191). Relinquishing power or control of a project can be a scary task for researchers working within the constraints of academia, including the obligation to provide accounts of research outcomes to funding agencies (and secure future funding), the pressure to publish in academic journals, and the need to meet certain deadlines. To turn a project over to community collaborators, who have their own criteria for evaluating the project, can make the researcher feel vulnerable (Ponic et al., 2010). Nonetheless, this process is at the heart of PAR research—a commitment to exposing and reconfiguring power relations and a shift from conducting research on participants to conducting research with participants (Cargo & Mercer, 2008; Evans et al., 2009; Kitchin, 2000; Ponic et al., 2010; Reid & Brief, 2009).

3.2.2 Promoting participation and facilitating engagement

There exists considerable debate as to how and to what extent it is possible, practical, or even ethical to involve participants in a research projects (Kitchen, 2000). Although full participation throughout every stage of the research process, from conception to execution to dissemination of findings, is often held as the ideal, there are few (if any) instances where this has been achieved. Rather, Cargo and Mercer (2008) described participation as falling along a continuum:

> The upper bound of participation occurs when those affected by the issues remain actively involved in all [participatory research] phases. Within this fully democratic model, academic and nonacademic partners codirect each phase of the [participatory research] process … The lower bound of participation in a [participatory research] project involv[es] engaging nonacademic partners at least at the project’s front end, in defining or redefining the research questions or otherwise contributing to the study direction, and at the back end, in interpreting and applying the research findings (p. 333).

There are many reasons why participants might not be engaged in all aspects of the project. The participants might have limited time to devote to the project, they might face barriers related to
health, literacy, transportation, or access to child care, they might not feel comfortable or confident in their ability to contribute, or they might not be interested in stages of the work (Cargo & Mercer, 2008; Reid et al., 2006). Researchers have to be cautious that they do not place undue pressure on individuals to participate when they do not wish to or to limit the research project only to those participants who are willing to commit to all aspects of the work (Cargo & Mercer, 2008; Ponic et al., 2010). Rather, researchers are encouraged to cultivate conditions where individuals are able to participate according to their interests, resources, skills, and abilities (Ponic et al., 2010). Acknowledging that this process can be frustrating at times, Ponic et al., (2010) offer the reminder that the richness of PAR “in part results from the diverse agendas, worldviews, skills, resources, and social contexts that each partner brings to the table” (p. 328). When speaking to their experiences of conducting PAR-based research on women’s health issues, Ponic et al. (2010) concluded the following:

Rather than simply tolerating the challenges as an unfortunate side effect or reason not to conduct [feminist participatory action research], we argue that the uncomfortable dynamics that often unfold are necessary to meet the intentions between the endeavour and give evidence to the fact that power relations are being destabilized in a way that can have positive consequences as a result (p. 333).

3.2.3 PAR, disability studies, and online methods

One of the many goals of the Disability Rights Movement was to direct attention to the historic ways that research institutions and research processes contributed to the oppression of people with disabilities (Barnes, 2003; Kitchin, 2000; Stone & Priestley, 1996). In addition to the previously described challenges that the Disability Rights Movement posed to the ‘medical model,’ disability activists also raised awareness about how researchers working across a number of disciplines had systematically engaged in projects that stereotyped people with disabilities as incapable, incompetent, and in need of protection or assistance (Barnes, 2003). Disability research was something conducted by able-bodied researchers on disabled subjects. According to Kitchin (2000):

Traditional expert model approaches, when used by a non-disabled researcher, [meant] that disabled persons’ knowledge [was] placed into the hands of the researcher to interpret ... such a situation [meant] that there [was] greater potential to discount, deny or even fail to acknowledge the lived experiences of disabled people (p. 34).
The critique of mainstream disability research within the Disability Rights Movement contributed to a proliferation of work produced (chiefly) by disabled researchers illustrating and documenting the experience of oppression (Barnes, 2003). However, while these works represented an important moment in the Disability Rights Movement and contributed to the burgeoning field of disability studies, there were still those who felt that personal narratives had limited potential to dismantle the structures that (re)produce marginalization (Barnes, 2003). Disability activist Mike Oliver instead issued a call for ‘emancipatory disability research’, which he argued would facilitate “the empowerment of disabled people through the transformation of the material and social relations of research production” (Barnes, 2003, p. 6). Summarizing the nature and scope of emancipatory disability research, Barnes (2003) contended:

In contrast to traditional investigative approaches, the emancipatory disability research agenda warrants the generation and the production of meaningful and accessible knowledge about the various structures — economic, political, cultural and environmental — that create and sustain the multiple deprivations encountered by the overwhelming majority of disabled people and their families. The integrating theme running through social model thinking and emancipatory disability research is its transformative aim: namely, barrier removal and the promotion of disabled people’s individual and collective empowerment. From this perspective the role of the researcher is to help facilitate these goals through the research process (p. 6).

PAR research fits within this emancipatory model in that, as previously noted, it has the potential to produce research that is grounded in the personal and intimate experiences of persons with disabilities and to connect these accounts with the context (historical, environmental, cultural) in which they were produced. Furthermore, participatory methods challenge stereotypical portrayals of disability by recognizing the expertise and skills of people with disabilities along with their capability to contribute to collaborative research projects (Kitchin, 2000).

However, despite widespread notions that PAR research has enormous potential to engage with individuals with disabilities, my review of the literature has identified some gaps. First of all, in the context of disability, PAR research has most frequently been employed in projects involving individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities (cf. Buettgen et al., 2012; Garcia-Iriarte, Kramer, Kramer, & Hammel, 2009; Goodley & Moore, 2000). There is
good reason for this — though people with disabilities have generally been excluded from formal research settings (e.g. universities) because of barriers associated with cost and accessibility, people with intellectual disabilities have been doubly excluded because they are largely assumed to be incapable of higher level learning or of speaking for themselves (Buettgen et al., 2012). Thus, it seems reasonable to suggest that participatory methods might be particularly valuable to these groups (and therefore explains the relative popularity of PAR when working with this community). There is also a considerable body of work documenting PAR projects that include people with disabilities living in low-income conditions, experiencing chronic underemployment, or facing barriers to accessing health services/information (cf. Block, Vanner, Keys, & Skeels, 2010; Buettgen et al., 2012; Ravesloot et al., 2007). It is well established that people with disabilities are more likely to experience poverty, be underemployed, and have poorer health compared to able-bodied cohorts. Therefore, these PAR projects make an important contribution to understanding the relationships between disability and other forms of marginalization (and ideally in contributing to actions that ameliorate the circumstances of individuals living in these conditions).

However, while acknowledging the important contributions of the work done in these fields, I do feel there is also room for PAR-based research that engages with individuals with disabilities in other settings. For example, PAR could be used to explore the experiences and concerns of people with disabilities in the workforce, in universities, and in the sport system. It would seem to me that an assumption is being made that once a person with a disability has overcome (and I use that term somewhat ironically) some of the barriers frequently associated with disability, they no longer experience any form of marginalization. Certainly athletes with disabilities (and all athletes for that matter) occupy a position of privilege in that they have had the opportunity to pursue sport and other leisure activities. However, as discussed earlier in this document, that does not mean that their experience of sport has always been positive or that there

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11 I should also note there are almost no examples of PAR-based research that engages with competitive athletes, either those with disabilities or able-bodied. Though there is a rich body PAR-based work on the topic of inclusion/exclusion from physical activity, recreation, and leisure activities (including sport) (most notably the work by Frisby and colleagues, see for example, Frisby et al., 1997; Frisby, Reid, & Ponic, 2007; Frisby, 2011), the focus of the field has more generally been on access to sport at a community/recreational level rather than in more competitive environments.
is no room for improvement. The role that the sport system has in perpetuating unequal or unjust hierarchies should also be interrogated and I contend that participatory methods that include athletes with disabilities is one means of pursuing this project.

Furthermore, despite claims that the Internet and the Web have enormous emancipatory potential for people with disabilities (cf. Berners-Lee, 2010; Ellis & Kent, 2011; Goggin & Newell, 2003) by breaking down barriers associated with cost, transportation, and communication, I was unable to find a single PAR-based research project that included online methods as a means of fostering collaboration with people with disabilities. Though there is extensive evidence that the Web is being used by disability activists and advocates to find and build community (for example, the prior example of the Women With Disabilities Australia network), it would appear that researchers working from a participatory model have been slow to recognize the potential afforded by online forms of communication. This seems particularly unfortunate given that researchers working with disability groups frequently cite time, cost, and transportation as barriers to participation in research projects — barriers that the Internet is uniquely able to address! It is within this context and with the aim of (starting) to address these two gaps that I position the AthletesFirst project.

3.3 Project Design

The AthletesFirst project was designed as a participatory project that involved individuals with disabilities in multiple roles and at various stages of the process. Five athletes with disabilities were collaborators involved in the design and the implementation of the project. These collaborators played a significant role in determining not only what would be done but also in identifying what types of outcomes were sought in order to ensure that the work was meaningful on a personal level and also more broadly to disability sport stakeholders. Other athletes with disabilities (as well as coaches, volunteers, service providers, and disability-rights advocates/allies) were involved in the implementation of the project as bloggers, readers, and interviewees. The following sections further elaborate on the design of the project and the methods employed in the collection of the data with particular attention paid to the contributions of various individuals and the application of the principles of PAR.

I should be clear, however, that though I position this project within the field of PAR-based research, I fully acknowledge that it might be more accurate to say it included
‘participatory elements.’ As will be described in the following section, the AthletesFirst project had several phases and included a mixed method design. Some methods were participatory in that individuals had substantial control over the direction of the project (for example, contributing to the design of the AthletesFirst blog, deciding on topics, writing posts, engaging in discussions) while other methods followed a much more traditional research model (for example, I conducted interviews and analyzed the transcripts). My intent, in the sections that follow, is to accurately and honestly describe the research project, to recognize the contributions made by others (the blog team, guest writers, blog readers, etcetera), to highlight the collaborative work that was undertaken, to acknowledge my own role in the project, and to expose and interrogate how power relations informed the research process. In Chapter 7, I further discuss the strengths and limitations of the various methods employed in the research and elucidate strategies that could be used to increase collaborative participation in future research projects.

3.3.1 Stage 1: Recruiting the blog team and building the AthletesFirst blog

The project had four distinct stages: (1) recruiting the blog team and developing the AthletesFirst blog, (2) writing blog posts and engaging in online conversations, (3) interviewing blog readers and guest authors about their impressions of/experiences with the AthletesFirst blog and more generally about their use of the Internet with regards to their involvement in para-sport and the Paralympic Movement, and (4) analyzing the data and writing up the research findings.

The first stage of a PAR project entails a review of existing services and interviews with key informants who can help to identify possibilities for action and assist in establishing relationships with potential participants (Frisby et al., 1997). This first step in my research occurred while I was training and travelling with the Canadian para-nordic development squad, thereby becoming familiar with the field. I read the literature on disability studies and on the Paralympic Movement and discussed ideas for a project with teammates and friends. I also ‘surfed the net,’ read blogs and forums hosted by athletes with a disability, and followed the ‘tweetstream’ on Twitter. In this way, I gained insight into existing online networks of para-athletes and identified potential allies and partners for this project. Throughout the process, I made note of athletes that I thought might be interested in being on the blog team and of those individuals who seemed likely to join the online conversations, write guest posts, and/or distribute the link to the blog through their online networks.
Courtney, as previously described, was the one who first introduced me to para-sport and who facilitated my entry into this field of study when she asked me to be her guide for the 2010 Paralympics. In addition to serving as a key informant, Courtney was also my first collaborator on this project. During the two years we were skiing together, we had at various times talked about starting a blog. In the spring of 2010, once I had defended my proposal and received approval from the university ethics board, we formally started working together to create AthletesFirst. Our first step was to recruit athletes to join us on the blog team. Keeping in mind that we wanted blog team members capable of writing about a variety of topics and sharing the project within different networks, we looked for individuals in different geographical locations, from various sports, and from different disability groups. It was also important to us to find athletes who were actively engaged in the Paralympic Movement and who had demonstrated a prior interest in partaking in critical debates regarding para-sport and the sport system. This included those who had served as athlete representatives on various teams and boards, who had engaged in public displays of advocacy such as writing newspaper articles, or who had an active online presence. We spoke with teammates, coaches, and friends and encouraged them to suggest people for the project. Our approach was to contact potential blog team members, discuss with them the design of the project, and then invite them to join the blog team. In the case that the athlete was unwilling or unable to commit to the project, we asked them to suggest other potential recruits. After several weeks of discussing the project with numerous individuals, four athletes agreed to join Courtney and me in our endeavour: Jason Dunkerley, Stuart McGregor, Blair Miller, and Josh Vander Vies. Forming what was termed ‘the blog team,’ the six of us collectively took on the tasks of creating a blog that discussed/debated para-sport, writing regular posts, recruiting readers to the site, and participating in the online conversations.

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12 One athlete turned down a spot on the blog team saying he was too busy. A second athlete had recently started a new job at a para-sport agency and was concerned that participating in a project that publically criticized para-sport policies would not be well received by her new employer. In both instances, the athletes directed us to other individuals that they felt might be interested in being on the blog team. Also, both of these athletes ultimately participated in the project in other ways including regularly reading the blog, posting comments, and/or sharing the link through their networks.
3.3.1.1 Meet the blog team

The following is a profile of each blog team member (myself included) in alphabetic order by last name.

**Andrea Bundon:** I started competing in rowing at age 10 and raced on numerous provincial and varsity teams before representing Canada at the 2010 World University Games in the lightweight single. Although I initially took up cross-country skiing as cross training for rowing, I went on to compete in the sport at two Canada Winter Games. In 2008, while completing a Master’s degree at the University of British Columbia, I was recruited to guide Courtney Knight, a visually impaired skier on the national paraparadox development squad. Courtney and I qualified for and competed at the 2010 Paralympic Games and finished eighth in the classic sprint event. When Courtney retired from competition, I started coaching and volunteering for a local para-nordic program. I am also certified as a pararowing coach.

**Jason Dunkerley:** Jason, along with his two brothers, was born with a congenital eye condition called Leber’s Amaurosis. Despite seeing only a tiny amount of light, the brothers grew up playing soccer and riding bicycles around their neighbourhood. Jason attended W. Ross MacDonald School in Ontario (a school for students who are visually impaired, blind, and deafblind) and there he participated in cross country running, wrestling, goalball, and athletics. He eventually specialized in middle-distance running and competed for the University of Guelph on the varsity team. He has represented Canada at four Paralympic Games (2000, 2004, 2008, and 2012), winning two silver and two bronze medals in the 1500 meters event. Jason works as a coordinator for a program that supports and enables Canadians with disabilities to live active, healthy lives.

**Courtney Knight:** Courtney was raised in northern British Columbia and was one of only two visually impaired students in her community. She has competed in five Paralympic Games in the sports of athletics (1992, 1996, 2000, and 2004) and in Nordic skiing/biathlon (2010) winning a total of three medals (two silver and one bronze). Courtney was also the first athlete with a disability to qualify for a provincial able-bodied team when she represented British Columbia at the Western Canada Summer Games and the Canadian Junior Championships (athletics). Since her retirement from elite sport following the 2010 Paralympics, she has been working

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13 The profiles included in this document were compiled from information provided by the blog team members during interviews and from the written profiles posted on AthletesFirst (http://athletesfirst.ca/meet-the-blog-team-2/).
tirelessly as a volunteer and coach for a local ski club. She organizes a number of ski programs for youth and adults with disabilities. Courtney has an undergraduate degree in communications from Simon Fraser University and is currently enrolled in a post-degree program in recreational therapy.

**Stuart McGregor:** Diagnosed with retina pigmentosa at age 12, Stuart competed for many years in able-bodied athletic events representing his high school and the University of Western Ontario. He was recruited to para-sport in his late teens and has competed in three Paralympic Games (1996, 2000, and 2004) winning silver in the 1500 meters and two bronzes in the 800 meters. In 2005, while on a training run with Jason, Stuart was hit by a car that shattered his leg. The road to recovery was a long one and required three reconstructive surgeries and many hours of physiotherapy. He was eventually able to return to running and just narrowly missed qualifying for the 2012 Paralympic Games. Stuart is a part-time elementary school teacher and a full-time father of three.

**Blair Miller:** Blair started out as a racewalker competing in the 20-kilometer event. He raced for Canada at a World Cup, a Pan Am Cup, and at the Jeux de la Francophonie. In 2003, he was approached while training and asked to guide a visually impaired sprinter, Dustin. Although it was quite a change to go from racing long distance to racing 400 meters, Dustin and Blair were quite successful and competed together at the 2003 World Blind Championships and at the 2004 Paralympic Games where they placed 5th. During his career as a guide runner, Blair was informed that he could compete in para-sport based on his own classification for cerebral palsy. He began competing in the 400m and 800m in the T38 class and raced at the 2006 IPC World Championships. Blair spent 18 months working in the United Kingdom developing sport opportunities for disabled young people. He now coaches some of Canada’s top racewalkers and works full-time as a high school teacher in Surrey, British Columbia.

**Josh Vander Vies:** Born without arms and legs, Josh is currently a member of the Canadian national boccia team and has competed in two Paralympic Games (2004 and 2012) winning a bronze medal in the pairs BC4 event in 2012. Josh is a powerful inspirational speaker and a recipient of the prestigious national Terry Fox Humanitarian Award. He has served as Athlete Representative on the board of the International Boccia Committee and the Canadian Paralympic Committee’s Board of Directors and as a board member for AthletesCAN. He holds a double major in Political Science and French from the University of Western Ontario and is currently a Juris Doctor candidate at the University of British Columbia in the Faculty of Law.
Though I stated earlier that Courtney and I attempted to recruit a blog team that was somewhat diverse and would, therefore, be capable of writing posts on a number of different issues (and from different perspectives) related to disability sport, I should also acknowledge the commonalities amongst team members. There is considerable evidence that not all groups are equally represented within the sport system, particularly at the elite or high performance level. Within a Canadian context, it has been recognized that competing on a national team (i.e. representing Canada internationally) is correlated with one’s socio-economic status (Beamish, 1990, 1992) and that sport both produces and reaffirms social inequalities along lines of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and (dis)ability (cf. Donnelly, 1996; Kidd, 1995; Paraschak, 1997). Additionally, though para-sport obviously includes people with disabilities, that does not mean that all people with disabilities are equally represented within the para-sport system. As previously mentioned, the historical context which led to the creation of the IPC and the rise of the Paralympic Movement goes a long way to explaining how and why some disabilities groups have been excluded from para-sport organizations. Howe (2008) has also written about hierarchies within the Paralympic program and the systematic elimination of certain groups through changes in the classification system and the elimination of events.14

Furthermore, it must be remembered that athletes with disabilities — even elite athletes with disabilities — face all the same barriers and challenges that their able-bodied counterparts encounter. Pursuing sport at an elite level is expensive, and, even when they have the talent, without the (financial) support of family members and/or sponsors, most athletes are forced to drop out (cf. Status of the High Performance Athlete, 2010). All of the blog team members came from families that valued sport and that had the resources to allow us to pursue sport from a young age. During our competitive careers, we might have struggled at times to cover the expenses associated with elite level competitions (including costs associated with travel and equipment, or training schedules that interfered with employment opportunities, etcetera) but we all had networks in place that supported us (family, scholarships, government funding, and sponsors). We came from communities and cultures where sport was seen as a worthwhile pursuit and where there was a certain status accorded to athletes who were part of national teams.

14 Changes to the classification system and the implications for various disability groups was a favourite topic of discussion on the AthletesFirst blog.
Thanks to our education and our upbringing, we also had the skills to navigate the sport system. Thus, while I would contend that the blog team was, in many ways, representative of the athletes who generally make up the constituency of the Canadian national teams, I am also very cognizant that the sport system is itself exclusionary and that this team also embodies (and reproduces) those dynamics.

3.3.1.2 Working together: The blog behind the blog

As Courtney and I found athletes willing to participate in the project, we sent out emails to the group introducing and welcoming the new recruits (four team members lived in British Columbia and two in Ontario thus the entire team never did meet face-to-face). By the time that Jason (the sixth team member to join) had confirmed his interest, we had already had several group email exchanges and were starting to gel as a team. I should also mention that this team was founded on pre-existing relationships. Although none of the blog team members knew everyone before the project started, everyone knew at least a few other blog team members or they knew of them given the close ties within the para-sport community in Canada.

While the original project proposal called for regular blog team meetings (via Skype or conference calls), the blog team members decided during these initial exchanges that they preferred to communicate by email. Conference calls were described as unnecessary and difficult to schedule. The most common response I received in reply to my requests to set up a conference call was that individuals would prefer to look over the items on the agenda and submit feedback in written format that could be circulated to the group. I proposed that we form a Google Group (a free Web-based platform that supports collaborative/group-based projects) and the blog team agreed it was a good solution. The Google Group included a calendar, a Word document listing blog topics that had been suggested by team members, a space for blog team members to sign up for a topic or propose new topics, a list of tasks to be completed by the group, and a message board. Using this group site (or the ‘blog behind the blog’ as it was occasionally termed) and email, we were able to come to agreement on a name and a tagline for the blog (AthletesFirst: Sporting Abilities and Opinions), how the blog should look, what features it should include, and how it should operate.

Using the group site, each blog team member indicated which topics they would like to write about and a tentative schedule was set out for the first couple of months. It was agreed
early on that the expectation was not that blog team members would contribute equally to all aspects of the blog, but rather that blog team members would contribute according to their individual skills and interests. For example, while all blog team members were involved in the discussion about what to name the blog (see Chapter 4 for more details), Josh was solely responsible for designing the logo and header and other blog team members submitted photos to be used as the background images. I was tasked with the actual creation of the site including registering the domain, finding a host server, deciding on a layout template, creating pages, and general management of the site. Feedback was solicited from blog team members and changes were made accordingly; the process was one of experimentation and exploration as new features were added to the site and the layout was reconfigured. In addition to the blog team, other individuals were also asked to provide feedback regarding the design of the AthletesFirst blog, particularly with regards to the accessibility of the site. I regularly asked individuals with visual impairments (recruited by emailing athletes that Courtney knew from various blind sport teams/organizations) to test the site using their preferred accessibility software including screen readers and zoom/magnifying software.

The final layout of the blog consisted of a home page featuring the latest post, a space for readers to comment, several widgets for sharing (on Facebook, Twitter, by email, Google+, and more), a sidebar featuring a search function, a list of older posts, a scrolling display of comments already made on the blog, a Twitter feed displaying tweets referencing the blog, and a blogroll linking to other blogs written by athletes with a disability. Also on the home page (indeed at the end of every post), was a pop-up box informing readers that this blog was part of an ongoing research project at the University of British Columbia, that comments made on the site could be used for research purposes, and containing a link to the ‘About this Blog’ page where they could find out more information about the project (see Figure 1). Additional pages included: ‘Meet the Blog Team’ (profiles and photos of all blog team members); ‘Get Involved’ (information on how to submit guest posts, ideas for posts, or comment); ‘About This Blog’ (information regarding the research project, including how to contact me, my supervisor, and the university’s ethics board); a ‘Contact Us’ page (email addresses); and an ‘Archives’ page (links to earlier posts).
3.3.2 Stage 2: Writing posts and starting conversations

The AthletesFirst blog (www.athletesfirst.ca) was launched on November 28, 2011 and the first post was co-written by Courtney and Josh. Entitled ‘Language and sport,’ the post attracted only three comments (one of them by me) but it was widely read and distributed through existing online networks with much of the traffic coming from Josh cross-posting on his own blog. In the following weeks and months, the blog team took turns writing posts and recruiting new readers to the site. While no effort was made to formalize a rotation, I emailed the group each week asking blog team members to let me know what posts were currently in the works and when they would be ready. The typical post would stay up on the home page for one or two weeks, depending on whether or not it was still attracting new readers and if the next post was ready to go, and then would be posted in the archives. Later in the project, as blog team members exhausted their own stores of ideas, posts were increasingly made by guest contributors including athletes, coaches, volunteers, and academics who were regular readers and who indicated an interest in writing for the blog.
Between November 28, 2011 and February 15, 2013, a total of 34 posts were made on AthletesFirst (a full list of blog posts including title and author can be found in Appendix A). Blog team members (myself included) wrote 23 posts and 10 guest bloggers wrote 11 posts. The format of the posts was generally as follows: writers were asked to choose a topic related to disability sport/para-sport and then submit a 1,000 to 2,000 word post on the topic. They could include images, hyperlinks, and videos. If requested by the author, I provided feedback or edited a text, but the majority of the posts were published with only minor edits including the correction of errors in spelling and grammar. A total of 339\(^{15}\) comments were made in response to the posts and many of the comments exceeded 500 words. According to the Google Analytics app\(^{16}\), 6,509 individuals visited the blog (for a total of 9,704 visits) and, while Canadians accounted for 63% of all visits, the blog had visitors from 97 countries (with the top three being the United States (15%), the United Kingdom (8%), and Australia (3%)). The average time spent on the site was one minute and 50 seconds and the average number of pages read per visit was 1.74.

3.3.3 Stage 3: Conducting interviews

3.3.3.1 Interviews with the blog team

I conducted interviews with all blog team members prior to the launch of the AthletesFirst blog (five interviews which were each approximately 75 minutes in duration). The one-on-one interviews were intended to delve more deeply into each individual’s reasons for participating in the project. In particular, I wanted know what blog team members hoped to accomplish with this project, how they would measure success, what challenges they foresaw we would encounter, and what topics they felt should be explored on the blog.

Starting in November 2012, the second round of interviews with the blog team took place after the blog had been in operation for one full year. These interviews marked the formal end of AthletesFirst as a research project (although the blog itself is still in operation). The questions asked in this interview focused primarily on the blog team members’ evaluation of the project.

\(^{15}\) This number includes comments made by the original author of the post in response to comments made by readers and the occasional ‘pingback’, or indication that another Webpage had linked to the post.

\(^{16}\) Google Analytics is a free application that tracks visits to a blog and provides reports that include the geographic location of the visitors, the amount of time spent on the site, the number of pages viewed, the source of the traffic (browser search or direct link), etcetera.
Unfortunately, I was not able to complete the second interviews with Blair or Stuart M. Thus, the second round of blog team interviews only includes interviews with Courtney, Josh, and Jason who were each interviewed for approximately 45 minutes.

All the interviews were recorded using Skype Call Recorder, an Olympus digital voice recorder, or iPad recording software. The files were loaded into a password-protected computer in a research lab and transcribed verbatim into Word document files. The files were then loaded into NVivo 8 software, a qualitative data analysis program.

3.3.3.2 Recruiting and interviewing blog readers

The third part of the project consisted of semi-structured interviews with 20 individuals who had been reading the AthletesFirst blog (including three who wrote guest blogs). In May 2011, I posted an announcement on the home page of the blog and tweeted the message that I was looking for volunteers to participate in an interview. I also sent emails to individuals who had made comments on AthletesFirst and had included their email addresses (comments could be made anonymously, using name/pseudonym only, or could also include an email address or a link to an online profile) (see Appendix B for a sample email to a blog reader). Finally, I sent direct messages via Twitter to individuals/accounts that I had observed regularly sharing the link to AthletesFirst. When contacted by potential interviewees, I sent a copy of the information and consent form (see Appendix C for consent form) and answered any questions they had about the interview process or the project more generally. Occasionally, respondents requested information about the project for distribution to their various networks (association members, teammates, etcetera) and some participants were recruited through these channels. Twenty participants agreed to take part with the first interview taking place in May 2012 and the 20th interview in December 2012. Four interviews were conducted in person and the majority of interviews were conducted using Skype (audio only or audio and video). With the participant’s permission, all interviews were digitally recorded (audio only) and transcribed verbatim. These semi-structured interviews (see Appendix D for the interview guide) ranged in length from 45 minutes to two hours (average of 74 minutes). Each participant was asked about their involvement/interest in

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17 Both Blair and Stuart M. have had significant personal events in recent months and their involvement in the project waned over time. While both originally scheduled second interviews, they had to cancel and have not yet been able to reschedule.
para-sport, online behaviour (Websites visited, use of social media, blog reading habits, etcetera), impression of the AthletesFirst blog, and use of the Internet specifically as it pertained to disability sport (to find out information, to promote/advocate for para-sport, to watch sporting events or follow particular athletes, to communicate with other participants, etcetera).

Participants were given the opportunity to decide how they would like to be identified in all work pertaining to this research project (the options were to use their full name, first name, nickname, or a pseudonym of their choosing). I discussed with each participant the implications of using real names in a project that had an online component; for example, many participants had already used their full name in the comment section on the blog (and linked their comments to a personal blog or an online profile) even though they stated they wanted only their first name used in relation to the data collected during the interviews. However, when I suggested that they might want to select a pseudonym to avoid having statements made during the interviews tied to comments posted publicly on the blog, all participants declined and stated that they would like to use their real names. Many participants discussed the importance of having their real names used in this project because they felt it was part of their ongoing advocacy for disability sport (a topic that is further developed in Chapter 6). In several instances during the course of the interviews, participants mentioned the names of the organizations for whom they worked (particularly when their work involved disability sport or working with people with disabilities), boards and committees they served on, teams they competed on, or other blogs they wrote for. In these situations, I asked participants whether or not this information could be used. Only two participants requested that the name of their workplace not be used (and that I refer instead to, for example, ‘a non-profit involved in the delivery of disability sport programs’) and several participants wanted confirmation that all views expressed would be attributed to them and should not be represented as the views of the committee or organization to which they belonged. Additionally, several participants used their Twitter or Facebook accounts or personal blogs to promote the AthletesFirst project or to continue discussions that started on the blog. I contacted these participants individually and obtained permission to use screenshots of tweets and posts when appropriate.
3.3.3.3 Profiles and characteristics of guest bloggers and blog readers

As stated in the research questions (RQ1), this project was designed to capture the myriad of ways in which individuals engaged with the AthletesFirst blog. For this reason, I made the decision to include very few criteria for inclusion/exclusion when recruiting individuals to interview — the requirements were simply that the individual must have visited the blog at least once and was able and willing to participate in a one to two hour interview in person, by telephone, or by Skype. While an effort was certainly made to recruit regular readers and contributors to the blog, individuals who had commented infrequently or not at all were also targeted for the unique insights they could provide. On a similar vein, while it was commonly assumed by the blog team (as is discussed in Chapter 5) that the audience for AthletesFirst was primarily athletes with disabilities and secondarily para-sport coaches and volunteers, this was not actually a criterion for inclusion. The result was that the 20 participants had diverse experiences with and affiliations to para-sport and the final sample included para-athletes (including Paralympians), coaches, volunteers, and also individuals who identified themselves as fans of amateur sport (able-bodied and para), newcomers to the world of para-sport, and/or lifelong critics of the sport system. See Table 3.1 for a description of the participants’ affiliations with para-sport.

The 20 interview participants ranged in age from their early 20s (university students) to mid 60s (recently retired). Eleven were female and nine were male. Eighteen Canadians were interviewed as well as one Australian and one American. Twelve participants identified as having a disability and eight identified as able-bodied. Of the 12 with disabilities, nine identified as competitive athletes, one identified as a coach/volunteer, and two identified as fans (and while they identified as having disabilities/disabling chronic health conditions, the three ‘non-athletes’ would not necessarily have met the criteria to formally be classified as para-athletes for competition). Overall, the sample included individuals with amputations and other limb injuries, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, multiple sclerosis/neural diseases, spinal cord injuries (including ambulatory and wheelchair users), visual impairments, and visual and hearing impairments (Usher’s disease). Four individuals described their impairments as congenital or acquired early in life and eight acquired their disabilities in adulthood. The group included two Paralympians, several athletes attempting to qualify for the 2016 Rio Paralympics, and many athletes competing at a local and regional level. The athletes in the cohort competed primarily in the sports of para-
triathlon (7), wheelchair racing (1), and para-nordic skiing (1) and they participated in a variety of other sports both competitively and recreationally (cycling, goalball, kayaking, running, and swimming to name a few). Of the eight ‘able-bodied’ individuals, two worked for organizations that deliver and advocate for para-sport, one was the editorial/social media coordinator for the IPC, one was a para-sport coach, one worked more generally in athlete services, one described himself as an avid fan of all Canadian amateur sport, and one described himself as a lifelong supporter of active living and recreational sport (and a critic of elite sport). The sample was diverse in terms of income and employment status, although all participants stated they had some post-secondary education.

All participants were regular computer users; however, there was considerable variation in the extent of their use of Internet technologies and online communication platforms. All participants stated that they emailed and that they used the Internet to search for information, to communicate with friends and family, and to complete tasks such as registering for events and banking. Eighteen participants said they were regular users of Facebook, 13 had Twitter accounts (either personal, professional, or both), and nine had blogs of their own or blogged for team blogs or company blogs. Two described themselves as early adopters of the Internet (although the very fact that they used these descriptors can likely be attributed to their age/generation as both were retired individuals). The younger participants were also avid Internet users but were unlikely to see themselves as Internet pioneers given the ubiquity of Internet use among their peers. While I did not specifically ask what forms of assistive technologies participants used, during the course of the interviews, several participants with visual impairments described using JAWS, Zoom text, and other screen readers and/or screen magnifying software designed to assist individuals who are visually impaired. Table 3.2 includes information regarding the participants’ use of the Internet in general and their interactions with/experiences of the AthletesFirst blog more specifically.

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18 The large number of para-triathletes can be partially attributed to the tightly knit online network that exists among the para-triathlon community. However, while many participants identified primarily as para-triathletes, in most instances they were new to the sport (para-triathlon was only recently added to the Paralympic program) and they had prior competitive experience in a variety of sports including running, cycling, swimming, goalball, and kayaking.
In keeping with the participatory action research underpinnings of this project, I was very conscious that these interviews on occasion served a dual role — for me, they were opportunities to gain insight into how and why individuals chose to engage with the AthletesFirst blog, what they perceived to be the outcomes of their engagement with the blog and, more generally, what role they perceived blogs and online communication to play within the Paralympic Movement. However, in several instances, it was also apparent that the participants had their own reasons for volunteering for the interviews. One example was articulated by Terry in an email where he stated: “I am interested in talking to you as [the] promotion of blind sports is always of interest, and it contributes to the bigger issue of living with vision loss in today’s society.” Through our subsequent email exchanges and during the interview itself, it was quite evident that Terry saw himself as an advocate for not only blind sport but also more generally for people living with blindness/vision loss. Participating in this conversation with me, an academic, was consistent with Terry’s ongoing mission to educate and inform society at large about the barriers to full inclusion in Canadian society encountered by individuals with visual impairments.

While semi-structured interviewing is, by design, intended to provide the interviewer with some freedom to improvise questions around pre-determined themes (Amis, 2005), these interviews were even less structured than I had anticipated based on my previous experience interviewing. Many of the participants had issues that they wanted to voice, stories that they wanted to tell, and things that they thought I should know. In some instances, the interviews became quite conversational in style, particularly when I was talking to participants who worked in the para-sport field. These participants (Calum, Jan, Courtenay19, and Stuart) were more than willing to answer my questions but they also had questions of their own: How did the AthletesFirst blog work? Was it a model that they could adopt in their own organization? What did I think of their Websites/blogs? Throughout the interview process, I attempted to strike a balance between ensuring that the questions in the interview schedule were addressed, while at

19 Please note ‘Courtney’ is a member of the blog team while ‘Courtenay’ is the name of one of the 20 interviewees. Two ‘Stuarts’ also participated in the project, blog team member Stuart McGregor (referred to as Stuart M.) and a second Stuart who participated in the interviews and who worked for the IPC (referred to as Stuart). The sample also included two women, one named ‘Rachel’ and the other ‘Rachael.’
the same time being attentive to and accommodating of what the participant was hoping to gain from the interaction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Disability/Impairment</th>
<th>Para-sport affiliation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Calum</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Works for athlete advocacy organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courtenay</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Works for para-sport and recreation organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darren</td>
<td>Yes – spinal cord injury (acquired)</td>
<td>Para-triathlete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Founder of non-profit organization supporting triathletes with visual impairments and founder of company that provides marketing/public relations services for athletes with disabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeff</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Para-nordic coach and official</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathy</td>
<td>Yes – chronic illnesses/impairments (acquired)</td>
<td>Para-sport coach and volunteer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Yes – multiple sclerosis (acquired)</td>
<td>Para-sport ‘superfan’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larry</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Supporter of recreational and grassroots sport and critic of elite sport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lelainia</td>
<td>Yes – neuromyelitis optica (acquired)</td>
<td>Amateur sport ‘superfan’ and participant in 2010 Paralympic Games torch relay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leona</td>
<td>Yes – visual impairment (congenital)</td>
<td>Para-triathlete (former competitive goalball player and para-kayaker)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Yes – traumatic brain injury (acquired)</td>
<td>Para-nordic skier (competed at 2010 Paralympic Games)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

20 I should also note that my experiences were not unique. Hurd Clarke (2003) has referred to this as “collaborative interviewing” (p. 732) and stated that answering a participant’s questions, providing them assistance on small tasks, or directing them to resources can be part of an ethical practice, can foster rapport in the interview relationship, and can suggest new avenues for inquiry.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Disability/Impairment</th>
<th>Para-sport affiliation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>Yes – cerebral palsy/epilepsy (congenital)</td>
<td>Para-triathlete (also a swimmer)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meyrick</td>
<td>Yes – below the knee amputee (acquired)</td>
<td>Para-triathlete (also a personal trainer, cyclist, and runner)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Sport assistant to athlete on the 2012 Paralympic team (boccia), boccia official, volunteer para-sport coach (multiple sports)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachael</td>
<td>Yes – cerebral palsy (congenital)</td>
<td>Wheelchair racer (competed at 2012 Paralympic Games)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>Yes – visual and hearing impairment (Usher’s disease)</td>
<td>Para-triathlete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rob</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Amateur (able-bodied) athlete and supporter/fan of amateur sport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stuart</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Editorial and social media coordinator for International Paralympic Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelley Ann</td>
<td>Yes – visual impairment (congenital)</td>
<td>Para-triathlete (also runner)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terry</td>
<td>Yes – visual impairment (acquired)</td>
<td>Para-triathlete</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3.1** Interview participants’ para-sport affiliation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Use of Internet</th>
<th>Interactions with Athletes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Calum | • Wrote for several blogs  
       | • Used Facebook and Twitter (work and personal)                                    | • Read occasionally  
       |                                                | • Did not comment  
       |                                                | • Shared link through social media                                                 |
| Courtenay | • Used Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube (work and personal)         | • Read often  
       |                                                | • Did not comment  
<pre><code>   |                                                | • Shared link through social media                                                 |
</code></pre>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Use of Internet</th>
<th>Interactions with AthletesFirst blog</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Darren</td>
<td>• Wrote for personal blog</td>
<td>• Read occasionally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Used Facebook and Twitter (work and personal)</td>
<td>• Commented infrequently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Shared link through social media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan</td>
<td>• Wrote for personal and work-based blog</td>
<td>• Read often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Used Facebook and Twitter (work and personal)</td>
<td>• Commented infrequently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Shared link through social media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeff</td>
<td>• Used Facebook (for personal and volunteer)</td>
<td>• Read often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Commented often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Shared link through social media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathy</td>
<td>• Used Facebook (for personal)</td>
<td>• Read often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Commented often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Shared link through social media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>• Wrote for several blogs (personal)</td>
<td>• Read often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Used Facebook and Twitter (for personal)</td>
<td>• Commented infrequently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Shared link through social media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larry</td>
<td>• Read many blogs</td>
<td>• Read often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Used very little/no social media</td>
<td>• Commented often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lelainia</td>
<td>• Wrote for several blogs (personal and volunteer)</td>
<td>• Read often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Used Facebook and Twitter (for personal)</td>
<td>• Commented often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Shared link through social media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leona</td>
<td>• Wrote for several blogs (personal, volunteer, and work)</td>
<td>• Read occasionally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Used Facebook and Twitter (for personal, volunteer, and work)</td>
<td>• Commented infrequently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Shared link through social media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>• Used Facebook (for personal)</td>
<td>• Read often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Commented often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Shared link through social media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>• Used Facebook and Twitter (for personal and volunteer)</td>
<td>• Read occasionally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Commented infrequently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Shared link through social media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meyrick</td>
<td>• Wrote for several blogs (personal and volunteer)</td>
<td>• Read often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Used Facebook and Twitter (for personal, volunteer, and work)</td>
<td>• Commented often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Shared link through social media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Use of Internet</td>
<td>Interactions with AthletesFirst blog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>• Used Facebook (for personal and volunteer)</td>
<td>• Read occasionally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Commented infrequently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachael</td>
<td>• Wrote for several blogs (personal and volunteer)</td>
<td>• Read often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Used Facebook and Twitter (for personal and volunteer)</td>
<td>• Commented infrequently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Shared link through social media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>• Used Facebook and Twitter (for personal and volunteer)</td>
<td>• Read occasionally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Did not comment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Shared link through social media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rob</td>
<td>• Used Facebook and Twitter (for personal)</td>
<td>• Read often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Commented infrequently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Shared link through social media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stuart</td>
<td>• Wrote for several blogs (personal and work)</td>
<td>• Read often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Used Facebook and Twitter (for personal and work)</td>
<td>• Did not comment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Shared link through social media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelley Ann</td>
<td>• Wrote for blog (volunteer)</td>
<td>• Read occasionally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Used Facebook (for personal and volunteer)</td>
<td>• Did not comment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terry</td>
<td>• Used Facebook (for personal and volunteer)</td>
<td>• Read occasionally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Did not comment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.2 Interview participants' use of social media and interactions with AthletesFirst blog

3.3.4 Stage 4: Thematic analysis of data in six phases

Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) have described thematic analysis as a process that consists of immersing oneself in the data with the objective of identifying themes that speak to the research questions or provide new insights and understandings of the research phenomenon as a whole. They adopted Boyatzis definition of a theme as “a pattern in the information that at minimum describes and organizes the possible observations and at a maximum interprets the phenomenon” (Boyatzis, 1998, p. vii). For the analysis of the 28 interviews (20 with blog readers and eight with blog team members), I employed a hybrid method of thematic analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) in which I identified certain codes (features or topics that repeat in the data set and that are deemed to be of interest in the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)) based on
the research questions and the theoretical framework (deductive codes) and other codes based on a close reading of the data set (inductive codes). These codes provided me with a means of reducing and organizing the data so that I was able to identify themes and understand them in relation to the data set as a whole. Specifically, I employed a six-phase process adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006) with reference to Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006).

**Phase one**  
Familiarization with the data through transcription of audio files into Word documents, active reading and rereading of the transcripts, and note taking looking for possible patterns and meanings.

**Phase two**  
Generation of initial codes by creating a list of ideas about what is interesting about the data and by returning to the theoretical framework and the research questions to develop some initial codes.

**Phase three**  
Searching for themes by sorting the codes into potential themes and by considering how codes might combine to form overarching themes.

**Phase four**  
Reviewing themes by searching through the data for negative instances of the pattern that may suggest alternative understandings or that provide evidence for the assertions (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). This involves considering the validity of each individual theme but also whether or not the themes as a whole “‘accurately’ reflect the meanings evident in the data set as whole” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 91).

**Phase five**  
Defining and naming themes based on the essence of each theme and through careful consideration of what makes each theme important and why it is of interest (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Also consists of identifying sub-themes (or themes-within-themes that are useful in understanding particularly large or complex themes or hierarchies of meaning within a theme).
Phase six Writing up the research, which consists of identifying which themes are important and how they collectively explain the phenomenon. As stated by Braun and Clarke (2006), “your write-up needs to do more than just provide data. Extracts need to be embedded within an analytic narrative that compellingly illustrates the story you are telling about your data, and your analytic narrative needs to go beyond description of the data, and make an argument in relation to your research question” (p. 93, italics in original).

Though these six phases provide a useful framework for understanding the processes involved in the data analysis (and in ensuring that no steps are omitted in writing up the work), in practice, the process was more fluid and iterative. While I generally progressed from the first stage to the last, I also, at times, went a few steps back or worked on several processes at once. For example, while I was reading and rereading the transcripts (Phase one), I already had a few ideas for potential codes based on the research question (Phase two). On occasion, something I had written (Phase six) prompted me to return to the raw data (audio files or transcripts) and consider it in a new light. The following sections describe the process I undertook in more detail.

3.3.4.1 Analyzing interview data

In Phases one through three, the interview transcripts were analyzed in NVivo 8 and during this process a codebook of 21 codes was created. Eighteen codes were developed deductively based on the research questions and the theoretical framework and three codes were developed inductively based on close readings of the interviews and my own field notes. Throughout the entire process of creating the codebook, I was also in conversation with my doctoral research supervisor, Dr. Laura Hurd Clarke. She provided assistance and guidance by reviewing the many drafts of the codebook, reading excerpts of coded data, and challenging me to define the codes and link them to the research questions.

21 This approach is consistent with the application of the model as suggested by Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006). They describe the framework as a step-by-step process for the purpose of clarity but acknowledge that there is value to engaging in various stages concurrently or returning to earlier stages.
3.3.4.2 Close reading of blog posts and comments

During Phase four, in addition to re-reading the interview data and searching for alternative understandings and/or confirmation that the themes accurately represented the data set, I also re-read all of the 34 blog posts and their associated 339 comments. The purpose behind this reading of the blog content was to look for examples of posts, comments, or conversations on the blog that (1) further elucidated the themes identified during the analysis of the interviews; (2) provided context or confirmation of statements made by participants during the interviews, or (3) contradicted or challenged statements made during the interviews. Excerpts from blog posts and from the comment section were copied and attached to the codes to which they pertained.

3.3.4.3 Identifying themes

It was during Phases five and six that I identified the three overarching themes that formed the basis of the following three chapters. The process of coding and analysis resulted in quite literally hundreds of pages of reports: each of the 21 codes generated between five and 42 pages of text and the blog posts and comments constituted another 175 pages of data when exported into a single-spaced printed format (a PDF file created using a free application called BlogBooker). The decision as to what to include and what story I wanted to tell was guided by my research questions, the review of the literature (and subsequent gaps), and my commitment to producing work that represented with accuracy and integrity the dynamics of what happened on the AthletesFirst blog. To a certain extent, it is impossible to accurately distinguish between Phase five and Phase six in the process of analysis. Certainly I identified the key themes — the ones I felt best represented the data set as a whole and that contributed to a more complete understanding of the role of blogging within new social movements (and particularly within the Paralympic Movement). However, as Braun and Clark (2006) and others (Ellis, 2000; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2008) remind us, the process of writing is also a form of inquiry and analysis. It is during this phase of the research process that I made decisions as to what to include both in terms of themes but also in terms of participant quotes and examples. It required a constant return to the original data (both in the form of NVivo node reports created for each code and in the form of the interview transcripts, field notes, and blog posts) to ensure that as conclusions were being drawn and quotes were being selected, the context in which the data was produced was not lost. The challenge was to reduce and reorganize the data and interweave it
with analysis to produce a document that provided new insights into the subject matter while at
the same time maintaining a clear and transparent link to conditions under which this knowledge
was produced.

3.4 Rigorous Practice

Maintaining a clear and transparent link between the knowledge produced (the findings
reported, the conclusions arrived at, and the claims made) and the steps undertaken in the
analysis of the data is part of establishing a rigorous research practice (Tracy, 2010). Rigour has
been defined as the demonstration of integrity and competence in qualitative research practice
(Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Establishing rigour is one means by which researchers
establish the quality of their work (and one means by which the quality of the work might be
assessed by others) (Tracy, 2010).

In addition to making explicit the processes undertaken in the analysis of the research,
there are many other ways of demonstrating and maintaining rigour. For example, other criteria
used to judge the quality of the work could include an assessment of the following factors: the
number and length of interviews, the types of questions asked, the number of pages of field
notes, the ‘audit’ trail (the documentation of decisions and actions that occurred during the
project), the accuracy of transcripts, or the size of the sample (Tracy, 2010). Similarly, the
researcher could engage in interpretative rigour by clearly indicating how the data were
interpreted and providing examples through direct quotes or access to the raw data. Additionally,
scholars might strive for theoretical rigour by demonstrating that the theories and methods they
have selected and utilized are appropriate to the phenomena being researched (Braun & Clark,
2006; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Furthermore, Tracy (2010) has also described rigour as
the process researchers engage in when they “push themselves beyond convenience,
opportunism, and the easy way out” (p. 841).

Though many models have been put forth for ensuring ‘rigour in research,’ Tracy (2010)
has cautioned against conflating the means with the end:

Just like following a recipe does not guarantee perfect presentation, or completing a
vigorous training plan does not guarantee race-day success, rigour does not guarantee a
brilliant final product. That being said, rigour does increase the odds for high quality
[research] (p. 841).
With this in mind, and recognizing there is no single test capable of determining rigour (for example, how would one know how many interviews are enough? Or what were the right questions to ask?), I find it more useful to think in terms of questions about rigour. Questions about rigour suggest that assessing the quality of a body of work (e.g. the AthletesFirst project) is a reflective practice where the researcher takes the time to think about the knowledge that is produced and the conditions of its production. The following are some questions that have been proposed in the literature as a useful means of assessing rigour:

- **Do the data support the claims? Is there sufficient data on which to base these claims?** (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Tracy, 2010)

- **Has the researcher searched for alternative readings of the data and made explicit the contradictions in the accounts? Has the researcher been attentive to disconfirming accounts?** (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Marshall & Rossman, 2006)

- **Did the researcher spend a prolonged time in the field and demonstrate an awareness of the nuances and complexities present? How was the researcher ‘immersed’ in the field?** (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Tracy, 2010)

- **Were the methods employed appropriate to the goals of the project? Was there cohesiveness between the methods chosen, the theories applied, and the topic of the research?** (Tracy, 2010)

Though I do not expect these will be the only criteria used to judge the quality of my dissertation research, they are some of the questions that I have asked myself throughout the research process and that I have found particularly useful. My aim, throughout this document, is to provide enough detail about the project and to present it in the clearest fashion such that the reader will be able to judge for him/herself the quality of the work.

### 3.5 Messiness: PAR, Online Methods, and Reflexivity in Practice

In this work, it was the combination of a participatory design and the mixed use of online and offline methods that posed some unique challenges that I feel are worth discussing. The following examples are based on my field notes and recollections of the past two years.
3.5.1 Research relationships in the age of Facebook, Google, and Twitter

My first interview with a blog reader was in May 2012 at a coffee shop. Interviewing Lelainia was easy. Her enthusiasm for the AthletesFirst blog and all things Paralympic was evident, she seemed to anticipate my questions, and building rapport was effortless. When the interview ended, I thanked her for her time, made my standard promise that I would share my research findings with participants at some (undefined) time in the future and walked to my car. As I opened the door, my cell phone started to beep. It was Lelainia tweeting about our meeting.

![Twitter exchange between Lelainia (@tatterededge) and author (@ultreia1x) following interview.](image)

I replied to her and within the next 24 hours we had exchanged half a dozen tweets. That was when I realized what was different about this project. In the past, I entered into interviews with very little information about who I was about to meet. I knew only what participants told me when they telephoned or emailed to volunteer. With a few exceptions, the relationship was over when the interview ended. I may have sent a thank you card or encountered a participant at the grocery store, but their involvement in the project was most definitely done. In contrast, when conducting interviews for this project, I often had ‘met’ the participants online. I knew them not only from the comments they made on the AthletesFirst blog but also from their Twitter accounts, their personal Webpages, and their posts on Facebook. During the interviews, I occasionally had to remind myself of how I knew what I knew. Had I asked the participant where he/she went to school? Or had I read it in an online profile? They also ‘knew’ me. In addition to reading AthletesFirst and ‘seeing’ me in various online settings, I came to suspect that several participants searched me on Google before agreeing to the meeting.
Furthermore, when conducting this research, I had to change my ideas about what it meant to maintain participant confidentiality. While interviewing for my master’s project on the use of health services by national team athletes, I was extremely cautious of not outing participants so we booked appointments in locations where we were unlikely to encounter coaches or other team staff. In addition to using pseudonyms, I removed all information that might identify the athletes before quoting them. While it is possible that athletes may have told others about their involvement in the project, I never identified any of the participants. With this project, I understood that the expectations around anonymity would be different. My application to the university ethics board indicated that participants would choose how they wanted to be recognized in the write-up of the project (as previously discussed). But there is a difference between understanding that one’s name might appear in a document stored in a university thesis repository or used in a publication distributed to a very select group and understanding the public nature of this project. Although I myself sent out very general messages on Twitter asking for volunteers to contact me privately by direct message or email, many people responded not only to the email address provided but also to the actual tweet, seemingly comfortable with booking an interview and deciding on a location in a publicly visible message. Post interview, Lelainia’s behaviour was not at all unusual as many participants tweeted or posted on Facebook after our meetings, proclaiming to all their friends and followers (and mine as well) their involvement in the project. Furthermore, they frequently continued the relationship long after the interview ended, tweeting me links to online content they thought I might be able to use on the blog, asking me to circulate information about projects in which they were involved in, inviting me to join para-sport-related Facebook groups, offering to write guest blogs for AthletesFirst — all done on the public space of the Web. Whereas I had originally conceived of the interviews as a means of providing some closure to the project by asking those who had been reading and writing for AthletesFirst to reflect upon their engagement with the blog and with other blog writers and readers, for many (if not most) of the participants, their engagement with the blog, and with me, only increased after the interviews. There were also several instances of participants finding each other online; they saw people tweeting with me or posting on my Facebook wall and recognized them as fellow contributors to the blog and initiated a conversation. Although I cannot comment on the full extent of the relationships that developed, I know of at least a few instances where participants went on to develop online friendships and collaborated on projects including
advertising para-sport camps, circulating online petitions, and sharing coaching education materials. I suspect that many participants will eventually meet offline as well (if they have not done so already) and that these meetings will be fruitful in their own ways. My relationships with many of the participants are certainly ongoing (mostly online but occasionally crossing into the offline) and will hopefully continue long past the formal conclusion of this project and will result in ‘actions’ not yet foreseen.

3.5.2 Participation from unexpected quarters

Participatory research is often conceived as research that involves participants in all stages of the project, from deciding on research questions, designing a project, implementing a program, and evaluating the results of the research (Frisby, Reid, Millar, & Hoeber, 2005). However, as previously mentioned, there are also concerns about how ethical (or simply how practical) it is to expect participants to commit to a longterm project. Participants may be interested or even willing to do so, but may not have the time or resources to fully engage to the extent that I, as a researcher, might want or expect. Simply put, this project has been my full-time job, but for most of the blog team and for other participants, it has been a side project.

While I stated in the proposal (and when recruiting team members) that blog team members would be encouraged to participate in ways that matched their individual skills and interests, I was still somewhat disappointed every time a blog team member told me they did not have time to write a blog post or did not respond to one of my emails. This project spanned nearly two years and sometimes months went by where the only feedback/contact I had with a blog team member was that I saw them share the link to a new post on their Facebook page — confirmation that they were not only alive but were still reading the blog! I found myself constantly pulled between wanting blog team members to be more involved and not being willing to resort to coercion or persuasion. Many of my concerns were addressed during the interviews with the blog team members, where I had the opportunity to ask them outright about their expectations for the project, what they personally hoped to get out of the process, and how they would evaluate the success of the project (discussed in the following chapters). At the same time, I think it important that I acknowledge that there were times when I was torn between my commitment to research that problematizes hierarchical, unequal relationships between the researcher and the researched and the realization that not everyone shared my vision for this project. Even Courtney, who was
involved from the very beginning and who frequently contributed to the blog, maddeningly referred to AthletesFirst as “your blog” rather than as something we co-created.

Yet even as I questioned the blog team model, participation frequently took on forms that I had not anticipated or planned. From the very first post, some blog readers took an interest in the project that exceeded my expectations when they read every post and every comment and actively sought out opportunities to promote the AthletesFirst site. They wrote guest posts and profiled AthletesFirst on their own Websites and blogs. Their names became familiar to regular readers of the blog to the point that interviewees sometimes could not distinguish between the blog team members and these regulars. Their contributions to the site were evident in many ways. For example, during the first few months that the blog was up, I spent considerable time each week sharing the link (on Facebook, Twitter, and by email) and promoting the post. If I was busy one week and did not send out as many links as usual, the result was that we had lower readership that week. However, as the project progressed, the blog gained momentum of its own. Towards the end, I barely had a post up before regular readers were circulating the link of their own initiative. A quick search on Twitter for ‘www.athletesfirst.ca’ provided evidence that the link was being shared by people I did not know! While the number of comments made on posts remained fairly constant throughout the course of the project, it became increasingly likely to have new voices join the conversations and comments made by individuals who were not immediately recognizable as having direct ties to me or to other blog team members. It became common for me to stumble across references to the AthletesFirst blog online: pinned on PinInterest, linked to from another site blog, or mentioned on a Facebook page. I occasionally met people at para-sport events who recognized me as a contributor to the blog. All of this is to say that while participation did not always take the form I had envisioned when I started the project, it was there. I realized now that it was naïve of me to think that I could design a project and then invite or select five individuals to join me and assume that we would have a similar understanding of how the project would work and what our objectives were. I also underestimated the role of more peripheral participants, individuals who saw the value in the blog and contributed in ways that made sense to them, bypassing the entire ‘research process’ and using AthletesFirst in ways that I did not predict and could not control.
3.5.3 Where is the action?

As the name suggests, PAR research is characterized by a commitment to fostering participation and contributing action. However, according to Reid et al. (2006), “it is difficult to pinpoint [in the literature] definitions and examples of action, as action is often used interchangeably with the notion of ‘social change’ and referred to in overly idealized ways” (p. 317). Simply put, PAR methods are frequently adopted because they are believed to have emancipatory potential but, in the final accounting, it is not always clear how action was defined and if (and how) this action had a positive impact on the lives of those involved. Seeking to address this gap, Reid et al. (2006) have issued a call for researchers to consider action as something that happens on individual and collective levels and that can occur at any stage of the research process (even before the project formally begins and long after it has ended).

In the following chapters, I adopt the definition of action proposed by Reid et al. (2006), namely that it includes “a multi-faceted and dynamic process that can range from speaking to validate oneself’s and one’s experiences in the world to the ‘process of doing something,’ such as taking a deliberate step towards changing one’s circumstances” (p. 317). I consider how action was defined by authors and readers and how participants made the blog a site of online action and a catalyst for offline action. However, I think it crucial that I first make the point that this project started with an action when we built the AthletesFirst blog. This project was not an ethnography or a participant observation, it was an intervention. The blog team was not observing an existing phenomenon, we were creating something that was not there before. We recruited readers and guest bloggers and invited them to join us in this endeavour and
collectively we created the AthletesFirst blog. What is more, I have no doubt that our actions provided the impetus for other actions. While I have attempted to identify these actions where possible, there are some actions that I will never be able to directly link to the blog (that I will never even know about) but that were nonetheless meaningful to individuals — and that might even have contributed to positive changes in their lives.

3.5.4 (Ongoing) reflexivity and interrogating power

3.5.4.1 Power and hegemony theory

In thinking about power, I draw on the theoretical concept of hegemony. Gramsci used hegemony to describe how the ruling class maintains ideological control over subordinate classes though the propagation of the values, norms, beliefs, and ideas of the dominant group (Gramsci, 1971). Hegemony, stated Gramsci, is present when dominant groups succeed in presenting their views and values as natural and common sense and thus convincing the majority that maintaining the status quo is in the best interest of all (Gramsci, 1971). Thus hegemonic power is frequently described as domination over subordinate groups achieved through consent rather than by direct coercion or force (Gramsci, 1971). Moreover, hegemony theory describes power as present in all social relations and as (re)produced through social relations (Gramsci, 1971). While all groups are seen as having power, the ability of groups to exercise their power is not equal. Drawing on Gramsci, Bates (1975) explained that “the powers-that-be … have a great advantage in the struggle for hegemony, by virtue of their superior organization, information, and means of communication” (p. 363) or, in other words, it is through exercising their power that dominant groups maintain and strengthen their position. Furthermore, hegemony theory understands that power is not fixed but rather produced through ongoing interactions and negotiations. For example, if dominant groups wish to maintain the (unforced) consent of subordinate groups, they perforce must take into account “the interests and tendencies of the groups over which hegemony is to be exercised” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 373). Thus by making some concessions to the demands of the subordinate group, the dominant group is able to maintain the goodwill of the majority thereby protecting themselves from more serious challenges to their authority (Gramsci, 1971).
3.5.4.2 Power and the research relationship

Using participatory methods means exposing how hegemony and power operate within the research process and committing to practices that disrupt hierarchical configurations and contribute to a more just research relationships (Frisby, Maguire, & Reid, 2009). That said, the equitable distribution of power is more of a goal intended to guide researchers rather than a claim that such a thing can ever be fully achieved. As previously stated, power exists in all social relationships and the challenge for sociologists is not to eliminate power (because such a thing is not possible) but instead to be attentive to power and to understand how it operates in different contexts (cf. Tom & Herbert, 2002).

Engaging in reflexivity is one way that researchers (and others) can interrogate how power informs their practice. Reid and Frisby (2007) have stated that “reflexivity means attempting to make explicit the power relations and the exercise of power in the research process” (p. 100, italics my own). They further elaborated that being reflexive requires paying attention to the complexities and contradictions that are present as researchers, collaborators, and participants negotiate the conditions of their collaborative work (Reid & Frisby, 2007). While reflexivity is at times reduced to engaging in self-criticism and writing oneself into the text, a reflexive practice can be much more. Reflexivity also entails “writ[ing] ourselves into action and activism and us[ing] our self-reflections to generate actions of self-discovery within the research process” (Reid & Frisby, 2007, p. 101). Thus, reflexivity is an ongoing act that happens at all stages in the research process and that, ideally, will inform the decisions that are made throughout the project (Hole, 2007).

Although reflexivity should not be limited to the write up at the end of the work, it is important to write reflexively. Reflexivity is frequently a practice that the researcher engages in alone. Writing reflexively (or writing about reflexivity) is an opportunity to document the moments in the project where the researcher felt uneasy, struggled, or had his/her assumptions disrupted (Hole, 2007). Revealing these challenging moments is good practice in that it can provide the reader with a deeper understanding of how the research was conducted and under what circumstances the knowledge was produced. It contributes to a more transparent

See Ponic et al. (2010) for a discussion on the possibility and potential of ‘collective reflexivity’ in participatory research projects.
methodology and, in doing so, contributes to the destabilization of taken-for-granted research practices that serve to maintain the hegemonic power and privilege of research institutions (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009). Acknowledging that a reflexive practice is an iterative or recursive activity that has the ability to shape the project *in progress*, I have endeavoured to write reflexively and to weave in reflections on how power was shaping the research project alongside the findings. My intent in adopting this style was to discuss the complexities of the research process alongside and in the context of the knowledge that was produced.

The following four chapters discuss the findings from the interviews with the blog team members and the 20 individuals who read the AthletesFirst blog. They are also informed by my own experiences, observations, and field notes garnered over the past two years and further illustrated by the blog posts and comments. Chapter 4, entitled ‘Authors,’ introduces the blog team and their reasons for agreeing to participate in this project, what they hoped to accomplish by their involvement, and the criteria by which they would measure the project’s success. Furthermore, this chapter discusses the experiences of blog team members and guest authors as they selected topics, wrote posts, and engaged with readers. It asks why individuals agreed to write for AthletesFirst, what kind of topics they wrote about (and how they were constrained in their selection of topics), and how they felt about the response their posts received. Chapter 5, ‘Audiences,’ explores the idea of known audiences (who was known to be reading the blog and why were they reading it) and desired audiences (who did participants think should be reading the blog) and considers the role audiences play in shaping a blog. Finally, Chapter 6, ‘Advocates,’ considers what forms of action were instigated as a result of participation in the project and the conversations that happened on the blog. It also explores the extent to which reading and writing for AthletesFirst was an extension of the individual’s participation in other (online and offline) forms of advocacy or activism. The chapter concludes with an exploration on the role of blogging within disability sport communities and the Paralympic Movement. Collectively, these three chapters tell the story of AthletesFirst, a research project that started with the decision by two athletes to create a blog and that evolved into a platform where we spoke to and with six thousand individuals involved in a global Paralympic Movement.
Chapter 4: Authors

*When you can get people to write about passion, about being wrong — that’s when you’re going to get the juicy topics.*

— Meyrick

4.1 Introduction to ‘Authors’

In the introductory chapter, I told the story of my own entry into para-sport and the origins of this project. I described how Courtney and I went from being two athletes discussing our personal experiences in sport to making the decision to start a blog that would include other athletes in these conversations. Chapter 4, officially the first chapter of findings, is really the story of the blog team, the (original) authors of AthletesFirst. It begins with an examination of the email exchanges among blog team members as we selected a name for the blog; a decision that required the group to start considering the kind of blog we wanted to create, the types of posts we intended to write, and the audience we were hoping to attract. Drawing on data from interviews conducted at the start and at the end of the project, Chapter 4 also describes and analyzes the experiences of the authors as we selected topics, wrote posts, and interacted with readers using the comment section of the blog. As such, this chapter touches upon all three research questions. It addresses why individuals agreed to participate in the AthletesFirst blog, what forms their participation took, and what outcomes they saw as a result of their engagement (RQ1). Also addressed are how the authors understood their writing of blog posts in relation to their ongoing advocacy for disability sport and their involvement in a broader Paralympic Movement (RQ2), and the ways in which their selection of blog topics was informed by their own experiences as para-athletes and their assessment of the central concerns of the Paralympic Movement (RQ3). Furthermore, this chapter documents how the project grew to include an ever-expanding network of readers, eventually blurring the boundaries between readers and writers and between team members and non-team members. Finally, it addresses some of the dilemmas and questions I personally encountered as I navigated my roles as author, blog administrator, researcher, and private individual.
4.2 A Blog by Any Other Name

Though we were keen to start writing, there were a few tasks that the blog team needed to complete before launching the blog. First, we had to register a Web domain and design a logo for the site — and both tasks required that we decide upon a name for the blog. Although this might sound like a trivial task, it was the first time the blog team had to work together and our first opportunity to discuss, as a group, our vision for the project. We agreed to circulate possible names by email and the following suggestions were made: Dis’Sporting Around, Disability Sport Voices, ParaOpinion, Paraspace, Parasphere, Parasport Voices, Paralympic Point of View, Sporting Abilities and Opinions, THINKability, and THINKsportABILITY. One of the factors influencing our decision was the availability of the domain name (for example, thinkability.com and thinkability.ca were both taken but wordpress.com/thinkability was available). The other consideration was that the name selected needed to be consistent with our vision for the project, the topics we wanted to explore, and our stance on various issues/controversies frequently debated by members of the Paralympic Movement. For example, Courtney was opposed to the prefix ‘para’ on the premise that she felt it was too referential to ‘paraplegia’ and had little relevance to other disability groups. Blair agreed with Courtney and responded by saying:

I’m with Courtney on the word association that goes with ‘para’ relating to paralysis or paraplegia rather than the proper reference in this case ‘with or alongside.’ Almost no one that I’ve met outside the disability sport community knows the actual meaning (Email correspondence to blog team, September 27, 2011).

Blair also raised the point that the name we selected would have implications for the audience that we would attract:

The alternatives for me are to focus on the sporting abilities of the athletes involved, [and] put the emphasis on the sport performance rather than the physical diagnosis or [the] social disabling of the individual. This is why I liked THINKability because it seemed to allude to a reframing of the context and dialogues about disability sport with a focus on ability rather than disablement. All that said, I think we could take Paraspace or Parasphere with the same viewpoint as opportunities to change and examine the boundaries of Paralympic sport.

We also need to be clear about whether our approach is broadly focused on elite disabled sport or disabled sport participation more broadly. ‘Paralympic’ sport is almost exclusively associated with the upper echelons of disability sport and giving it such a
name will turn the perceptions of readers to that focus. This can be at worst an alienating factor for our potential audience, or at best an attractive draw. It depends on who we view our audience as being and what we believe they might be most interested in (Email correspondence to blog team, September 27, 2011).

Josh, however, contended that there has been a drive within the Paralympic Movement (originating from the IPC but extending more broadly through to various groups involved in delivering para-sport) to rebrand the term ‘para’ and more generally apply it to any sport done by a person with a disability. He felt that, while the term might alienate a few readers, we would be wise to take advantage of the momentum behind the ‘para’ brand. He replied to Blair’s email and said:

Paralympic and para are clear international brands that the IPC and the National Paralympic committees (NPCs) are trying to build. I think we all agree that if the brand is strong, and if confusion is low, Paralympic is a powerful word.

Paralympic, like Olympic, as Blair rightly mentions, refers to the elite echelon of sport. Para-sport is the brand that many NPCs are trying to develop for development and participation level sport. Para can also refer to elite sport though.

I think we should make use of the brands, and I submit the following name suggestion: Voices of Parasport (Email correspondence to blog team, September 28, 2011).

Josh also expressed discomfort with the names THINKability and SportAbility because he believed that, by focusing on ability, we would actually be distancing ourselves from disability. He explained:

I have also never been fully comfortable when ability is used as a euphemism for disability. It conveys the message that disability is negative. Disability sport is certainly about abilities, but it is clearly (probably more) about disabilities — classification, adapted equipment and rules etc (Email correspondence to blog team, October 1, 2011).

A month after the first email circulated, everyone had had the opportunity to submit their suggestions and to offer their opinions. Though we had ruled out many options, we had yet to find a name that everyone truly liked. We had narrowed it down to Disability Sport Voices or Voices of Parasport as the two names with the most support and, perhaps more importantly, the
least opposition. It was then that Courtney suggested AthletesFirst, a name that resonated immediately with all group members. While it did not make use of the para brand or contain any overt references to disability, AthletesFirst alluded to the ‘person first language’ popularized by the Disability Rights Movement and echoed a phrase commonly heard within disability sport circles — that athletes want to be recognized first and foremost for their athletic accomplishments rather than for their disability. I registered the domain name and the blog was ready to go.

It is only in retrospect that I realized how succinctly that first email exchange among blog team members captured the debates at the heart of this project. Indeed, the issues raised during the process of choosing a name were the very same topics that would eventually be written about and explored on the blog. As stated by Blair, we wanted the blog to be a space where we would explore the boundaries of the Paralympic Movement and ask questions including: Who is involved in Paralympic sport and the Paralympic Movement? And does/how does disability sport as participation fit within the Paralympic Movement? The blog was also, as indicated by Blair, intended as a place to reframe the many ways in which disability sport has generally been construed. We were also, as Josh suggested, positioning ourselves within the context of a global initiative, instigated by the IPC, to redefine, rebrand, and further expand para-sport. Finally, we were acknowledging that, when embarking on a project exploring disability sport, we had to be equally as willing to engage with disability as we were with sport.

4.3 Authors Discuss Their Vision For the Blog

Although all of the athletes had agreed readily enough to participate in the project when I first approached them, it would be erroneous to assume that the blog team had a shared vision for the blog. Certainly the reasons that blog team members had for agreeing to take part in this research project were unique to each individual. The first round of interviews, conducted prior to the blog actually going live online, was my opportunity to ask blog team members about their motivations for participating and their aspirations for the project. Their goals ranged from those that were purely personal or that were internal to the blog team right through to objectives with

23 Person first language means putting the person before the disability saying, for example, a ‘person with a visual impairment’ rather than a ‘visually impaired person’ or a ‘person who uses a wheelchair’ rather than a ‘wheelchair user.’
much further reaching consequences. Stuart M. was one example of a blog team member who, early on in the process, stated that his reasons for agreeing to the project had more to do with the people involved than any expectations he had regarding particular outcomes:

Quite honestly Andrea, I don’t know exactly everything you are trying to do with all this. I’m just doing it because I know you and I’m helping you out and I know you have a lot of great people involved so I just want to see what comes together … I want to know what it’s all about (laughs). But I also want to know where it goes — I want to know what Blair and what Jay have to say and what Courtney has to say. It’s just kind of intriguing to me.

Similar to Stuart M., Courtney and Jason also perceived the project to be first and foremost an opportunity for them personally to engage in interesting conversations. However, unlike Stuart M., they knew there was a possibility that the blog could facilitate interactions with a para-sport community that extended beyond the six members of the blog team. For example, Jason described the project as having “a life of its own” and explained that, while he understood the blog might eventually go in directions none of us could anticipate (including reaching an extended audience), his main objective was that “a year from now I would have more knowledge and maybe a broader engagement of sorts.” Courtney agreed that even if the discussions were just between blog team members she still thought the project was worth pursuing. However, she did hope that others would join the conversation:

Even if we don’t have anybody join the blog other than our group — I still think it will be successful. It will be a bigger success if you [are able to] say ‘I had 10 athletes who aren’t on the blog team comment and post’ and that sort of stuff. But even if nobody joins it — the group that you’ve got is going to learn something. And that’s important.

Though Blair, Josh, and I were also looking forward to having online conversations with blog team members, our criteria for what would constitute a successful project were quite different. For example, Blair was a teacher and explained that he was part of an active community of practice that used online communication extensively:

Online I don’t think there is a real active discussion about disability sport and I would like to see that expanded. I mean I know in education there is a huge community… a
reflective practice type of thing. Of looking at what we’re doing. Of reform and [of] challenging issues that are going on in education internationally and in our local communities … It would be neat to start to see those discussions start to happen in Canada in disability sport.

Even though all of the blog team members were savvy users of the Internet and employed a variety of technologies in their personal and professional lives, Blair was the only one who had any prior experience of formally using the Internet as a forum for deliberate, critical debate. As such, his understanding of the potential of the AthletesFirst blog as a public sphere was quite different from that of other blog team members.

Josh also understood that the potential audience for AthletesFirst could be quite large. While working on this project, Josh also had his own Website that was quite popular and widely read within the Canadian amateur sport community. Though his site was mainly used to share updates from his latest competitions and to connect with fans and sponsors, it did include a blog component and he occasionally made issues-based posts similar in style to the editorial column of a newspaper. In this way, Josh differed from other blog team members who had only ever used blogs as a kind of online journal to stay in touch with family, friends, fans, and sponsors when on the road. In this way, Josh’s expectations of and hopes for the AthletesFirst blog were moderated by his prior experience as a blogger. When asked what measures he would use to judge the success of this project, Josh replied, “Number of comments. Comments I think. Comments and traffic. And we [should] probably be striving for some media reactions.” In this way, Josh revealed that, for him, the attraction of the blog was not the conversations that would happen between blog members but rather the ability of blog members to attract a large audience to the site. He was interested in the potential that blogs afford to new social movements with regards to broadcasting messages to new audiences. Josh explained that, in his prior work as an athlete advocate with AthletesCAN, he had seen how difficult it was to get athletes to participate in meaningful discussions about improving the sport system. The following is an excerpt from the interview with Josh:

[Josh]: Athletes are busy being athletes. Whenever it comes down to athletes’ surveys, participation rates are terrible. So one challenge will be to convince athletes that it’s worthwhile for them to participate … Surveys often don’t really do that. Surveys
generally can’t find a way to get comments. They’re usually written in a way that’s pretty selective.

[Andrea]: Select from these options?

[Josh]: That’s right.

Josh expressed frustration and disappointment that so few athletes demonstrated an interest in contributing to discussions that could ultimately shape policy and the future of the Canadian sport system. He hoped that the AthletesFirst blog would compel some new athletes to join in the dialogue.

Four of the blog team members also said that their reasons for agreeing to this project had to do with where they were at in their sport careers. With the exception of Josh, all blog team members had recently retired (Blair and I) or were anticipating retiring following the 2012 London Paralympic Games (Courtney, Jason, and Stuart M.). Thus, for many members of the team, this project was an opportunity to pass on the knowledge they had acquired over the years and to reflect upon their experiences. As Stuart M. explained:

I see my career coming to a close. I mean at a highly competitive level anyway. And I just feel I’ve got — I’ve learned a few tricks along the way that have helped me. And some things that have really bothered me as well. And some things that could be better and some things that young athletes should know … I find myself talking to high school athletes that I coach and telling them some of my, you know, tricks.

Courtney further added that she felt she was better qualified now, as a veteran athlete, to engage in these types of debates:

I think I understand the Movement a whole lot better than if you’d have asked me to do this blog in ’92, ’94, or even in ’96 … Now is just much better timing because I understand — I think! — what is going on globally and what issues athletes are facing.

For Blair, the blog was also an opportunity to maintain a connection with the para-sport community now that he was no longer actively competing:
I want to maintain that connection to the disability sport community and [this project] seemed like a neat opportunity to do it … I really enjoy talking about disability sport issues. It’s an area I’ve read in and become interested in and worked in and participated in the sport in. I guess [agreeing to this project] was an element of keeping that participation going.

Furthermore, the blog team members’ expectations for the AthletesFirst project could be partially attributed to our past experiences of blogging. For example, Courtney was most familiar with the ‘athlete blog,’ which has become increasingly popular among amateur athletes competing on a national team24. While I am not aware of any data tracking the actual number of Canadian athletes blogging, since starting this project, I have personally observed that organizations funding amateur athletes frequently ask for the athlete’s blog address on the application forms based on the assumption that most athletes have (or should have) a blog. Courtney, Jason, and Stuart M. all viewed AthletesFirst as a space for conversations between blog team members with the possibility (however remote) that other athletes might find the blog and be compelled to join in. The idea that the blog could be used as a form of outreach to actively recruit individuals to these conversations either did not occur to them or seemed fairly unlikely. In contrast, Blair, a regular participant in various forms of online communication, viewed the AthletesFirst blog as a means of reaching out to an already existing network of para-sport participants (the broadly defined Paralympic Movement that includes athletes, coaches, family members, service providers, and formal and informal groups and organizations). He spoke of blogging as a means of encouraging community members to take part in a reflexive exercise that would question and challenge the taken-for-granted practices of the Paralympic Movement with the intent of bringing about positive change — a model that echoed what he saw happening in the education sector. Finally, Josh saw AthletesFirst as a means of generating

24 At the same time that I was conducting this research, two Canadian national team athletes created a Website entitled SportCafé that acts as an aggregate for blogs by Canadian amateur athletes. Unlike AthletesFirst, which posted original content by a team of writers and invited guests, SportCafé sources content that is already published on athletes’ personal pages and links this content to their own page creating a sort of online newspaper. In a few short months, I have watched it grow from a small site with a few links to one of the largest, most comprehensive sources of information about Canadian amateur sport — all written by athletes.
conversations both within and without the Paralympic Movement. He believed it could be a venue for athletes to contribute to conversations that could in turn inform policy and, he also felt it could be a means of drawing mainstream attention to the debates already happening within para-sport networks.

4.4 Getting Down to Writing

Around the same time that I was concluding the first round of interviews with blog team members, the AthletesFirst blog went live online and it was time to start writing! The plan we had agreed to, was that members of the blog team would take turns authoring posts based on an informal rotation. We had decided that I would circulate a list of potential topics (suggested by blog team members during the interviews and informal conversations) and that each team member would select from the list or propose something new. They would then email me with their decision and let me know when they intended to submit. It was my responsibility to manage the logistics and to ensure that, for example, there were always two or three posts in progress and that blog team members had not selected the same topic.

Because none of the blog team members were particularly interested in participating in the management of the blog (with the exception of Josh who designed the banner and the logo), I took on the role of blog administrator and general project manager. This was not entirely unexpected; I understood when starting this research that it would be my full-time job but that, for my collaborators, it was likely to be a small side project. Consequently, it made sense that I would be responsible for many of the day-to-day operations of the blog. What I had not anticipated were some of the consequences of this decision. For example, I was extremely uncomfortable imposing deadlines on individuals who were ostensibly my partners in this project but who were also volunteers. This meant I was frequently in the position of searching for new content for the blog and I found myself having to decide between pressuring a blog team member to finish up a post, writing something myself\textsuperscript{25}, or soliciting a post from a guest writer. We had set no requirements or expectations as to how frequently each person would write and the result was that some blog team members were far more prolific as authors than others. At the conclusion of the project in February 2013, of the 34 posts, I had written 10 (including one co-

\textsuperscript{25} A situation I will further elucidate upon later in this chapter.
authored), Courtney wrote six (including one co-authored), Blair and Jason each wrote three, Josh wrote two (one co-authored), and Stuart M. had co-authored one (see Appendix A for a full listing of blog posts along with authors). Ten guest authors wrote the 11 remaining blog posts. Three of those guest authors were interviewed as part of the cohort of 20, however, Meyrick was the only one of the three interviewed after contributing a guest post. Thus, I have included data from the interview with Meyrick in this chapter on ‘Authors’ while the interviews with the other two guest authors (Kathy and Lelainia) are discussed in the following chapters given that neither of the women were authors at the time that they were interviewed.

There were many similarities in how the authors described the practice of selecting topics, writing blog posts, and then watching their posts being read and responded to online. All the authors stated that writing a post took time, required research, and was generally more involved than they had anticipated. My own experience, as one of the authors myself, was consistent with their accounts. One of the reasons that writing a blog post was perceived to be so challenging was that the authors found that they needed to conduct a substantial amount of research on the topic before writing. This was surprising because, previously, when asked what they thought would make good topics, blog team members largely stated that their ideas for posts came directly from their own experiences as athletes and from the challenges and/or barriers they had encountered during their careers. For example, Josh, a competitor in one of the few sports accessible to users of motorized wheelchairs (and therefore to athletes with more severe/limiting impairments), said he was interested in exploring how changes to the events and the classification system were resulting in fewer competitive opportunities for athletes with more severe impairments. Similarly, when Courtney was asked why she had selected to write almost exclusively posts about Sport Canada programs and policies, she replied, “I think what motivates that is that that is the system I came through. And I think it has a lot of room for improvement.”

Yet despite having selected topics that they were passionate about and that were grounded in their own experiences, the authors still struggled to formulate their thoughts and to think the subject through from different perspectives. For example, Jason stated:

26 As stated in Chapter 3, I was unable to interview Blair and Stuart M. a second time and therefore my ability to comment on their experiences as authors is quite limited. I do, however, have fieldnotes from conversations and email exchanges with all the blog team members during the course of the project and I used these as supplementary data in writing this chapter.
I think you learn new things when you are writing about these sorts of issues, you know, issues you feel strong about … I know I struggled a lot to write that [post] … It gets you to think through the topic. I mean different aspects of it, you know. So I think it’s good.

Courtney echoed Jason’s sentiments and said that, even though she was writing about the Canadian sport system, a system that she was intimately familiar with, she still “learned things because if you’re going to write the posts you have to back up where you are coming from, so in that sense it has been good.” The notion that writing was challenging but “good” (by which authors meant that they had benefited from the process or that it was ‘good for them’) was one I shared. I frequently felt that the posts that I was the most proud of or satisfied with were the ones that required me to conduct research, to learn something new, and to question my own position on the issue.

Courtney’s comment that authors needed to “back up” the posts with research addresses the very question upon which this entire project hung: Why were we writing and who are we writing for? While, as authors of the AthletesFirst blog, we were clearly drawing on our own lives as inspiration for our posts, the fact that we conducted research indicates that these posts were not the same as the online diary/travel journal style of writing typical of many athlete blogs. Rather the descriptions provided by the authors suggest that the blog was seen as both a means to reflect and make sense of their personal experiences as sport participants and to engage with others in ways that encouraged and fostered discussion and debate within the Paralympic Movement.

4.5 The Juicy Posts

Another issue that arose in discussion with the authors pertained to the difficulty they had finding topics to write about. Despite having a list of proposed topics compiled from interviews and discussions within the group, most blog team members chose instead to write about a topic not on the list or that was tangential to a topic on the list. Sometimes the selection was prompted by a recent event in the author’s life (for example, Jason wrote a post on ‘running guides’ based on his own experience of having to find a new guide) and other times the posts were prompted by topical events (for example, Jason also wrote a post about funding for sport that was published to coincide with the release of the federal budget). When asked if she was interested in
continuing with the AthletesFirst blog beyond the formal conclusion of the project, Courtney had this to say:

Yes. As long as interesting topics can keep being found. Cause, like I said, that’s the hard part. You’d say to me ‘can you write a post?’ And I would be like ‘on what? I don’t have anything to write about.’ And then we would talk about things and then that would sort of motivate me to write about something that I felt passionate about.

This sentiment was a common one among blog authors and one I struggled with myself when it was my turn to write.

Meyrick, who wrote a guest post on AthletesFirst, elaborated on this issue further as he stated that the challenge was not so much in coming up with a topic per se but rather in finding what he referred to as “the juicy posts.” He said:

Some posts are juicy. And you can tell. There are like 39 comments. And some posts are less and [are] drier and might be they are more focused on governmental [issues] or this and that and the juices don’t get flowing as much. But I don’t fault you for putting them up there because if you had 75 juicy ones I’m sure you’d put those up. But it’s so hard… It’s a bit surprising to come up with the juicy ones … I’m surprised when a really great one comes out because I’m trying really hard — I pride myself on being good at this stuff — at coming up with ideas. And I’m not doing so great (laughs). But you’ve got people who are and you hit the nail on the head on a fairly regular basis.

Meyrick’s comment about “governmental” posts (by which he meant posts that were generally policy-oriented and written in a more technical style) is further elaborated on in Chapter 6 in the discussion of how certain types of posts were employed within the context of advocating for para-sport. It is the notion that Meyrick was actively searching for ideas for posts that would get juices flowing that is germane to the current conversation.

In addition to struggling at times to find topics to write about, all the authors used posts written by others that they had really admired and/or hoped to emulate as a benchmark for their own success. Two posts that were repeatedly referenced as having set the standard included one by Blair entitled ‘Inspirational stories don’t tell the real story’ and a post by guest author and Paralympian, Joan, entitled ‘I am not special.’ While these posts were different in subject matter and style, both attracted considerable readership and both ranked high in terms of the number of
comments received. Blair’s post had 23 comments (which was quite high given that it was posted in the third week of the blog when the audience was still growing) and Joan’s post attracted an unprecedented 39 comments. In both instances, both blog regulars and newcomers contributed comments and, in addition to replying to the original post, readers also engaged in dialogue with each other. Both of these posts were highly controversial and the debates that ensued were heated. Although Meyrick was not in a position to know the number of visits for each post (only I was privy to that information using Google Analytics), he could see which posts were getting the most comments and it was on the basis of the comments that he was evaluating the success of the post and determining whether or not it qualified as “juicy.” He said:

I can obviously only go by the comments. I think the posts that do the best — one of the defining qualities about them is that there is a passionate voice behind it … Joan is saying she cares about the way those two events [the Paralympics and the Special Olympics] are delineated. And when there’s passion like that … people read that because they can feel it. So when you can get people to write about passion or about being wrong — that’s when you’re going to get the juicy topics.

Meyrick not only expressed his admiration for Joan’s post during the interview but he also commented on the blog itself:

I considered writing about this but didn’t have the courage to row in these waters … WAY TO GO JOAN! I think the Special, Para and plain old Olympics should all remain separate. Let’s face it — they are all different … (Posted on May 16, 2012).

Meyrick’s sentiment was echoed by other para-athletes who posted comments thanking and congratulating Joan on writing a post that so accurately reflected their own reactions upon being mistakenly identified as Special Olympians. Joan herself acknowledged that she had been concerned about how this post would be received. She wrote\(^{27}\):

\(^{27}\) On the blog the post is attributed to ‘Anonymous’ because the individual posting did not leave a name or sign in using an email account. However, given that the author of this comment indicates she was also the author of the original post, I have attributed it to Joan.
Thanks Meyrick. I wondered if there would be a lot of negative comments when I wrote this so thank you for your encouragement. I really appreciate all your comments, which are so true. You are right about the middle child thing. I am not so sure that I correct people as often when they say I am going to the Olympics as I do when they say I am going to Special Olympics but of course [I] did not mention that in my article. I am a bit of a hypocrite I guess … (Posted on May 16, 2012).

Both in the interviews and on the blog, authors and readers expressed a common admiration for individuals who were able to write juicy posts, to write passionately and honestly, and to express opinions that were seen as being politically incorrect and/or counter to more mainstream portrayals of disability sport.

Engaging an audience was the other criteria by which authors judged the success of a post. As the earlier quote by Meyrick alluded, juicy posts were those posts that not only took a strong, impassioned position on a controversial subject, but they were also the posts that attracted the most comments from readers. In the interviews with authors, I asked them about the process of writing posts and I also asked them to reflect upon the experience of seeing their posts go online and receive responses from readers. What emerged was that authors used the number of comments to evaluate whether or not they had been successful. Courtney, for example, described her objectives when writing a post as well as her assessment of how her posts had been received and said:

I’m trying to write from a point of view that’s going to motivate people to comment. So when the comments don’t come it’s sort of—well is that admitting that you [the reader] agree? Or do you disagree but don’t want to put your name to it? ... So that’s the hard part. I mean if 63 people read it and there are only three comments, what about those other 60 people, what did they think?

The post that Courtney was referring to was one she co-wrote with Josh and it was the first one published on AthletesFirst in November 2011. When the post was up on the blog, she did not know how many visitors it attracted because I had not yet installed Google Analytics. It was only during the final interview that I told her that that first post had had 63 visitors (this was, after all, the first week of the blog and numbers were still quite low). Even after I had installed the software, it was common for authors not to know the volume of the traffic on the blog. I typically
sent an update to the author a week after the post was published summarizing a few of the statistics on readership; until that point, authors could only judge whether a post was popular or not based on the number of comments.

Courtney took the lack of comments on her posts quite personally, as did all the authors. However, there was some division within the group as to whether or not a lack of comments should be interpreted as a failure on the part of the author or as apathy on the part of the reader. For example, I had been disappointed with the response that my first post received and took it to be the result of my inability to successfully engage an audience. Similarly, Meyrick said that he challenged himself to write in such a way that it would attract comments from readers:

I have a clear vision of the way I think sport operates best and I try to articulate that in a fun way on the blog. Because I know that if it’s boring, people leave. And I don’t want that for you. And nor do I want people to think that I’m a boring person when I write. I want it to be fun and colourful to read and inspire more conversation and create more dialogue and help the whole thing along. And I love it when people comment back and so I check [the blog] all the time.

In contrast, while Courtney stated that she was also trying to write from a position that would compel readers to comment, she perceived a lack of comments to be less of a reflection on her, the author, and more a reflection on the audience. She described the frustration she felt at times and said, “Especially with my last post, I really did want to go ‘Why are you not commenting, guys? Why does this not get you fired up? Do you not see that this is right or wrong?”’ However, while the authors might have had slightly different impressions as to whether or not a lack of comments was indicative of the writer’s inability to reach the reader or the readers’ lack of engagement with the topic, we were in agreement that attracting comments was the objective when writing.

4.6 The Risks of Writing

At the same time, soliciting comments required a delicate balance. As previously stated, the authors admired Joan’s post because it was juicy and had 39 comments. However, it was also acknowledged that she had taken a risk in writing about such a controversial topic. Joan’s reply that she was herself concerned about how her post would be received speaks to another issue raised by the authors. In addition to finding it challenging to come up with ideas to write about,
some topics were seen as too risky to write about. To understand this phenomenon, it is necessary to consider not only what topics authors chose to write about and but also what posts were never written. For example, if one were to judge solely based on the number of posts written by each blog team member, one would be forced to conclude that some blog team members were more committed to the project than others. It would appear that Courtney and I, the two team members responsible for conceptualizing and proposing this project, were not only the most prolific authors but were also the most committed to the project. However, my email and telephone exchanges with blog team members and our discussions during the interviews indicated that the reasons individuals had for writing or not writing were far more nuanced. First of all, in the early stages of the project (when the blog team was being recruited and while I was conducting the first round of interviews with team members), all the blog team members initially expressed an interest in writing about what they felt to be key debates within the Paralympic Movement or the central concerns of the Paralympic Movement (the term ‘key issues’ was used synonymously with ‘juicy,’ ‘hot,’ or ‘meaty’ issues over the course of the project). They appeared eager to express their opinions (as well as their anger and frustration) and they perceived the blog to be a safe venue for airing these kinds of grievances. Yet throughout the course of the project, every single blog team member shied away from a topic that they had previously expressed an interest in writing about. While I respect their decisions to avoid these topics and will not out them here by discussing the specifics as to who declined to write what, I will say that, over the course of the project, I was emailed by blog team members saying they had changed their mind about writing a particular post. On several other occasions, it was not an email that alerted me but rather a silence and the fact that promised posts never materialized. Most commonly, my strategy was to send a message casually inquiring as to when I might expect a submission or asking if there was anything I could provide in the way of support (for example, on a few occasions, I did provide research assistance or proof-reading to blog team members preparing posts). These emails frequently, though not always, resulted in replies stating that the post was nearing completion and that it was simply that other commitments had gotten in the way of meeting the original deadline. When reasons were given, blog team members replied that they were not in a position to write that post, or at least that they did not feel they could write about it at that particular moment in their sport careers. For example, Josh later said in an
interview that, “I don’t think there have been very many meaty ones and I’m certainly guilty of that. I don’t want to write meaty ones actually. I’m finding that it’s just too controversial.”

In a few cases, particularly during the late spring and early summer of 2012 when teams were being selected for the London 2012 Paralympic Games, blog team members either directly stated or indirectly alluded to the fact that they had ideas for posts but did not feel it would be advisable for them to publicly write about such issues before the teams were named. This reluctance, perhaps even fearfulness, with regards to engaging with certain topics surprised me. Not because I was oblivious to the possibility that athletes might experience backlash for writing posts that could be interpreted as criticisms of the practices of their sport organizations; rather I was surprised because, when I raised that very issue earlier in the project, it had generally been dismissed by blog team members. For example, during the first interview, Josh described himself as an advocate and an athlete leader and gave several examples of occasions when he had taken a public stance on controversial issues related to sport. He said that, though he personally felt comfortable engaging in advocacy projects, he recognized that not all athletes were in a position to speak out and he hoped that this project might provide them with a safe venue to do so:

In the athlete community there is this sense [that] almost every athlete has ideas about how you can make the system better. But they always have this stick held above them in some respect. So I thought this was a good way to have these debates and dodge some of the political consequences.

Yet, when interviewed at the conclusion of the project, Josh expressed disappointment at how few posts he had personally written and said, “Part of the issue is the time commitment — I mean I would have loved to have done more than two. I’m not very satisfied only having done two. But the realities of time just crept in.” However, Josh acknowledged that it was not just time that had been the issue; contrary to his statements at the start of the project, he too had felt uncomfortable engaging with certain controversial topics and said, “That [particular topic] didn’t come out … I’m just not in a place to write that. I can’t … I would have to be retired to deal with that one for sure.”

The reluctance on the part of authors to address certain issues partially explains why I wrote 10 of the 34 posts. Certainly I was invested in the success of AthletesFirst and making sure new content was posted on a regular basis was important to maintaining our readership.
However, my contributions were not solely (or even mainly) written because I felt I needed to pick up the slack. Many of the posts that I authored were based on conversations with blog team members and other members of the disability sport community who, for one reason or another, were not in a position to write the posts themselves. Of course Courtney and I (the two most prolific authors) were committed to this project — it was our brainchild! But it does not necessarily follow that those authors who wrote fewer posts were less engaged in the project (although neither am I denying that blog team members evidenced varying degrees of commitment to the project or that individuals’ involvement waxed and waned over time).

Courtney and I were in a relatively privileged position when it came to writing posts. Courtney had already semi-retired from competitive sport. While she did try-out for the 2012 Paralympic team, her motivation was primarily that she was training at a facility where other athletes were trying out for the team and she wanted to create a competitive environment for them. Her own attitude toward making the team was somewhat ambivalent; she had already competed in five Paralympic Games, was satisfied with her accomplishments, and was looking forward to a new stage in her life. Likewise, while I was still occasionally guiding on the para-nordic team, my involvement had also decreased significantly since the 2010 Paralympic Games. For Courtney and I, writing a controversial blog post would not have had a bearing on our athletic careers; we had no coaches who could bench us, no athlete contracts we could violate, and no sponsors we could alienate. We, unlike other blog team members, were free to write what we wanted.

4.7 The Researcher Exposed

My original intent, at the start of the project, was to limit the posts that I wrote to a few topics that I felt I could speak to with some authority — for example, a post based on my experiences as a para-nordic guide and as an able-bodied athlete on a para-sports team. I also expected to be asked to play a supporting role assisting blog team members with their posts by conducting research, providing editing services, and so forth. Indeed, in the early days of the project this is exactly how things progressed. I assisted other authors in preparing their posts and focused most of my energy on advertising the blog and generating traffic to the site. The first post that I was personally responsible for writing was entitled ‘What are the legacies of the Paralympic Games?’ Drawing on the sociology of sport literature, I questioned how the concept of legacies had been construed within the context of hosting a Paralympic Games. The post,
Despite being written in an informal, conversational style, was somewhat academic (or what Meyrick would have termed “governmental”). In fact, it had more in common with the many papers I have submitted for course work in recent years than with the intimate, casual first-person narrative style characteristic of many blogs. In short, it was a post that I was comfortable writing. It also received very little response; only five comments … three by Lelainia and two replies by me. That was my first experience writing for AthletesFirst and I was frankly disappointed with my efforts.

Like the other authors writing for AthletesFirst, I understood what it would take to get a reaction from readers; I was going to have to step outside of my comfort zone and tackle a juicy topic. There was just one problem. Throughout the entire process, starting with the discussions that Courtney and I had about the potential for a blog exploring issues related to disability sport and continuing right through to the conversations with the entire blog team, I had always positioned myself as more of an ally than an insider with regards to my involvement in the Paralympic Movement. I intended to act as a facilitator, someone ready to offer my skills and my time to supporting the efforts of the blog team and other athletes with disabilities as they discussed their very personal experiences with para-sport. In fact, had I been asked at the start of this process what role an able-bodied researcher could play in this project, I would have said that, it was my responsibility to ensure that the voices of my collaborators (the blog team) came to the fore and that my own involvement stayed in the background. Certainly I never envisioned that I would be in the position of writing a post with anything approaching the same passion or honesty that made Blair and Joan’s posts such tours de force.

Yet as the project progressed, several things occurred that compelled me to reconsider my stance on the role I would play. I have already mentioned two of the contributing factors. First, there were some topics that blog team members identified as worth pursuing but that they felt they were not in a position to address. Secondly, there was a limit to how much time I could reasonably expect team members to contribute and, if I wanted to ensure that new content was posted on a semi-regular basis on the AthletesFirst blog, it was up to me to find it — or write it myself. Additionally, the more I reflected upon how I was positioning myself within the project, the more I started to recognize the intricacies of engaging in this kind of work. While I still believed that participatory research is meant to destabilize traditional hierarchies within the research process and to provide participants with increased opportunities to contribute to and
guide the project, I was starting to recognize that there was an inherent disconnect in asking participants to do something that I myself was not comfortable doing. On one hand, I was encouraging blog team members and guest authors to write posts from a very personal place and to then publish them online where they could be read by anyone; on the other hand, I was limiting my own exposure to comfortable, technical posts that revealed very little about myself. I was maintaining my own privacy, while also actively pushing my collaborators to make themselves vulnerable.

The transformation was a slow one, but I gradually started changing my approach to writing posts. I, like the other authors, chose topics that were personally meaningful, used examples from my own life to illustrate my points, and adopted a more intimate style of writing. While I still frequently grounded my posts in research (as did most other authors), I also revealed to readers the relevance the topic had in my own life with regards to my experiences as a guide, a coach, a volunteer, and a fan of disability sport. I started to reflect upon and acknowledge the contradictions in what I was writing about, recognizing, like Joan did, that these issues were complex and that I was sometimes a hypocrite.

I describe my experiences here, not to privilege in any way my contributions to the blog, but rather because, of all the roles I played (researcher, team member, administrator, promoter, and audience), it was through my participation as an author that I gained the greatest appreciation for the AthletesFirst blog. Until I was able to experience for myself the struggle of deciding on a topic, the false starts at writing, the satisfaction of seeing the post go up online, and the thrill of watching people comment on and share the link to something that I had written, I did not fully understand the potential of what we were doing — even though I was the one who proposed the project in the first place! Furthermore, it was because of my identity as one of the authors of the blog that I was able to build a rapport with project participants and collaborators. As I stated previously, I had been largely uncomfortable with imposing deadlines on blog team members or asking them to write more. The dynamics of this relationship, however, changed as team members realized that I was writing alongside them and that I understood what it was that I was asking of them.

The posts that I wrote were also a means of connecting with the 20 interviewees in that they helped to disrupt the interviewer/interviewee relationship. Frequently, participants enter into an interview with little knowledge of the individual to whom they will be speaking. Calls for
participants usually indicate what the project is about and why participants are being recruited, but they rarely indicate what motivated the researcher to get involved or to conduct that work. This discrepancy between what the interviewee knows and what the researcher knows is one of the reasons the power distribution in interviews could be seen as unequal (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). However, with this project, participants typically arrived at the interview having read at least one of the posts I had written and/or having read my profile posted on AthletesFirst (and I suspect many of them also googled me to find additional information). In that regard, I was less likely to be viewed as a stranger and more likely to be seen as an ally — someone who was likewise committed to the promotion of para-sport and to advocating for athletes with disabilities. It was my impression that, because I exposed myself online, participants were more likely to be open with me and the interviews were richer as a result.

In addition to writing posts, I also made the decision early on to use my own Facebook and Twitter accounts to promote the blog rather than creating ‘AthletesFirst’ accounts or pages. This seemed risky at first in that it meant there would be a blurring (or rather a complete annihilation) of the line between my personal and my professional networks. This was not a decision that I made lightly and it had many implications. First of all, it meant that my friends and family would see everything I wrote on the blog and I had to wonder what their response would be. After all, most of my 400 plus Facebook friends knew little of my involvement in para-sport and, as far as I knew, had very little interest in learning more. Secondly, given that the para-sport community is relatively small and tight knit and that I am already Facebook friends with Courtney and other members of the blog team (who are in turn friends with many other para-athletes), it was only a matter of time before readers of the AthletesFirst blog found my Facebook profile. Not only would my existing friends be able to read my blog posts, but many project participants would eventually see the photos I posted of family holidays and time spent with friends. Twitter does not follow the same ‘friend’ model that Facebook does and is more commonly used by individuals in both a personal and professional context. Still, using my own account to promote posts on the AthletesFirst site and to recruit participants for the interviews meant I had to consider whether or not the tweets that I made on subjects other than the blog would cause potential project participants to question my professionalism and/or discourage them from getting involved with AthletesFirst. Essentially, my concerns regarding the use of both Facebook and Twitter hinged on whether or not friends, followers, and project participants
would perceive the way in which I presented myself online to be authentic and consistent across the platforms (including the AthletesFirst blog) or whether they would find contradictions in what I was doing/saying on one platform that would lead them to question my commitment to the opinions and politics I espoused on the blog. Ultimately, I decided that, while there were certainly some risks involved in using my personal accounts to promote the blog, I really had no other option. The other blog team members were sharing the link through their existing online networks. Indeed, in the early days of the project, most of the traffic to AthletesFirst came from links shared on Josh’s blog and blog team members’ Facebook pages. The fact that they were willing to use their personal accounts was, in fact, what made this project possible. As long-time members of Canadian para-sport teams, they were uniquely positioned to reach a large number of para-athletes (and coaches, volunteers, and fans) and, as multiple medal winners at previous Paralympic Games, they had the public profiles necessary to attract the attention of organizations such as the Canadian Paralympic Committee and other funding agencies and sponsors. While the decision to use my personal accounts was once again premised on the notion that I could not ask blog team members to do something that I myself was unwilling to do, the truth is that, in the overall picture of the project, my own contributions to sharing the blog were likely negligible compared to that of the other authors.

4.8 Discussion: Barriers to the Public Sphere

This chapter has discussed the reasons that authors gave for agreeing to participate in this project as well as the types of topics they were interested in writing about. They said their athletic careers had not provided them with a venue to engage in such debates and, as such, they were interested in exploring the affordances provided by online forums. This finding is consistent with recent research on the Canadian sport system which has found that despite the adoption of an ‘athlete-centred’ model in the mid-1990s that was meant to ensure that athletes had a role in the governance of sport organizations, most athletes are reliant on others to champion their interests and raise their concerns within their national sport organizations (NSOs) (Kihl, Kikulis, & Thibault, 2007; Thibault & Babiak, 2005). However, before declaring blogs a panacea to this lack of representation within sport systems or overstating their potential as a public sphere (alternative or otherwise), it is imperative to understand not only what types of online deliberations were considered possible but also what types of online conversations
actually occurred. Did the online forum of AthletesFirst provide authors with a safe space in which to engage in the discussions that they desired?

While the blog team members (myself included) originally conceptualized the AthletesFirst blog as a space where conversations that were considered too difficult to address in offline settings were taken up online, in the end, we censored ourselves. The democratic potential of the blog was curtailed by the authors’ abilities to introduce topics that they felt warranted discussion within a broader community or, in other words, by the authors’ ability to resist the coercive forces that reproduce inequality within the sport system and that position athletes as dependent on the goodwill of others. Fraser (1990) has defined the public sphere as “a theatre in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk” (p. 57). She further described public spheres as “institutionalized arena[s] of discursive interaction” (p. 57) where it is possible for citizens to produce and circulate discourses that are critical of the state (e.g. alternative counter-hegemonic public spheres). This was indeed the vision that blog team members had when they embarked on the AthletesFirst project. In the tradition of new social movement actors, we were also looking at blogging as an affordable method of self-publishing and as a means of creating texts that could speak to the superficial coverage of disability sport in the mainstream media. We imagined the blog to be a space where athletes with disabilities could come together to discuss and debate issues immediately relevant to their sport practices free of the power structures of a sport system that commonly silences athletes by denying them access to a platform where they can raise their voices. However, as stated by Fraser (1990), while the Habermasian public sphere is premised on the notion that it is possible to “bracket” (p. 65) social inequalities allowing for individuals to enter into discursive relations as social peers, “social inequalities can infect deliberation, even in the absence of any formal exclusions” (p. 64). In short, Fraser (and others) has reported that in many cases, the public sphere idealized by Habermas fails to materialize because of a “misplaced faith in the efficacy of bracketing” (1990, p. 64) that assumes individuals will be able to leave their social positions at the door. The experience of the authors of the AthletesFirst blog illustrates the challenge of creating a public sphere where individuals are equally positioned to engage in discussion and debate. While in the early stages of the project, the authors generally ignored the suggestion that they might experience repercussions for making posts or comments that were seen as critical of their sport organizations or the sport system more generally, as the project
progressed, I observed that not all team members were equally positioned to be able to write about what they wanted. Many of the same fears, for example the idea that speaking out might jeopardize their selection to a Paralympic team, actually followed team members online as was evidenced by their reluctance to engage with juicy topics.

This finding also raises another important point about power and participatory methods. Though PAR is described as a means of renegotiating power within the research project so that individuals engage as partners and collaborators rather than as researchers and the researched, that does not mean that participating in a PAR-based project will change power relations outside the project. For example, Reid et al. (2006) in working with women on welfare reported that the women expressed concerns about what might happen if their welfare workers found out they were participating in a project exploring grievances with the welfare system. Similar to the concerns expressed by the athletes involved in this project, the women wondered if questioning the practices of this institution might not be tantamount to “biting the hand that fed them” (Reid et al., 2006, p. 323).

In addition to not feeling comfortable or able to take the risk of writing about the juicy topics, there was also the issue as to how authors claimed legitimacy or authority on a subject. While the project was premised on the idea that athletes with disabilities are themselves in the best position to speak to issues related to disability sport, I was surprised to learn that all of the authors conducted research to situate and support their posts. This suggests to me, that on some level, the authors felt that their own experiences were insufficient grounds on which to make claims. Thus, while the inspiration for the posts were the authors’ personal experiences, the claims being made or the arguments being put forth were legitimized by references to more mainstream, external texts. This observation is consistent with what Fraser (1990) and others have stated, that although the public sphere is often described as open and accessible to individuals regardless of their social stature, only certain styles of speech and types of arguments are recognized as “rational” (p. 59) and, therefore, accorded attention and respect. As stated by Fraser (1990), there is a remarkable irony here, one that Habermas’ account of the rise of the public sphere fails to fully appreciate, in that a “discourse of publicity touting accessibility, rationality, and the suspension of status hierarchies is itself deployed as a strategy of distinction” (p. 60). Thus, in addition to not being free to pursue certain topics, the authors were also
constrained in that they felt they needed to write posts that considered the topic rationally rather than being only founded on their lived experiences.

However, in addition to using research as a means of presenting their posts as legitimate and authoritative, researching topics also served another function. It was an opportunity for the authors to interrogate their own stance on the issues they were writing about. Although the authors discussed research in terms of “backing up” their arguments, they also stated that it was through writing and researching topics that they came to have a better understanding of their own positions in relation to the issues being discussed. Whereas researching a topic did not result in them changing their stance, it did, in some instances, enable them to better consider the complexities of the subject matter. This reflexive practice was further reinforced during the actual process of writing the posts. As I stated in Chapter 3, when discussing my methods for this project, writing itself can be a form of analysis—it forces authors to arrange their thoughts, to make decisions about what to include/exclude in the text, and to relate to the subject matter in a new way. This was certainly the situation described by the authors of AthletesFirst; we created the blog to engage in discussions with others, but the first stage was an internal reflexive process whereby we engaged with our topics ourselves. This type of reflexive practice is consistent with the earlier description of new social movements as consisting of individual actors interacting within loosely bound networks and, through these interactions, arriving at a richer understanding of their collective experiences and grievances (Buechler, 1995). This finding is also a good reminder that social movement actors come together around particular interests, concerns, or values but that does not necessarily mean that they agree on everything! Rather, they are united in their agreement that certain issues are worthy of their attention or that certain mainstream practices and assumptions need to be challenged.

Nonetheless, although authors stated that the process of writing was “good,” they were far more interested in watching peoples’ reactions to what they had written. According to Meyrick, receiving comments from readers was the part he most enjoyed about being an author. The success of a post was judged on the number of comments that were received as well as the extensiveness of the comments (those comments that truly engaged with the post were valued more than simple notes congratulating the author on a well-written piece) and the number of individuals who participated in the conversation (posts that received comments from numerous readers were valued over posts that received numerous comments from a few readers). This
finding is interesting in that it challenges the notion that blogs are nothing more than online diaries (alternatively construed as either narcissistic or voyeuristic depending on whether it is the writer or the audience that is under investigation) and instead suggests, as previously contended by Baumer, Sueyoshi, and Tomlinson (2011), that blogs are co-created discursive spaces that are equally reliant on authors and audiences. According to this conceptualization, the individuals writing the posts are no more (and no less) important than the individuals reading the posts but rather both contribute value and both are responsible for making the blog successful (Baumer et al., 2011). Furthermore, as evidenced by the conversations with the other authors and from my own reading of the AthletesFirst blog, the very categorization of people as either authors or readers is misleading in that all the authors I spoke with were also readers — and, over the course of the project, ten readers became authors! Unlike more traditional forms of media, blogs disrupt the notion that media is produced by one group for consumption by another. Rather blogs exist through the bi-directional flow of texts. The following chapter, which is entitled ‘Audiences,’ further interrogates the role of blog readers in this project. It considers the issue from two perspectives: who was known to be reading the blog and who was perceived to be the desired or intended audience for the blog.
Chapter 5: Audiences

We all know this stuff anyway—we talk about it every day. People live it every day. This is nothing new to us. So that’s not the market we should be targeting. The market we should be targeting is the market that doesn’t understand this.

— Jan

5.1 Introduction to ‘Audiences’

While the previous chapter explored the reasons authors had for writing their chosen posts, this is only part of the equation; critical theorists studying sport media have issued the call for research that considers not only the producers (in this case, the authors) but also the consumers (blog readers) (Kane & Maxwell, 2011; Wheaton & Beal, 2003). With a few notable exceptions, including Baumer et al. (2011), Karlsson (2007), and Keller (2012), the literature looking at how audiences understand blogs and the role they play in the co-creation of online public spheres is quite limited. This lack of research into the experiences of audiences was the impetus for interviewing 20 individuals who visited, read, commented on, and occasionally guest blogged for AthletesFirst. In addition to exploring what brought these 20 very diverse individuals to the blog, this chapter also considers who was understood to be the intended audience for AthletesFirst. Chapter 5 pertains to RQ1 as it asks who engaged with the blog and what were their reasons for doing so. The chapter also addresses RQ2 in that, as will be demonstrated, there were close ties between how participants used AthletesFirst as a venue to promote and advocate for disability sport and their impressions of who was the intended audience for the blog.

Though it is very difficult to know who exactly is visiting a blog, there are a few software applications that offer some insights into the blog readership. As previously stated, I installed Google Analytics and was subsequently able to track how many times AthletesFirst was visited along with the geographic location of visitors, the search terms used to arrive at the blog, the number of pages viewed, and the amount of time each visitor spent on the blog. Meyrick’s statement about installing Google Analytics on his own blog echoed my own reaction when I first ran an analytics report on AthletesFirst. He said:

When I first figured out Google Analytics I was blown away. Because I thought like 25 people read my blog. And I turned that thing on and it was like—it was like someone turned the light on in the room and there were an extra two thousand people there.
Despite the fact that I had all these statistics available, in many ways, I was just as much in the dark as any visitor to the site. Unless someone commented on a post and revealed personal information, there was no way of really knowing who was reading AthletesFirst or why they were reading. It was this discrepancy between knowing that the blog was being read (by thousands) and the few cues as to who the readers actually were that led me to distinguish between what I came to term the known and the desired audiences. I defined known audiences as those individuals confirmed to be reading the blog (a group who included the participants interviewed and the individuals who posted comments on the blog or otherwise made themselves visible online). I defined desired audiences as those individuals who blog team members and interview participants hoped were reading.

5.2 Known Audiences: Who Is Reading AthletesFirst?

The call for participants deliberately contained very few criteria for inclusion/exclusion in the project. I stated that I was interested in speaking with both frequent and infrequent readers of the AthletesFirst blog and I advertised that the interviews would explore people’s impressions of the blog and more generally how people used the Internet and social media within the context of disability sport. The poster also stated that it was not necessary to be an athlete with a disability to participate. The result was that, of the respondents interviewed, nine were para-sport athletes, three were involved in para-sport as coaches or assistants, and three worked for companies or organizations involved in para-sport programming. The remaining five participants were less directly affiliated with para-sports: Rob described himself as an athlete and an avid fan/follower of Canadian amateur sport, Lelainia and Karen were both self-proclaimed para-sport ‘superfans,’ Calum worked for an organization that promoted athlete-advocacy projects and Larry, a retired teacher, was a lifelong critic of elite sport and a promoter of sport as recreation (see Table 3.1). While the sample should in no way be taken as representative of readership of AthletesFirst (there is no way of knowing the actual demographic characteristics of visitors to the blog), these participants reflected the diversity of its known audience and their participation in the interviews contributed to an understanding of the plurality of reasons that individuals had for reading the blog.
5.2.1 A ‘private party’

When the first post was made on AthletesFirst in November 2011, the blog team shared the link using our personal Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, emails, and word of mouth. Given our mode of advertising, it is hardly surprising that many of our early readers were personally known to a blog team member: they were teammates, family members, and friends. This is consistent with the findings of Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, and Espinoza (2008) who reported that although there is a tendency to privilege the Internet’s ability to reach new audiences, many online networks actually overlap with offline networks. While the readership of the blog eventually expanded, two of these early readers were also among the first to respond to my call for interview participants. Mary began competing in para-nordic after experiencing a traumatic brain injury and she was a teammate of Courtney’s and mine on the 2010 Paralympic team. Her partner, Kathy, is a long-time coach and volunteer with our ski club.

Mary and Kathy first came across the blog when Courtney and I shared the link on our respective Facebook pages. A previously stated, that first post was written by Courtney and Josh and debated the language used to describe sport done by persons with a disability. When Mary and Kathy read that first post they were shocked and intrigued by the debate that was happening. Kathy described her reaction to the post and said:

That was the first one I read. I got excited about it and I thought ‘Wow, that’s interesting’ and you know, I kept reading … I’ve really enjoyed the different perspectives. It’s given me food for thought. It’s even, you know, challenged my thinking in some areas. Cause you don’t realize — you’re going along tickity boo, you know, and you think that you have an idea of how people are feeling and you think it’s a certain way, but then you see these kinds of posts and it’s like ‘Oh I never thought of it that way.’

Mary echoed Kathy’s statements and added that the attraction for her was seeing the diverse opinions expressed within a group that she would have previously assumed had a shared understanding of the terms they were using and of the meanings associated with these terms. The following is an excerpt from the interview with Mary:

[Mary]: I find it really interesting that, you know, within the same community you can have such vast ideas as to what a word means or what a label means — you know, it’s the politics within.

[Andrea]: Did that surprise you?
[Mary]: Yeah it did. I’m not sure why it surprised me … I guess it really shouldn’t surprise me because, you know, it’s a smaller group but it’s still a group. Wherever you have groups you’re going to have different opinions, right?

Of course, Mary and Kathy did not just stumble across the blog; they had previously heard Courtney and I discussing the project and they had some pre-existing understanding of what we were trying to achieve. Others did not have that same information. Shelly Ann first visited the blog when the link was circulated in an email sent to a team of para-triathletes. While Mary and Kathy both found the diversity of opinions being expressed to be attractive, when Shelley Ann was asked about her impressions of the blog and her reasons for reading, she replied:

I thought ‘Woah — these are people who are talking my language’… I don’t remember whose blog post it was but someone wrote ‘Right on sistah’ and I thought ‘Yeah!’ There are different times I have said to myself ‘You’re talking my language.’ And I think it’s a gathering where, as I say, everyone is singing from the same hymnbook.

Shelley Ann acknowledged that people were expressing contradictory opinions on the blog, but it was the fact that para-sport was being discussed at all that made her feel that people were “talking her language.” The debates were on topics (the rules, the regulations, and the practices of para-sport) that directly impacted her. In that sense, the AthletesFirst blog was a like-minded community, not because everyone always agreed on everything, but rather because they were willing to participate in conversations on topics that were of common interest to para-athletes. Kathy also commented on the “like-mindedness” of blog participants and described AthletesFirst in the following way:

I’m sure that through the CPC [Canadian Paralympic Committee] there’s probably a Website and a forum. But this is more intimate and that’s what I like about it … And even though I know your blog is [international] because of the participants who are taking part, it still feels like — I don’t know — more of a private party … I think it’s because of the like-mindedness. With different points of view, if you know what I mean. It’s not like a department store, but a specialized store.
Kathy’s perception that AthletesFirst was an “intimate” space was not based on any expectations of privacy or exclusiveness. She was fully aware that the blog was technically open to everyone and I had informed her earlier in the interview that, at that point, we had had nearly 4,000 visitors worldwide. Rather it was the common interest in or the common commitment to discussing para-sport that led her to conclude that it was a “private party.”

5.2.2 A window onto para-sport

However, not all readers were para-sport insiders. Unlike Shelley and the other para-athletes who were initially attracted to the blog because people were “speaking their language,” Rob, Lelainia, Karen, and Larry had very different reasons for reading AthletesFirst. For example, Rob described himself as an avid follower of mainstream media coverage of Canadian amateur sport and as a regular subscriber to Canadian athletes’ blogs and Twitter accounts. For him, the attraction of the AthletesFirst blog was that it offered insider insights into an arena of amateur sport that was rarely discussed in other venues. He said:

My first impression of [AthletesFirst] was that it was a refreshing perspective … The story you hear from the Paralympic side — or pretty much the treatment of any minority group [in the media] — it’s always heart-warming or touching, uplifting stories [which] are not always totally reflective of reality. As nice as the stories are. And so I think that my first impression was I really appreciated the critical thinking … I like reading it – [and] sort of getting perspectives on the issues because, like I said before, I don’t really care what the Minister of Sport has to say about para-sport. Not that he doesn’t know anything but it’s not a valuable perspective. Because if I wanted someone’s perspective who wasn’t involved in [para-sport], I have my perspective (laughs) … The reason I return would be just because it’s a refreshing perspective on these issues from the people closely tied to them [and] who I think have really valuable things to say about the issues.

Rob saw this blog as both a logical extension of his existing consumption of sport media and also as something unique; it was an opportunity to get a perspective on para-sport not normally available to outsiders.

Karen and Lelainia also appreciated the unique perspective on para-sport that the AthletesFirst blog afforded them, although their reasons for reading were different from Rob’s. Both women had recently been diagnosed with chronic, degenerative, debilitating conditions. In her first email to me and again in the interview, Lelainia described herself as transitioning from
an able-bodied identity to a disabled identity. She said: “I am sort of one foot in the able-bodied world and one foot in the disabled-bodied world and I want to — if I’m forced to transition I’m going to do it as gracefully as I can.” She saw the AthletesFirst blog as a means of facilitating this transition. While Lelainia’s interest in amateur sport was not limited to disability sport (I interviewed her shortly before the opening of the 2012 London Olympic and Paralympic Games and she said she would be fixated on the television during both events), her particular interest in para-sport and in the Paralympic Movement was certainly moderated by her own experience of disability. In the following quote, she described what the Paralympics meant to her as a person with a disability:

I look to the Paralympics, because that’s kind of the biggest community of disabled people that I know, to get a sense of how they [are] coping, what are they doing with their lives. Because they are not just Paralympians, you know, they’re doctors and lawyers or whatever they are doing, and they are parents. So I think in life everybody needs mentors and they need people that inspire them for whatever reason and that can be a good thing. So for me it’s kind of like ‘Okay, what are the examples? How can I adapt that to me?’ I’m really grateful to, you know, have that community happening and [to have it] online where I can access it ‘cause I’m not an athlete.

As discussed in Chapter 2, there are certain individuals and groups within disability rights movements who view the Paralympics Games as inherently ableist and therefore lacking any true progressive potential to improve conditions for individuals with disabilities (Howe, 2008). Furthermore, there exists a substantial body of literature exploring how media portrayals of Paralympians can alienate or disempower non-athletic individuals with disabilities as they create unrealistic expectations as to what individuals with disabilities can or should be able to accomplish (Hardin & Hardin, 2004; Nixon, 2007; Schell & Rodriguez, 2001). Additionally, a recent study by Purdue and Howe (2012a) found that while “the belief that Paralympians did represent people with a disability [appears] to be a common belief among most Paralympic stakeholders” (p. 911) the ‘empowering’ potential of the Paralympic Games for individuals with disabilities not directly involved in sport is still very much in question. Purdue and Howe’s (2012a) research is supported by the recently released Scope Tracker Survey of Disabled People conducted in the lead up to the 2012 London Paralympics. According to the survey, 40 percent of Britons with a disability said they felt excited, included, or empowered by the Paralympics,
while 20 percent stated that the Paralympic Games made them feel “second class”, and 22 percent reported that the Games were patronizing (ComRes, 2011). Yet Lelainia indicated that she viewed the Paralympics as a source of inspiration. This suggests that while portrayals of elite Paralympians might indeed alienate some individuals and reinforce “hierarchies of impairment” (conditions whereby some forms of impairment are perceived to be more valued than others) (Deal, 2003, p. 901), it is still possible for (non-athletic) others, such as Lelainia, to view Paralympians as a source of inspiration and consider them to be positive role models. It was Lelainia’s desire to find out more about how people were living with their disabilities that kept her reading AthletesFirst.

Although Karen had also recently been diagnosed with a debilitating, degenerative condition, the catalyst for her sudden interest in all things Paralympic had less to do with her own disability and was rather attributable to her desire to support her friend, Joan, as she trained for the 2012 London Paralympic Games. Karen reported that while she had always known that her good friend competed in para-rowing and para-nordic skiing, she had never really paid that much attention to disability sport as a whole. It was only when Joan wrote a guest blog on AthletesFirst that it really “clicked” for Karen:

I sort of knew what was happening, that she was racing, what her results were and stuff like that but it was really this time that I think the idea of the Paralympics grabbed me. And part of it was the article that she wrote … on your blog about being an athlete and it really clicked for me … It just opened up a whole new world.

The blog post that Karen was referring to was the previously mentioned article by Joan entitled, ‘I am not special’ in which she gave a very personal and honest account of why she disliked it when people mistook her for a Special Olympian rather than a Paralympian. For Karen, this post was eye opening — and the impetus for her to learn more about Paralympic sport and the Paralympic Movement. At the time of the interview, Karen was actually the current leader in a Facebook contest hosted by the Canadian Paralympic Committee to be Canada’s ‘SuperFan’ at the 2012 Paralympic Games and was trying to win a trip for two to London to watch the Paralympic Games. While Karen described herself as a newcomer to Paralympic sport, throughout the interview, she demonstrated a remarkable knowledge of the athletes, the sports,
and the history of disability sport in Canada and stated that she had recently started to go online to find out more. She said:

If by any chance I actually got to go, who would I want to see? What sports am I interested in? I mean everybody knows that Oscar guy [Oscar Pistorius] but what other sports are there? ... So I kind of started exploring the different — like I actually went to the Paralympic site and went ‘Okay, let’s read the classifications’ … I was really surprised to find out about how many sports there actually are at the Paralympics!

Whereas, unlike Lelainia, Karen did not directly state that she viewed her interest in the Paralympic Movement as related to her own experiences as a person with a disability, she discussed how her experiences with multiple sclerosis had indirectly led her to para-sport and the ‘SuperFan’ contest. Karen explained that, while she was working, she did not have much time for social media or blogs — she used a computer at work and for email but did not really “get it.” She said, “Even Facebook, I wasn’t all that active on[line] until I was off work and probably got bored. Because I wanted people to talk to.” She described how she went from seeing the Internet as a place where she went to look up information to a place where she went to communicate with others. Within a short time she was not only using Facebook more frequently but she was also on Twitter, writing three blogs of her own, and reading/commenting on a number of other blogs. She stated that though she had previously believed social media and the Internet were the domains of younger generations (she had recently turned 50), she was becoming increasingly comfortable using these platforms herself:

I know there are a lot of people of all ages who are incredibly active on the Internet and do use it as a communication tool … And certainly through this experience with the contest and, you know, kind of looking at how athletes communicate with each other, [I] kind of [went], ‘Okay, I think I finally get it.’ Like maybe I can be part of this. Whereas before I don’t think I would have.

Karen started reading AthletesFirst because she was interested in what her friend had written, but she continued to read it because she found it intriguing and felt that she was learning a lot about Paralympic sport from those directly involved. Like Rob, she felt that the insights offered on AthletesFirst were “valuable” perspectives in that they (most commonly) came from individuals who were directly involved in para-sport and explored topics that were not widely available.
through other, more mainstream, channels. Karen’s comments also spoke to a phenomenon described in the review of the literature in Chapter 2; not only are social movements making use of online platforms but in doing so, members of these groups become socialized to Internet use and become more proficient in using these technologies. According to Della Porta and Mosca (2005), “If CMC [computer-mediate communication] is used by the organization an individual belongs to, accessing the Internet tends to become an important activity for previously ‘unwired’ individuals. The organization makes its members familiar with new technologies” (p. 173). Karen’s story provides an example of how this process might work in that it was reading the blog that prompted her to follow athletes on Twitter and Facebook and, from there, her increased consumption of these online media changed her understanding of who these online platforms were for and how she could be using them.

5.3 Desired Audiences: Who Should Be Reading AthletesFirst?

While the previous section described readers as either insiders at a private party or as interested outsiders peering in the window, a considerable amount of time in the interviews was spent talking about who should be reading AthletesFirst. In many instances, the individuals reading the blog did not feel that they themselves were the target audience of the blog. For example, Jan had started out as a guide and a volunteer but para-triathlon quickly became her passion. She soon founded a national triathlon club for blind and visually impaired triathletes and sighted guides. More recently, she had launched a private company that represents athletes with disabilities and works with events and companies looking to reach a disability market. While Jan said that she found the blog interesting and that she enjoyed reading it, her chief interest in the blog was in sharing it with those who were less familiar with the world of para-sport. She explained:

We all know this stuff anyway — we talk about it every day. People live it every day. This is nothing new to us. So that’s not the market we should be targeting. The market we should be targeting is the market that doesn’t understand this.

5.3.1 By insiders for outsiders

Jan’s response was consistent with those of other participants’; while they perceived the posts and comments on AthletesFirst to be mainly written by and for para-athletes and those with
close involvement in para-sport and the Paralympic Movement (coaches, guides, volunteers, family of athletes, and so forth), they also hoped that the blog was being read by those outside the networks that form the Paralympic Movement. Rachael, the only Paralympian living in her small community, said she enjoyed reading the blog because she could relate to the topics being discussed:

I think the blog is fantastic. And I’m not just saying that. Because we never had blogs like that before. In regards to other athletes — like you have athletes on there that are actually contributing blog posts … I can understand a lot of it. I get a lot out of it in regards [to] my life. So I read it and go ‘okay — somebody is going through something similar as me.’ So as far as I am concerned I think that what you are doing is great. And I think the more athletes that you can get on there the better.

However, Rachael also saw AthletesFirst as a tool for reaching out to others and introducing them to para-sport even while maintaining it as a space that privileged athletes’ voices:

Who I think should read it is everybody! Because how else can we advocate for para-sport? How else can we make it known that we are on the same level as Olympic athletes? How can they understand what we are going through if there isn’t that outreach, right? So as far as I am concerned, I think there [are] a lot of people that need to read the blog … So that is why I share it. As far as I am concerned, I would like everybody to read it. They don’t have to have input necessarily. I mean it’s great if they say ‘Wow’ — and, you know, if they have an understanding of what we do as athletes. But they are obviously not going to have the same sort of input that we [para-athletes] have, right? And that’s why it’s more of an insider thing.

Mike, a boccia official and the sport assistant for a boccia athlete at the 2012 Paralympic Games, had a similar (if slightly less optimistic) view to Rachael. He hoped that AthletesFirst was being read by outsiders but expected that the majority of readers were those individuals already engaged in disability sport. He said:

I want to believe that it’s people who have no idea what’s going on in this world of sport for people with disabilities. I have a feeling it’s more seen by people who are already involved in the sport. Ideally, I want to think that other people are seeing it and finding out more about it. In a perfect world, that’s what we would have … Because people need to know more about para-sports and the Paralympic Movement in general … I know there are a whole lot more people out there with disabilities who are not involved in
sports that could be. And their kids could be, their family members could be — we just need to get people involved and unless they know about it they are not going to get involved.

5.3.2 Promoting para-sport and finding new participants

According to Mike, while the blog could be a way of educating the general public about para-sport and disability (ultimately addressing some of the discrimination encountered by athletes with a disability), it could also serve as an outreach tool to recruit individuals with disabilities who were unaware of the sport opportunities available to them. This potential function of the blog was mentioned by many participants who used their own introduction to para-sport as a starting point to describe how things changed with the advent of the Web. For example, Meyrick described how after his accident he had really limited access to information about what his life would be like as a below-the-knee amputee with regards to sport. He said:

My recovery, now that all happened — I’m not going to say ‘before the Internet,’ I’m not quite that old — but before the Internet was what it is now. Information was not nearly as easy to get. There was no blog for me to read about some active amputee that was doing something. I had no idea. I would go to my prosthetist and he would have these ancient posters on the wall of some amputee running and I would think to myself that’s pretty cool.

Meyrick contrasted his own experience of learning by trial and error what type of prosthetic foot he needed to be able to comfortably run with the process someone might undergo if they had a similar injury today. His desire to save others the time and the pain he experienced was one of the reasons he frequently posted practical information, such as how he had modified his bicycle, on his own blog. According to Meyrick:

In this day and age, people who go through an accident like mine, you know, what’s the first thing [they] do when [they] get out of the hospital? You probably go right onto Google and start ‘Okay – what is my life going to be like?’ And you find things like my blog.
Meyrick’s comments were certainly reflective of Darren’s experience. Darren was left with partial paralysis of his left leg and permanent damage to his spinal cord as a result of a clot during a surgery. An avid athlete, Darren was researching what sports he might still be able to do before he even left the hospital. He said:

I found the Challenged Athletes Foundation. You know, I was just doing research every day I was in the hospital on what I could do. Because I had been an athlete all my life so I wanted to make sure that I could still do things.

Darren went on to describe how, in addition to the Challenged Athletes Foundation’s site, he found a number of online resources that facilitated his entry into para-sport. He also connected with a number of para-athletes (including Meyrick) who wrote blogs or used Twitter. In many ways, Darren’s story exemplified what many participants considered to be the value of blogging with regards to promoting para-sport.

Participants with congenital impairments also provided many examples of how they themselves were using various online platforms, including blogs, to connect online and how this differed from their experiences growing up when information about disability sport was not as readily available. For example, Maria described growing up in Australia:

I probably started training at thirteen and, as I say, I didn’t know that disability sport was a thing so I thought I wasn’t any good. I wonder how many people there are in their thirties and up who are like that. Who actually were pretty good but grew up thinking they were crap because they had no concept of disability sport. It’s not as if we were exposed to that sort of stuff back then ... Now that I know disability sport is a thing, I looked up the times [for para-triathlon races] and it was like ‘heck yes, I can do that.’

After realizing that she could be competitive in para-triathlon, Maria said she used the Internet intensively to find resources not available to her locally:

[Maria]: You’re on your own. Unless you go online and find people online you basically don’t have a peer group. I mean you have able-bodied athletes but there are some things that may not generalize well.

[Andrea]: Can you give me an example of something you have gone online to find?
[Maria]: Oh — starting with how to modify my bike. That’s actually my current project. I can’t shift chain rings with an unmodified bike … So it’s go online and find out how other people have done it … talking to other athletes.

Shelley Ann and Rachel, both individuals with visual impairments, also reported participating in various online networks for para-triathletes and said they wished these resources had been available to them earlier. Rachel described how (comparably) easy it was with today’s technology to find guides for training and competitions and said it was Twitter that connected her with her current guide.

I think I just searched ‘guide’ — or I don’t even know what I put in on discover. I thought ‘what are the odds that somebody would put I’m a visually impaired guide on their Twitter?’ … [It was] in her profile. Isn’t that crazy? … We meet for the first time the day before the race … We are like friends, we are like sisters now (laughs). We will be meeting up at several races throughout the year.

Both Shelley Ann and Rachel were also actively using these platforms to assist other athletes find guides as well. Shelley Ann contrasted the opportunities available today with regards to accessing information and resources to her own experiences and said, “I actually hope no kid has to sit on the sidelines like I did.”

5.3.3 Getting it in the right hands

The three previous ways in which the participants envisioned using AthletesFirst to reach a targeted audience were all rather congenial. Regardless of whether they felt the blog was a space for insiders to connect, a space for outsiders to learn more, or a space to reach out to newcomers, collectively they described the blog as a supportive and friendly environment. Not so for all participants. Some felt AthletesFirst was (or could be) used to express anger and frustration and to bring public attention to causes and grievances. When asked about his first impressions of the blog, Terry did not hesitate to express his disappointment with the topics and tone that most writers had chosen to adopt. He stated:

I always thought a blog was to make a point. You know, to say something. To attack … The unique thing of a blog — it gives you access to many different persons. It gives you
the ability to say what is on your mind in an instant. You don’t have to go somewhere, like to some kind of media outlet that’s looking for something that you have to say, that’s popular at the time. It certainly opens up the ability for one to speak one’s mind.

Terry viewed blogs as a way of bypassing mainstream media and sharing a message that might be deemed unpopular or even radical. His comments address the historical challenge facing social movements, the need to find alternative means of publicizing grievances or calls to action that forego media channels that are under the control of and that cater to the needs of dominant groups (Meikle, 2002). Terry shared the opinion of theorists Earl and Kimport (2011) and Meikle (2002) that blogs offer new opportunities for subaltern publics to go public and directly reach their audience without having to rely on traditional media channels.

Jan shared Terry’s view that AthletesFirst was not a particularly critical blog and that the posts and debates were more intellectual or informative than they were debate inciting. However, unlike Terry, she was not “disappointed” in AthletesFirst but rather saw it as having a different purpose. She contrasted it to the blog that was attached to her own company’s site and had the following to say:

The AthletesFirst audience [is] very much focused on people who are currently in it [para-sport] but also on people who want to get in, people who are sidelined right now … [our blog] is a bit more focused on calling out the business, or big business about the faults that are within their own system.

Jan stated that she felt that both blogs were influential and valuable but that they served different audiences and different purposes. She described the AthletesFirst blog as less threatening and more concerned with connecting members of the disability sport communities for the purpose of providing support and sharing resources and strategies. In contrast, she used her company blog to “call out” businesses and organizations who were either discriminating against or failing to meet the needs of disability communities. Therefore, Jan agreed with Terry’s assessment of the potential of blogs as spaces where grievances could be aired, but she did not agree with Terry’s assessment that AthletesFirst was not sufficiently radical, rather she perceived it as having a different mandate.
Meyrick shared the view that blogs, in general, could and should be used strategically to address issues and call for change. He wrote a guest post on AthletesFirst entitled ‘Boston and Kona: The cherry missing from the disabled sport sundae.’ In this post, Meyrick described how two iconic North American sporting events, the Boston Marathon and the Kona Ironman World Championship, were failing athletes with disabilities. The Boston Marathon, he claimed, was mocking the abilities of para-athletes by setting qualifying times that were too easy and not at all in keeping with the rigorous and challenging standards applied to able-bodied athletes. He also felt that the Kona Ironman should reconsider their criteria for para-athletes; as it currently stands, para-athletes apply to a lottery and are selected either by the luck of the draw or because they have stories that the event can leverage for publicity. Meyrick generated a lot of discussion on the blog when he wrote:

I am a below-knee athlete and my qualifying time for the Boston Marathon is 8:00:00. Yes EIGHT HOURS!! For those of you who don’t run and aren’t sure what that time means … it means, “if you are missing a leg we’re happy to have you here” (Posted on January 9, 2012).

At the time, Meyrick’s post was one of the most read posts on AthletesFirst with 74 visitors in six days (over the course of the project that page was viewed 495 times). Like other posts that attracted large audiences to the site, Meyrick’s post was passionate, he spoke from experience, and he had done his research. However, that was not the only reason Meyrick’s post was popular — he had made a concerted effort to share it and get it “into the right hands.” He explained his strategies in writing and sharing that post:

I knew that just writing the article wasn’t going to get it done. And I have at various times tried quite hard to put that article into the right hands and get it to people who will actually be able to forward it and take it forward. And so, in the end, it was kind of my repository for my stance. And it became the tool that I wanted to put in the hands of somebody who could make a change. So it wouldn’t happen just by virtue of the fact of posting it online. You know, I get a phone call out of the blue and they [the event organizers] want to change [the criteria]. I knew that wouldn’t happen (laughs). But I thought somebody might agree with it enough that they would forward it to someone else who might read it [and] get it to the person who needed to read it … Because I know a lot of people read it — I put it in very, very influential hands. They read it, they agreed with it, and they committed to pass it along.
Writing the post for AthletesFirst was merely Meyrick’s latest tactic in an ongoing campaign. He had previously written to event organizers and to running/triathlon publications but the issue had never really gained the momentum he was looking for. By publishing on the AthletesFirst blog, Meyrick was able to take his campaign in a new direction. Rather than having to contact each person/organization individually, he was able to circulate the link to the blog post when the opportunity arose. Furthermore, because the article was published on a site that was not his own personal blog, Meyrick felt the post was perceived to have more legitimacy. He said:

I’m not going to give up on that thing. I’m just going to let it go quiet for a while and I’ll probably do it again sometime. I’ll meet someone somewhere and I’ll be like ‘I’ve got to send you something.’ And I’ll send them a link to that blog because it’s more powerful than the [post] on my blog. Because it’s on that blog.

Meyrick understood that the audience for AthletesFirst included many para-athletes and other members of disability sport communities. However, he felt the real value of the blog was in getting the post in “the right hands” by which he meant getting it in front of an audience that had the ability to make the kinds of changes that were being advocated for on AthletesFirst.

While the contribution of the AthletesFirst blog and blogging more generally to the activist/advocacy work of participants is developed in the following chapter, this notion that the desired audience was individuals in positions of power deserves some consideration. Meyrick was quite clear with regards to whom he wanted reading his post but other participants had more ambivalent attitudes. As previously stated, Terry felt that AthletesFirst should be a place for grievances to be expressed but unlike Meyrick he was rather more ambiguous about who was the target for these posts. Was he looking to other athletes for affirmation or demonstrations of solidarity? Or was he, like Jan, hoping to use the blog as a space to call out offenders and challenge them to make changes? Jan also made statements that seemed contradictory at times. She stated that she felt the value of the AthletesFirst blog was in its use of what she referred to as a “peer model” (athletes educating and assisting other athletes). However, she also said that the “market we should be targeting is people who don’t understand this” suggesting that discussing these issues among para-athletes did not have the potential to instigate change.
5.4 “What Do You Need Me to Comment For?”: Invisible and Visible Audiences

As stated in the literature review, one of the features that make blogs a unique medium is that they allow for audiences to speak back to authors (and to other readers) (Baumer et al., 2011). Consequently, the theme of audiences cannot be fully addressed without also considering who posted comments and who did not. In the parlance of the blogosphere, audiences who ‘read only’ but do not comment are often referred to as lurkers (Baumer et al., 2011; Baym, 2010). Though they far outnumber those readers who comment, they are also an “invisible audience” (boyd, 2011, p. 49) in that, though they visit the blog, they leave no trace for other readers to see.

One of the more interesting findings pertaining to audiences addresses this issue of lurkers. Participants suggested that there was a difference between the intended audience for the blog and who they thought should be making comments. For example, Karen, Rob, and Rachael all stated that though they read nearly every post, they usually refrained from commenting. Several reasons were given for their reticence. First, they did not feel they had enough knowledge on the topic to offer an opinion. Rob, as previously mentioned, was a para-sport outsider and was reading the blog because he enjoyed the “valuable perspectives” by para-sport insiders. But the very feature that attracted him to the site also discouraged him from posting any comments of his own:

[It’s] not that I can’t have an opinion. But how valid is my opinion? ... I don’t really know what they’re going through or what their perspectives looks like. So they should probably discuss it. There’s nothing worse than like politics and stuff when you have people making decisions on things that don’t affect them. Well maybe you should have talked to someone who is actually affected by this.

The one time that Rob did post a comment on the blog was to ask a question and the remainder of the time he lurked.

Karen, another para-sport outsider, also stated that she was very reluctant to post comments on AthletesFirst even though she frequently commented on other blogs and enjoyed it when people wrote on her blog. When asked what prevented her from commenting on AthletesFirst specifically she said:
Until it becomes a more commented [on] forum you feel like the outsider, kind of … I would assume that something like AthletesFirst — you know, it’s a good blog and that lots of people are reading it. So what do you need me to comment for?

Like Rob, Karen believed her contributions were unnecessary or would not be particularly valuable (or valued). She also felt that her comments might warrant undue attention because not many other outsiders were posting comments at that time.

The insider/outsider divide, however, did not fully explain who posted comments and who lurked. For example, Larry was unique among blog readers in that he quite commonly challenged the authors and other commenters and was not at all cautious about expressing unpopular opinions seemingly without fear that his authority on the subject would be questioned because of his able-bodied status. He described himself as a lifelong critic of elite sport practices and it was on this basis that he premised his comments. Although Larry understood his opinions were unpopular with many other participants on the blog, he attributed this to their indoctrination within an elite sport culture rather than having anything to do with disabled/non-disabled identities. He told me that he had originally hoped that individuals who had experienced marginalization (referring to athletes with disabilities) would be more likely to critique sport practices that were hierarchical and elitist, but that so far he had been disappointed in what he had read and said that “there are not many radical ideas on [AthletesFirst] … Most of the people who are commenting have already committed to the party line.” Furthermore, Larry was quite comfortable in the role of antagonist and said:

The only reason I started writing was to throw some ideas into this thing that aren’t common sense … I’m going to try to subvert whatever you are trying to say. And that will force you to think about what you are saying, defend it, try to make it rational, point out logical fallacies, those kinds of things. So with that kind of approach to the blog I’m not surprised that it would provoke that kind of reaction. If you take something that somebody cherishes and is an aspiration and a dream and you say that it is a myth — it’s actually a little bit dangerous.

In contrast, Rachael was a member of Canada’s 2012 Paralympic team and a definite para-sport insider, and yet she was wary of commenting on AthletesFirst. She said:
The ones that comment — you might get the same group [commenting] because they are specifically reading it and wanting to comment almost every time. Cause they feel they can put their input out there on the blog and say ‘Well I agree with this’ or ‘I disagree’ … I don’t comment on every little thing, you know? I’m still learning. I think I don’t comment on certain things because I don’t want to be criticized or I don’t know — maybe it’s just insecurity on my part.

Yet despite several participants expressing concerns that their comments would not be well received by others, this fear appeared to be largely unfounded. Although individuals commenting on the blog quite often premised their posts in some way that established their authority on the topic being discussed (for example, they stated that they were speaking from their own experience as an athlete with a disability, a para-sport coach, and so forth), I found no examples of readers challenging another person’s right to participate. That is to say, other readers might have engaged with the topic and presented an alternative opinion, but generally, all readers were welcome to contribute. For example, Meyrick and Larry were frequent sparring opponents on the blog but they limited themselves to attacking other’s ideas rather than making the issue more personal. Meyrick described the situation by saying:

Larry, to his credit, he’s consistent. It’s quite predictable what he is going to say. And he’s opinionated and he has his stance ... As much as I don’t enjoy his comments, they do get other people to comment. And I don’t know how I am perceived on there but having people who come in with an opinion and lay it down will generate more, will take 10 comments to 30 comments. So that’s really good.

In fact, none of the participants I spoke with ever suggested that other readers had overstepped or were speaking to issues on which they had no authority. It was far more common to hear participants state that they wished more people would get involved, both insiders and outsiders, and that the blog would only be enriched by increased participation.

5.5 Discussion: Between Intimate Public Sphere and Promotional Tool

When Mary, Shelley Ann, and Kathy described AthletesFirst as a private party, they were experiencing what Berlant (2008) referred to as “the intimate public sphere” (p. viii). The intimate public sphere, wrote Berlant (2008), is not conditional on “autobiographical confession and chest-baring” (p. viii). Rather, the intimate public sphere is the result of a coming together of
individuals who “already share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience” (Berlant, 2008, p. viii). Kathy’s observation that there was a “like-mindedness” among blog readers and those commenting on the blog and Shelley Ann’s exclamation that people were “talking her language” indicate that they recognized their own lives in the content posted on AthletesFirst. This recognition of collective experiences and common identities in autobiographical narratives is a prerequisite for the establishment of an intimate public sphere according to Berlant (2008).

Berlant’s assertion that personal, first person narratives can be viewed as the basis for the formation of collective identities was based on her reading of contemporary mass-produced texts including novels, plays, television, and movies. Morrison (2011) further developed the concept of the intimate public sphere with regards to blogs and the practice of blogging. Her cyberethnography, as she terms it, of ‘mommy blogs’ (blogs written by mothers that generally describe experiences related to motherhood and parenting) offers some interesting insight into the AthletesFirst project. First of all, Morrison (2011) states that, while Berlant’s concept of intimate public sphere was premised on a reading of popular cultural texts, the narratives that Berlant drew upon were circulated by broadcast mediums and were intended as communications from one to many. Morrison (2011) and others (cf. Baumer et al., 2011) have reported that while blogs are technically texts from one producer to many consumers, they are commonly described by bloggers and blog readers as mediums for communicating one-to-one or one-to-few. That is to say that they feel like private spaces to the individuals who use them despite being accessible to a broad public (Baym, 2010; Norman, 2012). According to Morrison (2011), the sense of “one-to-one-ness of these blogs is manifest[ed] in feelings of connection and mutual obligation, of the blogger to write, and of the reader to comment or otherwise participate” (p. 45). The feeling of connectedness or belonging is reinforced by feedback loops when bloggers and blog readers communicate through a series of channels both on the blog (using the comment section) and off (in face-to-face interactions, by email, by Twitter, on Facebook, and so forth) (Keller, 2012; Morrison, 2011).

While only a few participants (Mary, Kathy, and Shelley Ann) outright referenced AthletesFirst as an intimate space, participants frequently supported the notion that blogs are circulated on the basis of existing social networks and that this was what made them feel like insider spaces. Not a single one of the 20 participants interviewed simply stumbled across the
blog; most participants first read AthletesFirst because of cross-posts on blogs they were already reading or because of links friends and teammates posted on Facebook. For example, Mike and Lelainia followed a link on Josh’s blog, Darren linked from Meyrick’s blog, a few individuals said they found AthletesFirst by reading Jason’s blog, and several others (Jeff, Kathy, Larry, Mary, and Rob) were referred to AthletesFirst by links shared by family members or teammates. The preponderance of para-triathletes included in the sample can also be traced back to a networked system of connections; the para-triathlon community in Canada and the United States is very tightly knit²⁸ and when I put out the call for participants it was quickly circulated through existing channels. Finally, some participants started reading the blog because they saw the link being shared repeatedly within personal and work-related online networks (mainly Twitter) and, while they initially ignored it, they eventually clicked on the link to find out what it was about (Jan, Calum, Stuart, Courtenay, and Maria). Furthermore, throughout the interviews, nearly every participant stated that they knew one of the blog team members or a guest blogger on the AthletesFirst’s site. Knowing another person who wrote for or read the blog sometimes meant knowing them in person (for example, Leona knew Jason and Stuart M. from their participation in local running clubs) but was also used to describe purely online relationships (for example, Lelainia read Josh’s blog and they had communicated on Twitter leading her to assert that she knew Josh despite having never meet him offline). Thus, there was considerable crossover between the participants’ pre-existing networks and the networked space of AthletesFirst. This was also consistent with Morrison’s (2011) finding that the intimate sphere of blogs includes multi-directional communication through a variety of platforms rather than the one-to-many communication originally described by Berlant (2008).

As was observed by Morrison (2011), participants in this project also described feeling obligated to the networks that they participated in. For example, Meyrick explained how despite a very busy schedule that included a young family, a new business, and his own athletic training, he made time to read and comment on new posts because he felt a sense of ownership and commitment to the project:

²⁸ Para-triathlon is a new sport at the 2016 Paralympics Games and many Facebook and Twitter groups of para-triathletes were formed during the campaign to have the sport added to the program.
I want it [AthletesFirst] to work because I sort of feel a little ownership … I certainly find that interaction rewarding or else I wouldn’t take so much time to write those things. You’ll notice my comments always come in at like one in the morning. I’m staying up late or getting up at five in the morning ‘cause I want to be a part of it.

However, Meyrick was not only a para-sport insider, he was also involved in the early conceptualization of the project. Not all participants felt the same sense of obligation to AthletesFirst; some reported reading every post as soon as it was written, others said they visited every few weeks and read several posts at a time, and some reported that they had only read a couple of posts or that they only visited the blog when something happened to remind them about it (for example, seeing a friend share the link on Facebook). Likewise, there was substantial variation in their habits around commenting. My own analysis of the posts and comments on the blog indicate that Meyrick, Larry, Courtney, Lelainia, and I commented on most posts while Josh, Blair, and Mary commented on many posts, and all others commented occasionally or only once (the reading and commenting behaviours of participants is displayed in Table 3.2). This finding also speaks to Baym’s (2010) observation that it can be through the differentiation of roles within an online community that a sense of belonging forms. On the AthletesFirst blog, some individuals took it upon themselves to comment on nearly every post and felt an obligation to do so. In some instances, this was because they enjoyed receiving comments when they wrote a post and they, therefore, assumed that other authors would also appreciate receiving comments. In other cases, it was because they saw themselves as having a role to play in furthering the discussion by challenging and/or contradicting others comments. Still other readers felt little or no obligation to comment but they set aside time to read believing that a thoughtful well-crafted post deserved their full attention. But regardless of the role adopted, there was a sense of reciprocity among the individuals I interviewed that is consistent with the literature on the potential for Web platforms to foster belonging or connectedness (Baym, 2010; Keller, 2012; Morrison, 2011; Norman, 2012).

29 One of the inspirations for this project was reading Meyrick’s blog and seeing the types of conversations he was able to generate. I had originally asked him to be part of the blog team and, while he declined because of other commitments, he had many suggestions and ideas for the blog team that were eventually applied in the construction and design of AthletesFirst.
While Morrison’s (2011) research also focused on blogs and blogging, the genre of blog she targeted and the demographic of the bloggers were different from the AthletesFirst project in a few critical aspects. Seventy-five percent of the personal mommy blogs surveyed by Morrison (2011) had audiences of between zero and 100 readers per day. These numbers are not vastly different from the number of visitors to AthletesFirst (over the course of the project, the number of visitors per day ranged anywhere from 1 to 182). What is different is that, at AthletesFirst, every effort was made to expand the audience whereas Morrison (2011) reported that the majority of the personal mommy bloggers she interviewed took steps to actively limit the size of their audiences! The two different approaches, limiting the audience versus growing the audience, can be attributed to the different objectives of the bloggers. Morrison (2011) reported that the mommy bloggers typically started their blogs as a form of online journal. Over time, they not only attracted an audience but they also formed networks with other mommy bloggers and with readers. These networks provided them with emotional support and practical information and advice and the relationships formed within these networks became the reason for them to continue blogging. Many of the mommy bloggers felt that it was the intimacy of these networks that was attractive and that they had no need or desire to expand the networks\textsuperscript{30} (Morrison, 2011). In contrast, as evidenced by the descriptions readers and writers provided of their envisioned or desired audiences, it is clear that AthletesFirst was never intended as only a space for insiders. Even while recognizing that there was value in para-athletes connecting with other para-athletes, all participants felt (albeit to varying degrees) that the audience for the blog was those with loose ties to the Paralympic Movement and those with no ties at all (at least not yet). Shelley Ann used the analogy that the people writing for and commenting on the blog were “singing from the same hymnbook” but this does not mean that the participants wanted to preach to the choir. Rather, they were interested in reaching new audiences including: individuals with disabilities not yet involved with para-sport, mainstream populations who they felt could/should learn a greater appreciation for para-sport, and individuals and organizations that had actively discriminated against athletes with disabilities and deserved to be called out. While, at times,

\textsuperscript{30} They also spoke of the potential risks associated with sharing information online that might allow strangers to identify them, their families, or their communities.
participants experienced AthletesFirst as an intimate public sphere, the goal of the blog (as described by participants) was always to reach outward to new audiences.

Fraser (1990) has argued that it is the dualistic nature of public spheres that makes Habermas’ theory so powerful. In fact, the conflicting descriptions of AthletesFirst characterizing the blog as being simultaneously inward facing (a place for insiders) and outward reaching (a place to reach new audiences) are consistent with Fraser’s description of the benefit of public spheres to subordinate groups. Fraser (1990) has stated that:

On one hand, they [public spheres] function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics. It is precisely in the dialectic between these two functions that their emancipatory potential resides (p. 68).

While Fraser (1990) contends that Habermas’ theory of public spheres revolutionized social movement theories by recognizing that talk or discourse could be a form of political participation, she has also asserted that for public spheres to fulfill their promise, there must be avenues for the discourses produced by subaltern counterpublics to reach a broader public and to eventually inform action or policy. This leaves me to conclude that, while the readers and writers of the AthletesFirst blog might have at times held ambivalent views regarding who was reading the blog or who should be the audience for the blog, this ambivalence is characteristic of public spheres and is an indication of the multiple functions that blog-based public spheres can play within new social movements. The following chapter further explores the link between the online discussions and debates that took place on AthletesFirst and the other (offline and online) activist and advocacy projects engaged in by project participants.
Chapter 6: Advocates

I like to look at the big picture of what sports can do for somebody who is blind or para ... It’s just thinking about what can be done and where it can go. It’s a never-ending process. And you know what the ultimate goal is? Well I don’t know if there is such a thing honestly.

– Terry

6.1 Introduction to ‘Advocates’

The previous chapter explored who was perceived to be the intended audience for the AthletesFirst blog. However, understanding who was being targeted as the readers for the blog is only one part of comprehending what the blog was for. This chapter delves into what blog team members were trying to accomplish when they wrote the posts and where this project fit within the broader scope of our ongoing advocacy for and promotion of disability sport. It also explores how participants in this project, those individuals reading and contributing to the online discussions, saw the Web as opening up new opportunities to engage in advocacy and activism (RQ2). This is followed by specific examples of action in which the AthletesFirst project played a role (major or minor). Finally, this chapter concludes with a broader discussion of the ways in which participants perceived the Paralympic Movement (in terms of individual actors but also more collectively) to be leveraging the affordances of the technology (RQ3).

6.2 Honey or Vinegar: How Do We Advocate For Para-sport?

The last post made on the blog at the close of the project was one that I wrote myself (with contributions from Courtney) entitled ‘Honey or vinegar: How do we advocate for para-sport?’. This post was based on an issue that had been raised several times during the interviews as well as during a discussion Courtney and I had had when working on a project to integrate athletes with disabilities into a large, mainstream sporting event. The question that I asked of readers was, when promoting para-sport, did they have more success by demanding inclusion (the vinegar approach) or by politely requesting inclusion (the honey approach)? The following is an excerpt from my blog post:

As a supporter of para-sport and a local volunteer/coach for a para-nordic program, I am often in the position of having to liaise with race organizers. There are basically two approaches you can take, the first being what I will call the vinegar approach — you go to the race organizers and inform them that athletes with a disability will be participating
and you’d like to discuss with them the accommodations that need to happen in order to facilitate this. Basically, you send off the vibe that you assume they will cooperate or they risk being called out on the basis of discrimination ... The second approach, the honey approach, is less confrontational — you send a friendly message asking if it would be possible to include some athletes with a disability in their event ... You [say] that you are so thankful they are supporting this endeavour. Personally I’ve seen both methods used with varying degrees of success — and seen both encounter resistance (Posted on February 15, 2013).

Eight comments were posted on the blog in response (including one I wrote and another by Courtney). Though the actual number of replies was not particularly high, the detail and the complexity of the comments were impressive (several were in excess of 400 words long) and individuals who had never before posted made a few of the comments.

I also observed that the post was being discussed on other platforms, particularly Twitter, where it appeared to have garnered some momentum. The link was retweeted by athletes (mostly Canadians but I also recognized a few Paralympians from other nations as well) and by organizations (including the Canadian Paralympic Committee and the International Paralympic Committee). Figure 4 is a screenshot of the link to the post being circulated by the Canadian Paralympic Committee and subsequently discussed on Twitter by two project participants, Jan and Leona. Leona later posted a more elaborate reply on the blog itself where she discussed how her personal approach to advocating for para-sport had evolved over the years. She said that while she had started out with a honey approach, it had often left her feeling powerless. In her words:

I have decided that I need to keep the power on my side. I have adopted the vinegar approach, but with a little spoon of honey. I now approach races telling them how excited I am about their race, and that in order for me to participate safely, I have a few simple accommodations … I sign off saying “see you on race day”. I don’t give them the option of saying no. I keep the power so that if they do say no, I can respond with confidence (Posted on February 17, 2013).
This particular post raised some interesting points, and as previously stated, encouraged a few individuals to comment for the first time. However, what I found to be most fascinating about it was that I realized that we had never really discussed advocacy on the AthletesFirst blog before. That is to say, although the blog was used to discuss the promotion of disability sport, the
Inclusion/exclusion of athletes with disabilities, stereotypes related to disability, and other issues that I personally considered to be part of an advocacy agenda, the actual topic of advocacy, including how we went about engaging in advocacy or what it meant to be an advocate, was never discussed.

6.3 AthletesFirst: A Launchpad For Advocacy

In the previous two chapters, ‘Authors’ and ‘Audiences,’ the point was made that participants perceived AthletesFirst to be a means of connecting with different audiences. In many ways, the issues of intended audiences and the use of the blog as a form of advocacy were two sides of the same coin. The particular audience that the author was targeting with each post was highly dependent on what they were trying to accomplish by writing. Rachael even made a direct connection between outreach and advocacy in the previously quoted statement when she said that the intended audience for AthletesFirst was “everyone” because everyone needed to be educated on the subject of para-sport and to learn to appreciate the skill and hard work required to be a Paralympic athlete. However, teaching or informing people about para-sport was only one of the ways in which the AthletesFirst blog was used as a platform for advocacy. In total, participants perceived three ways in which the blog related to or encouraged advocacy, namely: the promotion of and engagement in insider debates, the education of outsider audiences, and the calls for changes to discriminatory practices or policies.

Examples of insider debates included the previously mentioned post by Josh and Courtney debating the use of the terms para and adaptive. But where do these insider debates fit within the context of advocacy? As already discussed in Chapter 5, intimate public spheres provide individuals with a place to negotiate collective identities and to have discussions that are perceived to be of interest only to insiders, but it is highly contested as to whether or not these spheres have the ability to inform or instigate action given that they are, by definition, not in conversation with other dominant publics (Morrison, 2011). Yet in the interviews with authors and readers of AthletesFirst, many of these insider posts were described as “topic[s] worthy of discussion” (Rob) with the added caveat that they were the stories that were missing from other, more mainstream, forums.

When I interviewed Courtney at the conclusion of the project and asked her what her objective had been in writing that first post and whether or not she considered it to have been
successful, her response shed some light on how insider conversations could contribute to advocacy projects. Courtney felt that there was value in debating these issues with other athletes because if they could arrive at an agreement as to where the group stood on a particular issue, they could then enter into negotiations with outsiders while also demonstrating a united front. For example, Courtney had served as a representative for athletes with a disability on various committees and boards. For years, she had wanted the organizations she worked with to start using the word ‘adaptive’ as opposed to the prefix ‘para’ (for example, adaptive rowing and adaptive skiing versus para-rowing or para-skiing) or the acronym ‘AWAD’ (short for ‘athletes with a disability’ and commonly used in Sport Canada programs and policies). However, she believed that her request was frequently dismissed because people felt this was her personal campaign and not a widely held opinion. She had hoped that addressing the issue on the AthletesFirst blog would provide her with a clear mandate (one way or another) that she could then take to these organizations by way of evidence that she had the support of the larger community of athletes with a disability. She said:

[The targeted audience was] athletes with a disability to see what the majority consensus was. Because maybe I’m the one out in left field — I feel very strongly about [this issue]. But if out of a hundred athletes, 98 of them go ‘No — I like being called an AWAD’ and they have good reasons for it, then there’s no reason in [me] promoting the position that we need to change the language because obviously I’m the minority.

Courtney maintained that although the blog might start as a conversation among insiders, it was possible for these debates to inform and influence interactions with outsiders and, in this way, the blog could be a form of advocacy. Whereas no other participants made such a direct link between insider conversations and negotiations with mainstream sport organizations, several described the AthletesFirst blog as playing an important role in the involvement of more athletes with disabilities in the politics of sport. For example, when I asked Mary to elaborate on why she felt the AthletesFirst blog was a worthwhile project, she said:

I would love to see more athletes discussing issues within the Paralympic Games — and not just the games but the movement or the community … I would love to see that type of thing because … I think able-bodied people sort of run the show and I think more and more you’re seeing people with disabilities getting involved in their own sports … It’s kind of like women’s sports, it started with a lot of men doing the organizing and
coaching and refereeing and now, as the sports grow, there are more women in those roles, which is a good thing … I think it’s good to have more people with disabilities involved in the organization and running of it, so yeah I would like to see more conversations — [about] politics and ideas and experiences and that sort of thing.

Although Mary did not directly explain how reading blog posts would translate into more athletes with disabilities getting involved in the organization and running of disability sport, she indicated that she felt that having these conversations generally contributed to making athletes aware of the issues and could thereby contribute to a political awakening of sorts.

The next type of advocacy in which AthletesFirst played a role was in reaching out to outsiders with the intent of educating them about disability sport and the Paralympic Movement. This form of advocacy was closely associated with the finding presented in Chapter 5 whereby the blog was described as a “window onto para-sports” (Rachael). The purpose of these posts was to inform individuals, with the underlying assumption that people who understood para-sport were more likely to get involved and/or more likely to be supportive of para-sport and athletes with disabilities. Examples of these types of posts were a guest post by Jeremy about the bobsled program for people with disabilities entitled ‘Adaptive bobsled: The next Paralympic sport?’, one by Courtney entitled ‘Too blind to be sighted/Too sighted to be blind’ about her experiences of joining an able-bodied rowing program, and a guest post by JP entitled ‘Para-tri: The art of the transition’ which discussed his decision to give up cycling and train for paratriathlon instead. None of these posts were particularly juicy by Meyrick’s standards in that the topics they discussed were not generally controversial. Rather, they were personal narratives as to how individuals were navigating the sport system. The following example is an excerpt from Courtney’s post:

When I first met the team, I was up front about my vision and stated that I would likely make mistakes when trying to identify everyone. Everyone seemed to be understanding, but now that there are still six guys I don’t know [because I can’t tell them apart], I’m wondering what I could have done differently to make it easier. Should I be going to workouts with a white cane? That would remind everyone why I am not the most graceful (read: clumsy) person around the boathouse. It would also mean I have a white cane in my hands, making it harder to move oars and boats. Plus, it would make me feel like a hypocrite — I don’t typically use a white cane in my daily life except for crossing busy streets without stoplights so why would I emphasize it at workouts? Having said that, maybe my teammates already think I’m a hypocrite in that I say I am legally blind,
but manage without a white cane or a guide dog. It sometimes feels that sighted people think there are only two levels of sight in the world — blind and fully sighted — and if you happen to fall somewhere in the middle, well that just confuses everyone (Posted on January 3rd, 2013).

What was particularly interesting about these types of posts was that they attracted comments by individuals involved in the sport system in some sort of official capacity. For example, two rowing coaches employed by regional and national governing bodies both commented on Courtney’s post using their full names. They thanked Courtney for sharing her experience, congratulated the rowing club on their efforts to include athletes with a disability in their programs, and took the opportunity to promote para-rowing initiatives that they were working on. Likewise, Jeremy’s post on adaptive bobsled also received comments from coaches/sport administrators involved in adaptive bobsled programs. This was unusual in that, while various organizations, including the Canadian Paralympic Committee and the International Paralympic Committee, regularly advertised AthletesFirst through their official Twitter accounts or on their Facebook pages, they (or rather their employees) rarely offered any comment. Given the small number of instances in which this occurred and without talking directly to any of the individuals involved, it would be premature for me to conclude why those working in official capacities within the sport system commented on some posts but not on others. However, I think it at least plausible that these ‘honey’ type posts were viewed by the organizations and their employees as aligned with their own strategies for promoting para-sport and were thus considered safe and appropriate posts on which to comment whereas other, more controversial posts, were seen as best left alone.

Figure 5 Tweet by Rowing Canada Aviron's 'Para-rowing' account in response to Courtney's blog post.
The final way in which the blog posts were described as a form of advocacy was in the use of juicy posts to attack or challenge policies and practices that the author perceived to be discriminatory or unjust. These posts, which I termed the vinegar posts, were more aggressive in tone than the honey posts. In addition to the previously discussed post by Meyrick on the qualifying times for the Boston Marathon and the Kona Ironman, other examples of vinegar posts included Joan’s second guest blog entitled ‘Para-athletes excluded from local races ... again ...’, Kathy’s guest post entitled ‘Coaches with a disability: Should we or shouldn’t we?’, and Ryan’s guest post entitled ‘Defining advantage: The black out glasses rule.’ All of these posts used personal experiences to describe how a particular policy or rule had impacted the author’s own sport involvement and why they felt these policies were inherently discriminatory. Though the authors, for the most part, refrained from actually naming individuals or specific organizations, the level of detail they provided was specific enough that readers involved in the same sport would likely be able to identify the incident described or the individuals involved. Thus, even without publically naming the event or the participants, there was still the possibility that the post could be used to challenge or even shame the individuals involved. The following is an excerpt from Joan’s post:

Will things ever be fair and equal in adaptive sport? I have just been the victim of another situation where adaptive athletes are being excluded from events. I attempted to register for a cross-country ski race that is being held in a few weeks. I looked at the race notice and realized that there were no para-nordic categories. So I emailed the race organizer and was told that it was too late to change. They did not think that any para-athletes were interested in racing. So tell me this: How do you know if anyone is interested unless you give them the opportunity to sign up? ... In checking into this further, it appears that some
race organizers feel that adaptive categories should only be offered by request … and that requests need to be made up to 6 or 8 months in advance so that the courses and schedules can be set. I would completely disagree. Do the able-bodied teams know that far in advance which races they will be attending? I doubt it … Don’t we as adaptive people have enough challenges in trying to keep fit? Having to remind race organizers every single season that we are here and want to race is getting a little old (Posted on November 26, 2012).

Though the authors were not shy about expressing their frustration and anger, it should also be noted that in all cases, they also proposed some concrete ideas for solutions and generally offered to work with the groups involved.

6.4 Taking It Offline

While it is difficult to trace if any of the posts made on AthletesFirst effected the kinds of changes that the authors were hoping for, I was able to confirm that the blog was, at the very least, starting new conversations. As mentioned in Chapter 5, many of the participants who regarded the blog first and foremost as a site for insiders also thought that friends and family not involved in para-sport would not be interested in reading AthletesFirst. As a result, they were frequently surprised when someone they did not realize was reading the blog mentioned it in casual conversation or offered an opinion on one of the posts. For example, Mary and Kathy spent most of their winters skiing — but, in the summer, they liked to travel in their recreational vehicle and they had become good friends with a group of women who often camped together. But this group knew very little about Mary’s sport involvement and, according to her, few would have known that she had been a competitor in the Paralympic Games. Thus, Kathy was quite surprised when one of the women commented on an AthletesFirst post that Mary had linked to her Facebook page. Kathy said:

That’s wow — I mean they are all from the U.S. (laughs) — so I thought that was cool. And I mean they had an opinion about it. And I don’t know if they went on the blog and wrote on it but they certainly did [write] on Mary’s Facebook [page] … I thought that was fascinating. We’re indirectly influencing our group of friends that would never come together [around para-sport]. They are RV’ers. They have nothing to do with Paralympic sport. So that’s kind of neat.
Other participants described similar situations where they realized that individuals they assumed would have no interest in para-sports had been reading the blog. I was not exempt from this phenomenon as, on several occasions, I was stopped by parents of friends, classmates, and teammates asking me for an update on one of the blog team members or telling me that they had enjoyed a recent post. Other graduate students also informed me that undergraduate students were citing the AthletesFirst blog in course papers or were using it as an example in class presentations. Moreover, even as I was constantly recruiting guest bloggers to write for our site, I was occasionally recruited to write for other blogs. A post of mine was featured on the Website of the International Paralympic Committee on the occasion of International Women’s Day (the post discussed how the Paralympics were trailing the Olympics in the inclusion of women) and another post of mine on the history of disability sport was published on the London School of Economics’ Access and Diversity blog on the eve of the Olympic Games in London.

Authors and readers also discussed using the AthletesFirst blog to raise or legitimize a particular topic in conversations with outsiders. As previously described, Courtney said that one of her objectives when writing a post was to find out where the community stood on an issue. While Courtney did not feel that her first post was entirely successful, she was not the only one to say that citing or referencing the blog could be a useful tactic when advocating for change. For example, there was also the previously mentioned post by Meyrick about the Boston Marathon and Kona Ironman qualifying times. He said that if he ever encountered an individual who was in a position to actually initiate the kinds of changes he was advocating for (for example, one of the race organizers), he would direct them to the AthletesFirst blog and encourage them to read that post. Although his own blog had quite a large readership — probably larger than the audience for AthletesFirst — he believed that because our blog was produced by a group of individuals who were highly involved in the disability sport community, his post would carry more weight if it were published there. However, this was a double-edged sword in that Meyrick acknowledged that not everyone who commented on the post on AthletesFirst was in agreement with what he had proposed. As previously stated, Meyrick said that although he felt there was value in having the post on the AthletesFirst blog, he worried that his plan could backfire if it became known that the community was split on the issue. The following is an excerpt from our conversation:
[Andrea]: Did anyone disagree? I’m trying to remember.

[Meyrick]: Oh lots of them did. They were like ‘Oh you’re making it so less of us can do those [events].’ And I was like ‘Yup, that’s the whole point. It’s elite. There’s a gazillion marathons and you can enter any one you want but this one is supposed to be elite.’

While Meyrick had, at other points in the interview, indicated that he enjoyed the debates and hearing different sides to arguments, when it came to using the blog to engage with outsiders, he felt that displays of dissent among insiders could potentially diffuse the message he was trying to convey.

Josh also provided an example of how he personally made use of the AthletesFirst blog. As Josh was being interviewed by a former Olympic athlete for a Website that features Canadian amateur athletes, the issue of independence in the context of people with disabilities was raised. Rather than explaining why he found it difficult as an athlete with a disability to have to ask for assistance in certain situations, he directed the reporter to a post I had written entitled ‘The myth of independence.’ He described the situation and said:

Well the personal highlight for me was when you wrote about your theory of interdependence based on my documentary31. That was pretty cool … I talked about it a lot. I was getting interviewed on SportCafé.ca … he asked me a similar question — ‘Why don’t you like to ask for help?’ I was able to point him to your article and was able to talk about your theory of interdependence. And he said ‘Oh wow — that’s true. If I can help someone right away then it doesn’t bother me to ask them for help. But I hate doing it as well.’ So for an able-bodied Olympian it’s the same thing.’

Josh was able to use a blog post as a way of introducing a topic he often found difficult to explain. The blog once again acted as a repository for ideas and as a tool for engaging someone in conversation — and, in this instance, enabled an able-bodied athlete and an athlete with a disability to connect over a shared experience.

31 The post had been inspired by a short documentary about Josh on a Webseries entitled Ripple.
6.5 Blogging As a Form of Advocacy

As previously stated, three of the blog team members (Courtney, Josh, and Jason) and nine of the 20 participants had personal blogs and/or wrote for other blogs associated with work or other organizations to which they belonged. The style and subject matter of these blogs was extremely varied. For example, Courtney and Jason’s blogs were used to update friends, family, and sponsors on their most recent sport exploits. Lelainia used her blog as a place to share her multi-media artwork and write about projects she was working on. Karen actually had three blogs: one documenting her experiences with multiple sclerosis, one with quirky life observations, and a third that included a “bucket list” of things she wanted to do/accomplish. Jan had just introduced a blog component to her company’s Website (her company provides public relations and marketing services to athletes with a disability among other services).

Some of the blogs were more explicitly used as a form of outreach or political engagement than others, but even the personal blogs written in the style of training diaries or travel logs had an element of advocacy. For example, Rachael spoke extensively of how important it was for Paralympians like herself to share their stories so that young people growing up with a disability would have role models and would know that others had faced the same challenges. Her belief that her blog could be a means of encouraging the next generation of Paralympians was confirmed when she started receiving emails and questions from young readers. She described the experience and said:

I had a young girl actually read my blog. She was maybe about 12. And she said, ‘I read your blog.’ And she was asking a lot of questions about how I got into sports, when did I start, did I think that she could get into it — that sort of thing … And I’m glad to help. I’m glad that my blog or my Facebook page is being that sort of outreach for someone.

Rachael also reflected that, in addition to offering support to others, she also received enormous support from readers:

I don’t post on it every day but every once in a while, you know, if I have a thought or I need to vent, I’ll write a post. And it comes in handy … I have a big support system. So they’ll say, ‘What’s going on?’ Those sorts of things. ‘Do you need someone to talk to?’ … Cause it’s hard to have someone here in my city who understands what I am doing … There still is some frustration because I’m the only para-athlete in athletics from [my
Having social networking is a huge thing … To just [be able to] say, ‘Listen, this is what is going on. I’m frustrated.’

Meyrick had also started his blog with the intent of reaching out to support and assist other amputees wanting to get involved in sport. While he occasionally published posts on his blog that were more explicitly political, for the most part, he described his blog as a mix of stories about being an athlete with a below-the-knee amputation and stories about his family:

My two themes were always sport and me and the family. And it was — I tried to, you know, generally I kept it to like 70/30. And often the two overlapped, you know, active living with a family and active living with a disability — those were the themes I worked in.

Like Rachael, Meyrick also reported that several individuals with disabilities contacted him after reading his blog because they had questions, were looking for resources, or just wanted to tell him how much they enjoyed what he was writing. In several instances, he was able to support and mentor these individuals at a distance (online) or in person (offline). For example, I personally observed an ongoing exchange he had online with another amputee in Australia as they both experimented with different swimming strokes to find the most efficient techniques given their specific impairment. In other instances, he had individuals with disabilities seek him out at his personal training gym because they wanted to be coached by another amputee. Meyrick described some of these encounters:

I’ve had two or three people who actually have come and worked with me [at my gym] because they read my blog. Like I worked with a lady who is an amputee — she’s 61. She found it that way. I’m training another guy who is going to need an elective amputation and he trains with me because I think he finds it less daunting when he sees what I am able to do and that I’m happy and normal. And he doesn’t worry so much about losing his own leg because he can see somebody who is doing well with it.

Rachael and Meyrick’s use of their personal blogs echoed the “window onto para-sports” model previously described with regards to the AthletesFirst blog, but unlike AthletesFirst, they were
able to provide concrete examples of individuals who had become involved in para-sports as a result of their outreach.

Other participants were using blogs in ways that were more in keeping with the vinegar approach. For example, Jan explained that she had recently added a blog component to her company’s Website and that she was posting articles written by people with disabilities—a move she described as both risky and rewarding:

[Jan]: When I started [the blog], that was the biggest risk that I had taken with the company so far—it scared the beejezus out of me to be honest. To associate something that is so political to a business. But the benefit—it was one of the best risks I ever took. Cause it got our name out there in minutes.

[Andrea]: Really?

[Jan]: Because again it was coming from the community. We don’t put any stipulations at all on what is sent to us. Yeah. I just put it out I’m looking for a blog—you send it to me and I’ll put it out. There are a couple [of posts] on [the blog] that I really thought about before I put up. Was it worth putting it up because of the potential [for negative backlash]? But at the same time, it’s a blog for the community. It isn’t my voice … I especially think that if you are trying to reach a larger market you need to pay attention to what people are saying at a grassroots level and then amplify that.

When asked what she saw as the purpose of having such a potentially controversial blog on her site, Jan described it as serving a dual role. On one hand, Jan said it was a means of calling out organizations; on the other hand, she said it was also “a chance for some voices not to feel like they are being censored” and for “the voices of the community” to be heard. Therefore, Jan felt that the blog could be helpful both in identifying sites of discrimination and inaccessibility (that could then be the target of interventions by her company) and in engaging with what she called her community, namely athletes with disabilities.

6.6 Blogging and the Paralympic Movement

The previous sections described how participants viewed AthletesFirst and the other blogs they were writing for or reading in terms of their contribution to ongoing advocacy projects. This section explores more generally the ways in which the Paralympic Movement collectively was perceived by participants to be leveraging the affordances of blogging. In doing
so, the field of analysis is expanded from a narrow focus on how individual actors were using blogs to a much broader view that considers blogging within the context of the shared goals and values of the Paralympic Movement.

As stated in Chapter 1, blogging has become de rigueur for amateur athletes (Hutchins & Mikosza, 2010). It might have started as a convenient means for updating friends and family while on the road, but the practice has since evolved and there are now many reasons why athletes blog. Calum, the executive director of an agency that teaches athletes leadership and advocacy skills, explained what he felt were the dual purposes of blogging for athletes:

I think it [blogging] is mostly for their personal promotion … It’s getting their name out there and if they are [of] a certain profile then maybe it’s building a brand for their sponsors … [It is also about] learning how to promote themselves online and building that profile … Then I also think that it’s important to have an outlet as well. So when you’re in the demands of training and it’s tough and it’s hard and you’re frustrated, it’s an outlet. And I think it’s important for athletes. Not necessarily to be outspoken but just to have that creative output to sort of write something and consider issues and be thoughtful.

Calum provided, as an example, the blog that he had created during his final year as a competitive athlete. He used that blog to build a profile that would be useful to him as he transitioned out of sport and into a new career but he also used it to document and reflect upon his experiences. Meyrick closely echoed Calum in his perspective on the various roles that blogs served:

The blog was really dual purpose for me … I like to write and I love photography and it was a good outlet for me. But it also was at a time when I was looking for an opportunity and I needed to do whatever I could to put feelers out in the world and that was a really great way. I mean it got me sponsors, it got me speaking engagements — you know I made money speaking for quite a while.

However, neither Calum’s nor Meyrick’s descriptions of blogging directly addressed the value of blogs specifically for athletes with a disability. While all athletes can use a blog to build their online profile and make themselves attractive to sponsors, blogs can be especially useful to athletes who lack other avenues for self-promotion and have yet to attract the attention of the mainstream media. Stuart, the social media editor for the International Paralympic Committee,
believed this was one of the reasons that blogging was particularly important for Paralympic athletes. He said:

There are specific groups who pick up blogging — whether it’s politicians or athletes or someone who has a story to tell … In regard to athletes, [it is] those who aren’t necessarily written up in the media every single day … It sort of lets them report their own journey … I think that is especially true of Paralympic athletes because … [For example,] in London a lot of athletes weren’t interviewed by the media until [they arrived] in London and that was the first time they were ever interviewed. So in the lead up to London, that is how they sold their stories themselves. They were proactive and they used their own blogs.

This was an issue raised by blog team member Stuart M. in the first round of interviews when he expressed frustration at the lack of media attention paid to Paralympic athletes. Stuart M. said, “It’s extremely difficult to follow Paralympians, I find. Difficult to know when they are racing [and] where they are racing.” Indeed, this was the experience of many participants that I interviewed in the weeks following the 2012 London Paralympics. Despite having close ties with a para-sport community and having a very good working knowledge of the sports, the athletes, and the events, they still found it very challenging to find media coverage beyond the mere online reporting of results. For example, Leona had previously competed on several provincial and national goalball teams and she was close to many of the athletes competing in London. She felt that the lack of coverage of Paralympic sport severely hampered her ability to track her friends’ progress:

I’ve recently started blogging myself. And one of the blogs I posted … was about the frustrations of trying to support my friends while they were in London and I was here … You know, being with so many of them since they first started and being with them through training and trying to maintain those friendships and relationships with them when they were preparing for the Paralympics. And then they get there and I can’t even follow them … Goalball wasn’t even covered. I couldn’t watch a single game.

Although she found that coverage of the athletics events was a bit better (she was able, for example, to watch one of Jason’s races online), Leona’s best source of information was her friends’ blogs, Facebook pages, and Twitter accounts rather than any official media sources. Thus, while high-profile athletes might be able to use blogs to further develop their brand and
market themselves, for other athletes, self-publishing on a blog might be the only publicity they get.

6.7 The IPC and Leveraging Blogging

It is not only that Paralympic athletes might be more reliant on blogs for publicity than their able-bodied counterparts, but it would also appear that the Paralympic Movement is using blogs (and other online platforms) in a way that is inherently different to how these practices have been picked up by other sports-based organizations. As described in Chapter 2, in recent years, a series of contractual agreements between the IOC and the IPC has reinforced the relationship between the Olympic and Paralympic Movements and has largely been credited with ensuring the ongoing financial viability of the Paralympic Games (Purdue, 2013). However, although these contracts have largely resulted in the Paralympic Movement adopting the practices and discourses of their much stronger partner (Purdue, 2013), the IPC’s attitudes toward blogging and other social media is one example of where the two movements have diverged. Even as the IOC has focused on the inherent dangers blogging poses, particularly the possibility that blogs will be used to infringe upon broadcast media rights or as platforms for athletes to post “unexpectedly critical, scandalous or politically charged comments” (Hutchins & Mikosza, 2010, p. 285) that could be damaging to the Olympic brand, the IPC has chosen instead to capitalize upon the potential of blogs to promote the Paralympic Movement. Stuart, as the Editorial and Social Media Co-ordinator for the International Paralympic Committee, was well positioned to comment on the strategy adopted by the IPC with regards to blogging in the lead up to and during the 2012 London Paralympic Games. The following is an excerpt from my interview with Stuart shortly after the London Games:

[Andrea]: What were some of the goals or the strategies going into London around social media and blogging?

[Stuart]: Right before I [started working] here, they [the IPC] [were] more of a corporate organization I guess you could say. And the last couple of years they switched to being athletes first — just like your blog is called. So we wanted the athletes to be the voice, we wanted athletes to speak for us rather than us speaking on behalf of the movement. We wanted athletes to create what was going on. We wanted athletes to blog. We wanted them to be the face of our Website … and we would sort of centre everything around them.
[Andrea]: I was quite pleasantly surprised at how many athletes were blogging and how the IPC was reaching out to make their blogs more visible and profile them. That’s quite a different strategy than the IOC.

[Stuart]: Yeah, it’s not opposite but it is very different to what the IOC did. Because I think their aim is different. They don’t necessarily need to be as proactive. Because they already have all the media covering it [the Olympics] … Versus the IPC — you know you don’t have all the major networks and newspapers covering it so we have to be more proactive in getting online.

Stuart’s description of the IPC’s strategy to showcase content written by Paralympic athletes was supported by my own observations as a regular reader of the IPC Website and a follower of their Twitter account. Indeed, I even had firsthand experience of how IPC staff members were actively searching out bloggers to contribute posts to the IPC’s Website. A few months after AthletesFirst started (and prior to me contacting Stuart for an interview), I received a message from someone at the IPC offices who said that she had read my post on the lack of female guides at the 2010 Paralympic Games (I was one of only two female guides in para-nordic skiing) and asking if I would write the previously mentioned post for International Women’s Day. Not only did I write a post but also included a mention of the AthletesFirst project and a link to our site in the article.

According to Stuart, my experience of writing for the IPC’s site was fairly typical. He said that although posts were edited for grammar, they were rarely censored or otherwise altered:

[Athletes] send me their blogs and basically I just correct it for grammar. If there is something extraordinarily crazy in there we might say ‘can you take this out?’ But I’ve never actually experienced that yet. I think most Paralympic athletes we choose are pretty smart about it. They know that it’s a tool for them to use to their advantage — to promote themselves and whenever they blog we give them a shout out on social media — so they can only hurt themselves.

Stuart went on to elaborate that he fully understood that there was always the possibility that an athlete would publish a post that was openly critical or disparaging of the IPC and/or their partners. Still, he insisted that it was not the IPC’s intent to silence the voices of athletes but rather it was up to the athletes to make sure they were not damaging their own brand by posting outrageous things:
I would say the only big concern is that you never know what those athletes are going to say … But I think it’s more that you know the athlete is liable. It’s not the governing body or their country that’s liable. It’s coming straight from them. So I don’t think it’s too much to worry about. You know if they say something, they are digging themselves a hole.

Additionally, Stuart stated that the IPC understood there to be a difference between posts that were libelous and posts that expressed a strong, albeit controversial, opinion. When asked what he thought made for a good post, he had this to say:

Honestly, just something that is unique. You know, that the athlete has the guts to write [about] the issues that might not have been raised before. That people have been thinking about but have not been discussed. I don’t know if you’ve seen any of Evan O’Hanlan’s blogs on our site? His [posts] get the most readers just because they are so unique and they are something different and he makes them very personal.

Throughout the course of this project, the official IPC Twitter account (jointly managed by Stuart and other IPC employees) regularly promoted posts made on AthletesFirst. Although they did not share the links to all of the articles, they did share many of them and, if there was a correlation between the type of topic being discussed and the likelihood that they would tweet the link, it was not apparent to me. In fact, I was quite surprised to see that some of the posts that I considered to be the most critical of the IPC (and their partners and policies) were shared by the IPC’s Twitter account. While Stuart and others managing the IPC’s online presence might have been on the lookout for posts that were deemed to be too outrageous to publish, in practice, they promoted blogs that engaged in thoughtful, gutsy (or juicy) debates, even when those posts challenged the very actions of the IPC.
Figure 7 International Paralympic Committee tweets the link to a post on AthletesFirst critiquing the media coverage of Paralympic sport.

Figure 8 Blair tweets the link to his post critiquing a news story by ESPN directly to the broadcaster’s Twitter account.

Some participants that I interviewed speculated that the IPC’s apparent support of athlete blogs was consistent with or an extension of the historical ways in which members of the Paralympic Movement have supported each other. For example, Jeff, a coach with two decades of experience with para-sports, had participated in several national and international projects around the development of adaptive sports equipment and resources for para-sports coaches. During our discussion of the ways in which the IPC was leveraging resources and partnerships
(both online and offline), Jeff referenced a culture of sharing and cooperation within the movement:

[Andrea]: They [the IPC] are working with fewer resources than the IOC so they are interested in partnerships — either formal or informal — with people who are also interested in promoting the Paralympic movement?

[Jeff]: I agree with that 100 per cent. I think that comes from the history of everybody sharing. I mean if you go to a world cup, the other countries’ coaches are coaching your athletes while they are on the track. Well that’s changing a bit. But you can go and copy their sleds any time you want — and they are quite happy to see you copying their sleds.

What Jeff is referring to is the historical ways in which members of the Paralympic Movement have worked to support the expansion of disability sport and the inclusion of new participants. For example, while early competitors at the Paralympics competed with the same wheelchairs they used for daily activities, the wheelchairs (and other prosthetic devices) used by athletes today are highly specialized pieces of equipment and the cost of such devices makes them inaccessible to people with disabilities in many countries. The IPC’s solution to this dilemma was to recruit a British-based charity to design low-cost, high performance wheelchairs for tennis, basketball, and wheelchair racing that retail for approximately 75 per cent less than other popular models (IPC Website, 2012, IPC supports design low-cost racing chair). Stuart also discussed a recent project in which staff members at the IPC are working with National Paralympic Committees in developing countries to assist them in the creation of their Websites:

One thing [my colleague] and I have been trying to do is to contact those National Paralympic Committee or athletes in those regions to get them engaged and ask how we can help. Do they want us to create a Facebook page for them? Or one of my main projects is we are creating Websites for National Paralympic Committees that don’t have the resources to do it themselves. So by the end of this year we will probably have the first six or something like that. A few of them have already launched — Zimbabwe was launched recently. We are hoping that if we create them we’ll just have to show them how to update — simple things that they can do and we are here to assist them … We are just trying to get them off the ground.

Though these might seem like fairly small contributions when considering the huge disparities in resources among developed and developing countries, projects like these are indicative of the
IPC’s commitment to support programs and initiatives that provide people with disabilities worldwide with opportunities to participate in sport. Furthermore, it is difficult to imagine the IOC engaging in such hands-on activities as creating a Facebook page for a nation or funding the design of a standardized bobsled or rowing shell to ensure that all countries can afford to send a team to the Games. While these ongoing projects of the IPC might seem incongruent with the more proprietary approach to sport research embodied by the Olympic Movement, it is consistent with how the participants in this project described their own activities to reach out to and support other members of the Paralympic Movement.

6.8 Discussion: The Value of Blogging in Advocating For Para-sport

The IPC defines advocacy as the act of “speaking on behalf of an issue” (International Paralympic Committee, 2010, p. 14). While this definition captures the mechanics of advocacy, it fails to do justice to the passion, anger, frustration, or hope that I heard in the voices of participants when they discussed why they were blogging and what they were trying to accomplish. In contrast, in a recently published book on the politics of advocacy, Stake and Rosu (2012) offered a far more poetic definition:

For human beings, advocacy is a default setting. We seek change for the better; we struggle to protect what we have. Advocacy is a plea for what we want and see needed. Our actions convey our advocacies as much as words. We evolve, we survive, we exist, and we threaten our existence, partly because we are advocates (p. 45).

By this definition, every individual involved in the AthletesFirst project was an advocate. Though our advocacy took on different forms, including writing, commenting, reposting a link, or simply reading, all of us were trying to change things for the better and to make a plea for the kind of sport that we wanted to see.

Nowhere on the AthletesFirst blog was there posted a mission statement. The page entitled ‘About this blog’ simply indicated that the site was the result of a collaboration between five athletes with disabilities and a graduate student and had been designed with the purpose of exploring “how the Internet can be used by people with a common interest (in this case, disability sport) to discuss topics of concern to them” (AthletesFirst.ca, What is AthletesFirst?, 2011). When asked to contribute a post, guest authors were simply instructed to write about
whatever they wanted, provided their articles: (1) had something to do with sport; (2) had something to do with disability; and (3) could engage an audience. As a blog team, beyond one initial email conversation when we were selecting a name, we never even discussed what we meant by “disability sport.” What we had instead was a shared understanding that sport was something we all enjoyed and believed to be worth pursuing but that current sport practices often failed to address the needs of athletes with disabilities.

Yet defining the reason for the blog’s existence was not necessary. As Stake and Rosu (2012) state, “advocacy is a default setting.” When asked to write about or discuss disability sport, individuals knew immediately that the blog was a space to explore and debate the current state of sport and the ways in which sport could be made better. That’s not to say that everyone who participated in the AthletesFirst project had a common vision for the future of disability sport or the changes that needed to be made. Nothing could be further from the truth. Every post presented a strong point of view and every post elicited comments from readers who agreed, disagreed, or took an entirely different approach to the issue. What we agreed upon was that there was value in having these debates and that writing and talking about them was one step toward creating change. Even those individuals who only read the blog (the lurkers) were part of this contract by reading AthletesFirst they were at the very least opening themselves up to the possibility that, by reading, they would be persuaded to change their ideas or their behaviours.

I originally wrote the post ‘Honey or vinegar: How do we advocate for para-sports?’ based on my personal experiences of advocating offline for the inclusion of athletes with disabilities in mainstream sporting events, but the issues raised in the post and the ensuing comments provided a useful framework for understanding how the blog itself could be a form of advocacy. The honey approach to advocacy was exemplified in the posts that attempted to reach out, to inform, and to entice individuals to become more engaged in the Paralympic Movement. These posts, despite being described by Terry as not being very progressive or radical, and dismissed by Meyrick and Josh as neither juicy nor meaty, were nonetheless widely distributed on Twitter and Facebook. Where the honey posts sought to generally foster an environment where disability sport could flourish, the authors of the vinegar posts had very specific targets in mind and clearly defined ideas about the changes they wanted to see. They wrote posts and distributed the link in an effort to reach their intended audiences and they thought strategically
about how they could maximize the impact of their posts and increase the likelihood that they would result in action.

Social movements have always mixed honey and vinegar and engaged in actions that include outreach, education, and confrontation (Earl & Kimport; Meikle, 2002; Meyer & Whittier, 1994). The test for members of social movements is to make sense of and evaluate the tools and tactics available to them and to make strategic decisions about when and where to act. As discussed in Chapter 2, the Internet has added a further degree of complexity to this task by affording advocates new ways of engaging in activism (Earl & Kimport, 2011; Meikle, 2002). While some groups have been particularly adept at recognizing the novel opportunities provided by the Internet, others have chiefly used the technologies in ways that mimic older tactics (even if they do reduce the cost previously associated with strategies or allow for the group to reach a much larger audience than before) (Earl & Kimport, 2011; Meikle, 2002). As evidenced in the findings presented in this chapter, the Paralympic Movement is an example of a new social movement that is well positioned to leverage the opportunities enabled by computer-mediated communication technologies. Recognizing that the IPC does not have the resources\(^\text{32}\) necessary to compete with the IOC when it comes to attracting media attention or sponsorship, the IPC has opted instead to capitalize on the low-cost options that Web-based platforms provide. As stated by Stuart, the IPC is using its Website, staff, and partners to support, facilitate, and amplify the voices of the disability sport community. Working in collaboration with athletes, national sport organizations, and others, the IPC has used the Internet to advocate for and promote the Paralympic Games. As suggested by Della Porta and Mosca (2005), the Paralympic Movement has demonstrated that the Internet might be more valuable to newer, less centralized, less established movements compared to older movements (like the IOC) that are not as flexible in the way they operate and thus are poorly positioned to take advantage of the new technologies.

AthletesFirst is only one blog. It is very difficult to identify if and how the online discussions that occurred over the course of the project contributed to any change that improved the lives of those involved or that contributed (in some small way) to a more just society. However, I am reminded by Reid et al. (2006) that even when it is not possible to identify

\(^{32}\) Resources in the sense of financial resources but also in regards to the historic privileging of able-bodied Olympic sport over disability sport.
outcomes, it is possible to identify ‘actions.’ There were examples of individuals who read the blog and changed their opinions on a particular issue, of conversations that started between friends and family members because of a blog post, and of relationships and networks formed between blog readers and writers. Despite little concrete evidence, blog team members, guest authors and readers believed that, under the right conditions, these actions could contribute to making the world that we live in more like the world that we wanted.
Chapter 7: Conclusions and Implications

I would love to see more athletes discussing issues within the Paralympic Games—or not just the games but the movement or community so to speak. That’s what I would love to see, discussions around that.

— Mary

In three preceding chapters, I used the framework of authors, audiences, and advocates to organize, document, and discuss the objectives of the blog team as we embarked on this project and the eventual ways in which the AthletesFirst blog was adopted and used by others. In this final chapter, I briefly summarize my research findings and conclude my dissertation by examining the broader implications of my project. In particular, I consider how the AthletesFirst blog extends current understandings of the role that blogging can (and does) play within the Paralympic Movement. I also elaborate on the contributions that this work makes to the previously discussed literatures pertaining to the use of online public spheres within new social movements. Additionally, I reflect on the methodological implications of the AthletesFirst project including the advantages and limitations of conducting participatory research using online methods and the prospect for such methods to disrupt the hegemonic structures of traditional research hierarchies and to facilitate a broader engagement in the research process. Finally, I outline the strengths and limitations of this research, the practical applications of the work, and possible avenues for future research.

7.1 Summary of Findings

7.1.1 (RQ1) How and why do individuals choose to interact with the blog and what are the perceived outcomes of their participation?

AthletesFirst started with two individuals but quickly expanded to encompass the six-member blog team. It grew from there to include over 6,000 individuals from more than 90 countries. Yet knowing the statistics of the blog readership does very little to answer such questions as who was reading the blog, why they were reading it, and what outcomes did they perceive as a result of their involvement. The previously presented findings addressed these questions by talking to blog team members and 20 additional individuals and then working backwards to investigate what first attracted people to the blog and why they chose to participate in the online discussions. This strategy revealed three conditions that largely explained why
individuals chose to write for, read, comment on, share, or otherwise engage with the AthletesFirst project. First, the blog was a private party that offered support to members of the disability sport community while at the same time pushing them to think more critically about the practice of sport and generally contributed to/supported their awakening to the political context of disability sport. Second, the blog was a window onto para-sport where the stories of athletes with disabilities were shared with outsiders thereby leading to a greater appreciation of para-sport and (hopefully) encouraging individuals to take part in para-sport programs and/or engage with the Paralympic Movement. Third, AthletesFirst was a tool to be wielded by athletes with disabilities and their allies to challenge and call out individuals and practices that were perceived to be discriminatory or unjust. These three functions of the blog are consistent with Fraser’s (1990) description of the role that subaltern public spheres can play within marginalized or subordinate groups; they act as a space to regroup, negotiate collective identities, identify common grievances, disseminate messages, and plan strategic action.

In regards to the outcomes that the blog team members individually reported as pertaining to their involvement in the project, I must conclude that we were all naïve in our expectations (and that I was perhaps the most naïve of all). At the start of the project, our expectations for AthletesFirst — along with our criteria for assessing the success of the blog — were based on our prior experiences with other blogs. However, in retrospect, it was Jason who came the closest to understanding the possibilities inherent in this project when he said that AthletesFirst would, at some point, “take on a life of its own.” AthletesFirst evolved over the course of the 14 months that this project was in operation and the blog that we ended up with had very little in common with the athlete blogs with which we were most familiar. Though we had always spoken of AthletesFirst as a place for us to engage with others, we were constantly astounded by the extent to which audiences decided to get involved. Readers did not just post comments, they took time to really talk back; they were thoughtful in their replies and they challenged us to think about the topics differently. The reach of the blog also surprised us. We hoped our friends and teammates would read it — we never dreamed it would be read in 97 countries or that the link would be regularly retweeted by the IPC.

As the project progressed, blog team members revised their expectations about what the blog could and should be. For example, as previously described, Courtney originally stated that she was looking forward to conversations with the other blog team members and that if other
athletes joined in that would be a bonus. However, as she watched what was happening online, she came to redefine what constituted a successful post and expressed disappointment that her post was read by only 68 people and commented on by only three. Based on her reading of other posts on AthletesFirst, she decided that a successful post would have closer to two-dozen comments by readers and that those comments would represent a range of opinions on the topic. Josh also revisited the criteria he used to define the success of the project. Truthfully, I was rather dreading my final interview with Josh because I knew that when we first started he had high expectations for the number of readers we would be able to attract. I was not convinced that he would be impressed with the statistics I had to show him and I did not want to disappoint him. Much to my surprise, Josh’s final assessment of the project was not only positive but he paid only passing attention to the readership numbers. His chief interest was in discussing what I had come to think of as the small victories — the myriad of events and interactions that were facilitated by the blog and that were meaningful on an individual level even though they failed to have widespread or systemic implications/outcomes. Josh, who had originally focused on the potential of the blog to reach a wide audience and to generate publicity for various issues within the para-sport community, later came to value the blog for one-to-one interactions and the intimate discussions that it facilitated.

Although it was possible to identify actions that were prompted by this research project, identifying or measuring outcomes proved to be incredibly difficult. One of the more interesting findings was the ambivalent response I received when I asked individuals who they perceived to be the audience for the AthletesFirst blog. There was a contradiction in that many, if not most, of the participants did not believe that they were the intended audience for the blog! Rather, those who saw themselves as para-sport insiders acknowledged that they might have a role to play in creating the content for the blog (writing posts or responding to posts) but they felt there were other groups that were the target of the posts including individuals who needed to be educated about para-sport and the Paralympic Movement or encouraged to get involved. This phenomenon was perhaps best captured by Rachael who, as described in Chapter 5, defined the AthletesFirst blog as a dialogue between members of the Paralympic Movement that was performed in front of an audience of outsiders (or at least individuals who were not yet involved).

When it came to discussing action, the participants most commonly described the action as happening elsewhere, removed from the blog itself, and out of view to most blog readers.
There was an assumption made that if the right individuals were to read the blog, they would be compelled to change their attitudes toward disability and that these changes in attitude would result in more inclusive policies and practices (this was illustrated by Joan’s post about being excluded from a local race and Blair’s post on inspirational portrayals of disability in the media, to name just two). However, there was an implicit understanding that these types of changes in behaviours could never be linked directly to the blog. In fact, the honey approach to blogging would appear to suggest that the whole point of the blog was to allow individuals to read the posts and to think about what changes they might make in their own behaviours — while remaining anonymous and not being made to feel like they were being targeted or called out. In this sense, the individuals that I spoke with were assuming, or hoping, that there was an audience of ‘lurkers’ — blog readers who were not commenting or posting and were thus invisible to other readers but who, nonetheless, could be inspired to take action that would ultimately make sport a more inclusive space for athletes with disabilities.

The types of actions that could be directly linked to the blog were those that had to do with networking and relationship building. Throughout the course of the project, I personally made many new connections within disability sport communities. For example, I went from having two-dozen followers on Twitter to having over 330. I was repeatedly contacted via email, Facebook, and Twitter by individuals looking for assistance with disability sport related projects or who had information/resources they thought I might be interested in or that they wanted me to distribute through my networks. I have also observed other blog authors and readers forming similar connections and some of these relationships are culminating in interesting collaborations. I realize now that although I originally hoped to document specific ways in which the AthletesFirst blog facilitated change, what I have actually documented is many small actions that resulted in the creation of networks that have the capacity for future action. While the Internet is frequently recognized as being able to extend the reach of new social movements by allowing them to share their message with a larger audience, I would contend that the real value the Internet affords to social movements is in its ability to bring people together so that they can share ideas and resources and collaborate to affect change.
7.1.2 (RQ2) How do blog users (readers and writers) understand the relation between the discussions occurring on the blog and their individual online and offline actions to promote, advocate for, and/or transform para-sport?

When Courtney and I first started discussing the idea for this research, one of the questions that I had was whether or not there was something about online platforms that made them more valuable to athletes with a disability as compared to their able-bodied peers. One of the early claims associated with the Web was that it would be especially beneficial to individuals with disabilities in that it would afford them many new opportunities to pursue employment and engage in social life (Ellis & Kent, 2011). In fact, Tim Berners-Lee, the man credited with inventing the World Wide Web in 1997, said: “The power of the Web is in its universality. Access by everyone, regardless of disability is an essential aspect” (Ellis & Kent, 2011, p.1). Berners-Lee and the other founders of the World Wide Web Consortium remain highly committed to designing technologies that are accessible to the widest range of users possible and have been instrumental in developing key design principles meant to facilitate the use of the Web by people with physical, sensory, and cognitive impairments (Berners-Lee 2010; Ellis & Kent, 2011). However, despite these promises, many disability scholars and activists have argued that the design of new technologies most commonly follows market logics and the result is products that work for the majority of the population without taking into account the needs of users with disabilities (Goggin & Newell, 2003). According to Goggin and Newell (2003) and Ellis and Kent (2011), many digital technologies (including Websites and various online platforms) have actually recreated disabling conditions and resulted in the further marginalization and isolation of people with disabilities. I remain unconvinced that when Berners-Lee spoke of the individuals with disabilities using these new technologies to gain access to social realms, it was Paralympic athletes that he had in mind. As is surely evidenced by the accounts of the para-athletes involved in the AthletesFirst project, many (if not all) are active members of their community and they are hardly reliant on the Internet to interact with others. While it is true that many people with disabilities face barriers related to transportation, communication, access to services, access to education, and so forth and these barriers limit their ability to find employment or engage socially, athletes with disabilities, by definition, are those individuals who have somehow managed to negotiate these barriers and gain access to sport opportunities. Their experiences should not be taken as representative of all people with disabilities!
That being said, though privileged in many ways, athletes with disabilities do encounter many obstacles with which able-bodied athletes are not required to deal. As stated in the introduction, Courtney, throughout her sporting career, had to advocate for her right to participate and to access sport services in ways that I never encountered. When a person with a disability engages in sport, they often do so without the support of other para-athletes (isolated by the relatively low number of para-athletes and large geographical distances) and they do so in an environment where coaches, clubs, facilities, and volunteers might have very little experience of disability-related issues. Without local networks, every para-athlete is a pioneer forced to figure things out for him/herself and, in many cases, expected to simultaneously take responsibility for educating other members of the sport system and for advocating on behalf of para-sport as a whole. The difficulty in accessing practical information (about equipment, technique, training programs, and so forth) and the sense of isolation that comes from being the only athlete with a disability in a particular program was discussed repeatedly on AthletesFirst (for example, in Courtney’s post about being the only rower with a visual impairment in her club) and was also frequently referenced during the interviews.

When blog team members, guest authors, and readers spoke about the AthletesFirst blog being valuable to athletes with disabilities, they most commonly referenced the potential of the blog to bridge geographical distances and to find others in like situations. However, the isolation experienced by many athletes with disabilities is not just a result of the relatively low numbers of participants in disability sport but is also directly tied to the way in which disability sport has been constructed within the Canadian sport system. Before the mid-1990s, Canada had a disability-centred sport provision model for people with disabilities (Howe, 2007). The Canadian Amputee Sports Association, Canadian Blind Sports Association, Canadian Cerebral Palsy Sports Association, and the Canadian Wheelchair Sports Association (along with their international and local partners) were largely responsible for identifying athletes with disabilities, providing competitive opportunities within Canada, and selecting teams to compete at international events including the Paralympic Games (Howe, 2007). Starting in the mid-1990s (and in response to calls from the IPC for the inclusion of athletes with disabilities in mainstream sport systems), Sport Canada started a program to fast track the integration of athletes with disabilities into the able-bodied sport system (Legg, 2003). Sport Canada transferred a large portion of the funding earmarked for disability sport from the disability-based sport
organizations to NSOs and made them responsible for the provision of disability sport (Legg, 2003). At the same time, a new accountability framework rolled out by Sport Canada measured the NSOs success in developing athletes with disabilities capable of competing on the world stage and tied their achievements in this area to their core funding (Legg, 2003). Though not all individuals involved in the AthletesFirst project would have been aware of this historical context, many of the issues written about and discussed were rooted in this policy change.

The AthletesFirst blog was, in many ways, used by participants to replace some of the networks that had previously supported athletes with disabilities but that were demolished, weakened, or made redundant when Sport Canada made the decision that disability sport should be included in mainstream sport. This decision, while applauded by many for its ‘inclusiveness’, exemplifies type of concession that dominant groups sometimes make in order to maintain the consent and goodwill of the majority (Gramsci, 1971) and, I argue, ultimately reinforced the dominance of the able-bodied sport system. For example, in Chapter 6, I described how Courtney frequently found herself in the position of representing the needs of athletes with disabilities to organizations that had very little experience with or understanding of disability-related issues. This is because in the move toward integration, athletes with disabilities had to trade organizations with disability specific expertise for organizations with sport specific expertise. AthletesFirst provided Courtney and others with a venue to write about and discuss issues that were important to athletes with disabilities but that were not priorities within able-bodied sport organizations. On the blog, she could raise issues, test out ideas, and receive advice — all things that she believed would make her a more successful advocate for athletes with disabilities. In this sense, blogging was used to form an online subaltern public sphere that where, as proposed by Fraser (1990), a subordinate group was able to regroup, deliberate, and ultimately develop strategies to support offline advocacy projects and counter-hegemonic practices. In engaging in these discussions, the athletes were also challenging the hegemony of the able-bodied sport system by discussing issues that were seen as taboo or unpopular within their (offline) sport networks.

33 All of the blog team members (myself included), started competing in the mid-1990s around the same time that these policies were being instituted.
While Courtney went from online discussions to offline advocacy, others went from the offline to the online. They perceived their engagement with AthletesFirst to be an extension of their pre-existing identities as advocates and a continuation of their offline advocacy projects. An example of this was Meyrick’s description of publishing his Boston/Kona article on the blog after having tried (unsuccessfully) to lobby event organizers to change the rules. Likewise, Kathy wrote about her frustration related to her efforts to become certified as a para-nordic coach (an offline event) because she was looking to find others (online) who might have had a similar experience and could offer her advice. Most (if not all) of the posts published on AthletesFirst were continuations of ongoing advocacy projects or extensions of the individual’s identity as an advocate. Furthermore, there was a definite blurring of the lines between online and offline and, although participants might have perceived blogging to be more or less useful as a tool for advocacy in particular situations, they overwhelmingly saw it as another means of doing advocacy rather than as something that was entirely new.

7.1.3 (RQ3) How do participants (readers and writers) define their involvement in the Paralympic Movement and what do participants perceive to be the ‘key’ issues that the movement must address?

The classification system, reverse integration, the inclusion/exclusion of individuals with intellectual disabilities, the decision as to what sports to include in the next Paralympic Games, media portrayals of athletes with disabilities, prosthetic limbs and unfair advantages were among the myriad of subjects that were discussed on AthletesFirst and could be described as the key issues facing the Paralympic Movement today. Certainly, every author and interviewee had a topic that was of particular concern to them and that they wrote or spoke about with passion and urgency. My first instinct when conducting the analysis was to try and categorize the posts, comments, and interview data to find the recurrent topics that were perceived by participants to be the most important. However, although the thematic coding process revealed that some subjects were more frequently discussed (for example, the addition/elimination of different ‘classes’ of athletes from the Paralympic program was a favourite topic), I struggled to identify what participants perceived to be the key issue facing the Paralympic Movement today. I questioned whether or not there was really one unifying theme that, once identified, would lead to better understanding of the Paralympic Movement and the concerns of its membership as a
whole. It was only by returning to the AthletesFirst blog itself and rereading the 34 posts and their accompanying comments that it occurred to me that the common unifying thread could be reduced to a single question: How do we maintain the values that make the Paralympic Movement unique while working toward greater inclusion within a chiefly able-bodied sport system?

The posts made on AthletesFirst and the subsequent discussions were ultimately about exploring the similarities and differences between disability sport and able-bodied sport and about moving towards integration while also simultaneously maintaining values such as inclusion and equality for all people regardless of physical ability or difference. This challenge is exemplified in the ongoing negotiation of the relationship between the IPC and the IOC (also a favourite topic among project participants) but it can also be seen in the less grandiose, daily negotiations that happen every time an athlete with a disability practices sport. For example, Joan’s post explicitly addressed the differences between the Paralympic Movement and the Special Olympics, but there was an undercurrent to the discussion that ensued; in order to be recognized as real athletes (i.e. Olympians), athletes with physical disabilities needed to be careful they were not mistaken for individuals with intellectual disabilities. What made the post so juicy was the contention that the Paralympic Movement, a movement founded on the ideal of inclusion through sport (Wolbring et al., 2010), needed to exclude certain individuals if it wanted to be taken as seriously as an elite sporting movement.

Labonté (2004), writing on the inclusion/exclusion of particular groups from social systems (political, economic, etcetera), cautioned that there are risks to social movements that attempt to use social inclusion as an objective or a measure of success. Social inclusion, he said, is generally construed to be unproblematic and it is assumed that, once included, a group will face no further barriers — that from that point on they will be included in all activities, practices, and policies of the group (Labonté, 2004). The danger, according to Labonté (2004), of seeing social inclusion as the end goal is that social inclusion can only ever be understood when contrasted against social exclusion and the model does not allow for individuals or groups to be simultaneously included and excluded. For example, athletes with disabilities might be included in national sport governing bodies but still excluded by practices and policies that privilege able-bodied athletes and that sustain ableism within the sport system. Kane’s (1995) exploration of the ways in which even supposedly resistive or transformational forms of women’s sports have
ultimately been co-opted and subsumed by the hegemonic practices of sport even though women have officially been accepted by the sport institutes serves as a cautionary tale for disability sport. Furthermore, in the context of new social movements, inclusion can actually work against a movement because if full inclusion were indeed to be achieved, the social movement would lose the impetus that leads to mobilization. Labonté (2004) has put it this way:

\[
\text{We should not let the warmth of our inclusive ideal smother our anger over exclusivity’s unfairness. Anger is often the magnet of mobilization, and mobilization is often the tool for social transformation that shifts power relations in ways that allow societies to become more inclusive (p. 118).}
\]

In Chapter 2, I summarized the history of the Paralympic Movement and questioned whether it was a disability-based movement that used sport or a sport-based movement that included disability. At the conclusion of the project, the best answer I have is that the Paralympic Movement exists (and perhaps always has) in the dialectic between disability and sport and in the tension between inclusion and exclusion. The Paralympic Movement is made up of individuals, groups, and organizations that collectively challenge mainstream society’s definitions of sport and disability. In order to be considered a social movement, it is not necessary that these actors come to an agreement on any of the issues discussed on the AthletesFirst blog, only that they agree to engage in these conversations.

The reason that the AthletesFirst blog was perceived to be valuable to authors and readers was that it allowed for individuals involved in the Paralympic Movement to regroup, engage in debates, find support, and discuss tactics. These are processes that are important to maintaining one’s ties with a social movement. These activities also support Melucci’s claim that social movements are “action systems” (p. 793) that are constituted in the performance of ongoing interactions between social movement actors rather than static objects with clearly demarcated boundaries and objectives. The value of the Web in this equation is that it provides individuals a venue for these interactions. Though it is certainly possible that offline spaces could also provide some of the same opportunities, there are a few factors that might make online venues more accessible and more attractive. As outlined in Chapter 5 (and earlier in this chapter), finding other individuals interested in discussing issues related to disability sport is not always easy; many of the participants interviewed described being the only athlete with a disability in their
(geographically-bounded) community. For these individuals, the Web has the potential to support the creation of new communities or to reach out to new audiences. The other reason why blogging and other forms of computer-mediated communication are particularly valuable to the Paralympic Movement is because these technologies allow for members to maintain strong networks and relationships even as they become increasingly integrated into mainstream sport systems. Thus, the Web might be one way for the Paralympic Movement to work toward inclusion within the predominantly able-bodied sport system while at the same time maintaining a strong Paralympic identity and sustaining ties with a network of individuals ready to mobilize and advocate for disability sport when occasion arises.

7.2 Methodological Reflections

7.2.1 Blogging as a participatory method

The design of the AthletesFirst project was unique to say the least. There are many examples of excellent sociological research that explore blogs as cultural artifacts and as sites where culture is produced. Since I first engaged in this research, there has even been a proliferation of publications in the field of sport sociology addressing blogging and the use of other Web platforms: by fans of professional sport (cf. Norman, 2012), by sporting subcultures (cf. MacKay & Dallaire, 2012, 2013), by athletes at the Olympic Games (cf. Hutchins & Mikosza, 2010), by sport for development practitioners (cf. Hayhurst et al., 2011; Wilson & Hayhurst, 2009), and by Olympic protest groups (cf. Millington & Darnell, 2012). Collectively, these works are contributing to a broader understanding of the technological affordances of blogs and how people are leveraging these affordances and turning them to their own use.

However, the AthletesFirst project remains the only project, that I am aware of, where a blog was the focus of a participatory project. While blogs are being used within research projects, they have generally been a product of collaborative work rather than a central component of the actual research. For example, blogs are used to share research findings or as part of a knowledge transfer plan. There are also many examples of ‘project blogs,’ blogs that are used within a research group as a means of managing the project (very similar to the way in which the AthletesFirst blog team used Google Groups as our ‘blog behind the blog’). Perhaps the most prevalent form of collaborative research-oriented blogs are those being used by communities of practice to share best practices or to interrogate their practices. For example,
there is a vibrant community of educators (like Blair) who are blogging as a means of communicating with other professionals. I myself am a regular reader of a number of blogs written by academics and graduate students.

There are two gaps in the methodological literature where I believe the AthletesFirst project can make a contribution. First, though researchers might be using blogs within research projects (PAR-based or otherwise), there are few accounts of how the research was informed by the practice of blogging. Blogs, when they are mentioned at all, are portrayed as merely one more tool employed in the research. This is concerning because, as discussed in Chapter 2, different technologies suggest different uses. Every communication platform has particular strengths and weaknesses and, without falling into the trap of technological determinism, researchers must still be attentive to how the technology shapes the communication (Baym, 2010; Earl & Kimport, 2011). For example, in writing about relationships and partnerships in a PAR-based project that involved four geographically distant communities, Ponic et al. (2010) found that the group’s reliance on email and telephone communication resulted in some research partners feeling alienated from the work that was being done and that “lots [was] lost in translation and in time and space” (p. 329). But accounts like this, reflections on how the technologies are shaping the practice, are few and far between. This project makes a contribution to the field of PAR research by making explicit how a blog was used in a participatory project including the steps undertaken and the challenges/successes involved.

Second, despite (1) claims that the Internet will be of particular benefit to people with disabilities; (2) evidence that people with disabilities are indeed using the Internet to find community and to engage in self-advocacy; and (3) recognition that PAR methods can contribute to an emancipatory research project, I have found no examples of PAR-based research conducted with disability communities using online methods. If the Internet truly does offer new opportunities for individuals with disabilities to find one another (important given that disability communities are rarely geographically bound) and also has the added benefit of reducing (some) of the barriers associated with cost, transportation, and/or communication, then it follows that online methods could potentially be very beneficial when conducting PAR with disability communities. The AthletesFirst project is one step in that direction and will hopefully provide a model for future work with disability communities.
7.2.2 Strengths, limitations, and struggles

Not having an existing model to reference presented a number of interesting dilemmas but it also afforded many novel opportunities. The first learning opportunity came as the blog team figured out how we were going to work together online. As previously described, the entire blog team never met face-to-face. Instead, the work of the blog was conducted by email, Skype, Facebook messages, and using the Google Group. In the final interview, Josh and I discussed the dynamics of the team and we both agreed that the group had never really formed that close unit we both had envisioned at the start of the project. In fact, the number of occasions where all six individuals engaged in a conversation was negligible in comparison to the far more numerous instances where I communicated with one or two team members. Most of the interactions between blog team members actually took place on the AthletesFirst blog itself when one team member would write a post and another would reply with a comment. This lack of cohesiveness among the blog team might at least partially explain why team members’ participation in the project waxed and waned over time. A stronger emphasis on the ‘team’ could have contributed to a greater sense of involvement and commitment to the project. In their recommendations for creating strong partnerships in collaborative projects, Ponic et al. (2010) suggested that the project design should include time dedicated to building strong partnerships and engaging in team building practices. In retrospect, I think the blog team (and the project) could have been strengthened had we taken the time early on in the process to engage in team building activities and create a more comprehensive plan as to how we were going to move forward as a group.

However, as previously stated in Chapter 2, it is also important to avoid comparing online interactions to offline interactions. Baym (2010) explained that early studies exploring the productivity or effectiveness of groups working online did exactly this and inevitably concluded that the online groups had had less success than the groups working offline. The problem with this evaluation, as stated in Chapter 2, is that it does not account for how groups are using online communication to accomplish tasks that were not possible before the advent of digital technologies. Certainly the blog team could have met face-to-face, but it would have been difficult to coordinate and expensive. We could also have made more frequent use of Skype
video conferencing or other digital platforms that facilitate synchronous video communication. The truth is that we employed the technologies that were familiar to us (email, Facebook, Twitter, and file sharing applications) and that allowed us to accomplish what we had set out to do (to create a blog, to write posts, to attract an audience, and to engage in online conversations). The result was a blog that reached local and global audiences and that facilitated conversations between para-sport insiders as well as between insiders and outsiders — interactions that would have been impossible without the use of online communication.

Conducting PAR research also implies a destabilization or reconfiguration of more traditional research methods. Yet, as previously discussed in Chapter 3, there were instances in which the AthletesFirst project reproduced traditional research relationships. Compared to blog team members, I had a disproportionate amount of control over the direction of the project. It is undeniable that the AthletesFirst blog that exists today is largely as I envisioned it; it might have looked very different had other team members been more involved in various tasks. Though I posted articles as they were submitted, I still played the role of blog curator: deciding what post would go up when, searching out new writers, advertising the latest posts, and so forth. My experience is consistent with the accounts of other researchers working in the field. In Ponic et al., (2010), Frisby wrote honestly about how she “struggled with [her] role in encouraging power-with instead of power-over partnerships” (p. 329, italics in original). I too struggled.

However, I am also comforted by Kemmis and McTaggart’s (2005) rejection of the notion that the role of the researcher should be confined to that of a ‘facilitator’:

Too often the facilitator lapsed into the role of ‘process consultant’ with pretensions or aspirations to expertise about a ‘method’ of action research, a role quite inconsistent with

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Baym (2010) also reports that, when asked to comment on different forms of communication, individuals are most likely to respond that face-to-face is better than video, video is better than voice only, and voice only is better than text. Computer-mediated communication (which is frequently text-based although this too is changing) is perceived to be less personal, less effective, and less satisfying than face-to-face offline interactions. Baym contends that these types of rankings miss the point; a text message is not always instead of a face-to-face conversation, it might be used in place of no interaction at all. I would add that these hierarchies of communication are also inherently ableist. Is a video Skype call really better than a voice only Skype call when the individuals speaking have visual impairments? (Though in all fairness video calling was certainly helpful when interviewing individuals with hearing impairments who rely on lip reading ... context is everything).
the commitment to participate in the personal and social changes in the practice that had brought participants together (p. 569).

This quote is a useful reminder that, in engaging in this work, I made a commitment to engage with others and not to sit on the sidelines.

Furthermore, I need to acknowledge that the analysis presented in this dissertation is my own while at the same time recognizing the contributions made by others. I developed the interview guides, conducted the interviews, analyzed the transcripts and the blog posts and comments, and arrived at conclusions. Yet there were some participatory elements to the process; the design of the AthletesFirst project allowed me to go back and forth from interview data to engagement with participants. Some of the themes presented in this dissertation came from my own reading of the interviews but were tested and further developed on the blog. For example, the theme of advocacy was one that was grounded in the research questions and was a topic that I anticipated would be raised by participants during the interviews. However, because I was conducting interviews even as the blog was in operation, I was able to write the post ‘Honey or vinegar: How do you advocate for para-sport?’ and solicit further input from blog readers. Throughout the entire research process, there was a feedback loop in operation whereby the interview questions informed the blog posts and the blog posts informed the interviews. The boundaries between interview and blog post were further blurred when two participants volunteered to write guest posts—based on issues we had just talked about in the interview! These posts then elicited further comments from individuals who were reading AthletesFirst and these comments prompted me to ask new questions in the next interview. Thus, though I take responsibility for the analysis of the data and the conclusions presented in this document, I also acknowledge that they were arrived at in conversation and consultation with the individuals who collaborated to make this project possible (including individuals who were only reading/commenting on the blog and never participated in interviews).

Upon reflection, though the AthletesFirst project did not always achieve the degree of participation that I had hoped for or originally envisioned, it did have participatory elements or participatory moments that are deserving of recognition. Simply having the opportunity to observe a research project from start to finish was a new experience for many individuals and disrupted the commonly held notion that research is something that happens in universities and
that is done by researchers. In contrast, this research was conducted online in full view of the community ‘being researched’ and afforded individuals opportunities to engage in a variety of capacities. I was overwhelmed by the number of individuals who chose to get involved and the commitment to the project demonstrated by blog readers and guest writers (individuals not formally involved in the blog team and who more or less stumbled across the project in progress). There were also several examples of individuals who used their involvement in the AthletesFirst project for their own purposes. For example, two blog team members recently made the decision to pursue post-secondary degrees. Though I am not so arrogant as to suggest these decisions were in any way motivated by this research, I do know that the individuals included samples of the posts they wrote for AthletesFirst in their applications, reported their involvement in the project on their curriculum vitae, and asked me or other blog team members for letters of reference as “colleagues on a research project.” Other guest authors included posts in their writing portfolios, reprinted them in community newsletters, and distributed them to their personal networks. While it is often stated that anyone can be a published author online, not everyone can attract an audience and not all voices are given equal weight (Dart, 2009; Leonard, 2006). The AthletesFirst blog was a way for individuals to write posts that would be read by (relatively) large audiences and, as previously described, there was a certain amount of legitimacy that was associated with posts published on the blog and this was valuable to some authors. The many ways in which individuals were able to use the AthletesFirst project and make it useful and relevant in their own lives should be acknowledged as a strength of the research design.

One of the more challenging methodological aspects of this project centred around how to define the boundaries of the research field. In Chapter 3, I outlined the steps taken to discuss issues of anonymity versus recognition with project participants and noted that most participants opted to have their real names used in the project findings. Indeed, participants contended that their roles as advocates precluded anonymity, felt anonymity would not be possible given their already public profiles, or stated that they wanted to be credited for their contributions. Using real names can also be construed as a challenge to what Reid and Brief (2009) termed “condescending ethics” (p. 83) whereby the (powerful) researcher protects the (powerless) subject by employing pseudonyms. Though there are most definitely circumstances where using pseudonyms is necessary or desirable, making this decision for participants (or collaborators and
co-researchers) rather than engaging in a discussion about the potential risks and benefits of each option, can reproduce unequal power distributions in research relationships (Reid & Brief, 2009).

However, using participants’ names (and obscuring/revealing other identifying information such as workplaces, hometowns, team affiliations, and so forth) was relatively simple compared to the far more complex decisions that I had to make every day about what constituted the boundaries of the project and what data was off-limits. The strength of the project design was that the blog team and I were able to use our existing networks, our online presence, and our general knowledge of how to communicate online to recruit readers to the site and to get them to engage with the blog. Twitter, Facebook and other platforms were what powered the project and gave us the reach we were looking for. The difficulty arose in determining what exactly participants had agreed could be part of the project. There was a disclaimer (the pop-up box) on AthletesFirst stating that anything posted on the blog could be used in the research project, but that disclaimer does not totally account for the way information is linked on the Web. For example, if someone commented on AthletesFirst but referenced or linked to his/her own blog or to another site, did they intend for me to read it? I assumed so. But was that link meant to provide context to the comment made on AthletesFirst? That was a more difficult question.

The exchange between Jan and Leona captured in Figure 4 is another good example of a grey area — they were talking about a post I wrote, but did they intend for me to see it? During the writing of this dissertation, I was constantly returning to the interview transcripts and blog posts to confirm that the data I was including was from these sources and not from someone’s personal blog or from tweets. Fortunately, while these issues posed an additional complication in writing up the research, what could have been a limitation turned out to be one of the strengths in the design of the project. Because participants were so accessible online, I was able to remain in contact with them throughout the entire project. If I had any questions about what could be used or what was off-limits, I just had to ask. The ability to continually engage with participants across a variety of platforms was actually quite liberating in that, although the project was messy and had unclear boundaries, there was also an element of transparency that came from conducting the research in the public spaces of the Web. Thus, even though I encountered many practical and ethical dilemmas while doing this work, I felt like I had a space to explore these issues and collaborators willing to help me work through them.
7.3 Theoretical Reflections

In order to discuss the theoretical contributions of this project, it is useful to return to the description of new social movements provided in Chapter 1:

The participation of the individual, detached from specific organizational allegiances, is not necessarily limited to single protest events. It can also develop within committees or working groups, or else in public meetings. Alternatively (when the possibility arises) one may support a movement by promoting its ideas and its point of view among institutions, other political actors, or the media. However, the existence of a range of possible ways of becoming involved means that the membership of movements can never be reduced to a single act of adherence. It consists, rather, of a series of differentiated acts, which taken together reinforce the feeling of belonging or of identity (Della Porta & Diani, 2009, p. 26).

In today’s highly networked world, it is, as Wilson (2007) suggested, easier than ever before for individuals to find others who share their concerns or their belief that another type of world is possible. The Internet has increased the “range of possible ways of becoming involved” (Della Porta & Diani, 2009, p. 26). The ‘togetherness’ of new social movements is no longer predicated on being together in space or in time (Earl & Kimport, 2011) and the cost of communicating has been significantly reduced.

However, like new social movement actors, sociologists too should consider if they are really leveraging the affordances of the Internet. As stated previously, one of the challenges of studying new social movements is identifying and engaging with social movement actors who are more peripheral to the activities of the social movement. These individuals, as Della Porta and Diani (2009) indicate, might not even understand themselves to be part of a social movement even though they engage in activities that support or promote the values and messages of the movement. As such, their involvement in new social movements often goes unrecognized in favour of the more explicit, obvious forms of action taken by individuals who occupy more central positions within the social movement. The contribution that AthletesFirst makes to the new social movement literature is in the provision of insights into how ‘outsiders’ also participate in social movements and the particular role that blogs can have in supporting their engagement. As observed by Wilson (2007), the Internet offers sociologists of sport new opportunities to engage with members of sport-related social movements. By leveraging online
fieldwork methods and interventionist practices, it is possible to communicate with social movement actors and, in doing so, to arrive at a richer understanding of how communication shapes new social movements. What AthletesFirst has done, is provide insights into the role of more peripheral actors in the Paralympic Movement. Not all of the participants interviewed considered themselves to be social movement insiders, and some had very few ties with para-sport. But they did read the blog posts and they engaged in discussions and debates either on the blog itself or later with friends, family members, colleagues, etcetera. This is modest contribution to the field to be sure, but it does reaffirm that belonging in new social movements cannot be reduced to membership in particular groups or organizations or by participation in particular types of activities or protest events.

7.4 Practical Applications and Empirical Contributions

Over the course of the project, the blog team and I learned a number of important lessons that could be useful to others; most of them had to do with how to create, manage, and promote a blog. That said, the more important implications of AthletesFirst have to do with understanding how a blog can be used to generate conversations among participants in new social movements and how these conversations can form the basis of advocacy projects. Though I still question whether or not AthletesFirst was successful (as seen in the findings, the answer really depends on which blog team member or participant is asked and what they thought we were trying to accomplish), I have no doubt that there are implications to this work that are worth pursuing.

With regards to practical applications of the AthletesFirst project, I would contend that the blog has already been ‘applied.’ As stated in Chapter 3, this project was an intervention inasmuch as we created something and implemented it in a real world setting. Furthermore, though AthletesFirst started as part of a research project, the blog team (with some new members) plans to continue it in the future and will doubtlessly be used by individuals to find support, to test ideas, to build networks … and there are likely a number of different applications that I cannot predict and will never know about.

There are other practical applications or legacy projects that have emerged from AthletesFirst. For example, I have already been contacted by a former teammate who has been reading AthletesFirst and wants to start a co-authored blog curating and reposting articles that address the issue of women in sport and that provide female athletes with an alternative to more
mainstream sport media. I will certainly be able to provide her with some advice that will save her time and headaches and I will likely write a few posts as well. I have also recently had a conversation with an individual working for an organization that uses sport to promote development projects and we talked about creating a blog that facilitates conversations between academics studying SPD and practitioners in the field. I am not sure where that project will go or if I will be involved but I am curious to find out. What AthletesFirst has done is provide a model that, while not perfect, does suggest new ideas for what a blog could be and how it can be used. Though some have contended that the heyday of blogging has come and gone (a claim which Dean (2010) mocked when she said the announcement of the death of blogging was somewhat belied by the fact that the announcement was blogged), I argue that there is still a lot to learn when it comes to using blogs to facilitate and effect change. I should also state that AthletesFirst, while in many ways unique, is only one blog among many that are changing ideas about the affordances of the medium. Taken as a whole, these blogs are a useful reminder that while some technologies might suggest or facilitate certain uses or make some uses more probable than others, users are the other part of the equation and they can be endlessly creative (Baym, 2010; Earl & Kimport, 2011).

The other practical implication of this project was already touched upon in Chapter 6 and mentioned earlier in this chapter, namely, the value that blogging and other online platforms have for new social movements, particularly when the membership is small, is geographically dispersed, or is entwined within other networks. Individuals who engaged with the AthletesFirst blog created new linkages between individuals and groups and there is a lot of potential in these new networks; they can share resources, collaborate on projects, and offer support. As discussed in Chapter 2, one of the challenges faced by social movements is finding ways to sustain networks during periods of non-protest or relative inactivity so that, when needed, the channels are there to communicate and the individuals are primed to engage in collective action. Blogging, as evidenced by the example of AthletesFirst, can in part address this issue and enable individuals involved in new social movements to maintain ties with other members and with the social movement as a whole even in periods of inactivity.

In addition to making available a step-by-step account of how a blog was used in a participatory research project, AthletesFirst makes an empirical contribution to the literature on Paralympic sport and the Paralympic Movement. Though there is considerable work being done
in the sociology of sport on disability sport generally and Paralympic sport more specifically, more research that engages with athletes with disabilities is still needed. In particular, this AthletesFirst example offers a unique perspective in that it includes *conversations between athletes* whereas most other accounts have addressed athlete accounts individually. In this way, the AthletesFirst blog provides a previously unseen look at para-sport by creating a space for social movement actors to discuss ‘in public’ their ideas, concerns, and hopes for the Paralympic Movement.

### 7.5 Suggestions For Future Research

As previously stated, this dissertation is just part of a (rapidly) growing body of literature that explores the ways in which blogs are being used by athletes and within sport communities. There are, however, still many avenues to explore, particularly with respect to using blogs as a site for collaboration and co-creation. As stated by Stuart in Chapter 7, blogs provide a venue for athletes to tell their own stories without waiting for the media to come to them. Blogs also enable athletes to produce sport coverage that is different from the more typical media portrayals. The possibilities for further projects where researchers, academics, and advocates collaborate with athletes to produce blogs that challenge, resist, and offer alternatives to mainstream coverage of sport are endless.

From a methods perspective, there are many innovative options including using a blog to aggregate posts written by athletes in an attempt to amplify or generate greater publicity for the texts that already exist, but that struggle to reach audiences[^35]. Another possibility for future research (suggested to me by Blair’s post criticizing the ‘inspirational’ use of people with disabilities in media coverage) would be to develop a blog to solicit athlete critiques of sports media coverage; reposting links to newspaper articles and videos and then moderating a discussion between athletes about the type of coverage provided. Additionally, though AthletesFirst used only asynchronous communication (individuals read and responded to the post on their own time), future work should certainly explore the option of using synchronous

[^35]: SportCafé.ca is using this aggregator model and is republishing existing blog posts written by Canadian national team members. In recent months, I have watched SportCafé.ca grow from a simple site run by two amateur athletes to one of the most widely read blogs in the Canadian sport community.
communication (real time discussions, Twitter ‘chats’, and other forms of computer-mediated
communication that allow individuals to be together in time if not in space). Just imagine the
possibilities if athletes and academics were to ‘live blog’ sport events and offer alternatives to
broadcast coverage.

Another avenue that I am particularly interested in exploring is the use of blogs and other
online platforms to reach individuals who are more peripheral to the Paralympic Movement or
who are being excluded from the movement. Over and over, participants in this project repeated
that they wanted the blog to reach out to new (potential) para-sport participants: children with
disabilities, those with newly acquired impairments, individuals in remote communities, coaches
who had never before considered coaching para-sport, etcetera. There were even a few examples
where the AthletesFirst blog did exactly that and the blog was an entry point for someone to
learn more about the Paralympic Movement or to find out how they could get involved.
However, the assumption was that if individuals just knew more about the Paralympic
Movement and para-sport they would want to be involved. We did not really consider how
individuals might be alienated from the Paralympic Movement itself or, as suggested by Labonté
(2004), be simultaneously included and excluded. Of particular concern to me is how certain
groups are being recruited to join the movement even as other groups are being left behind. For
example, there is increasing evidence that wounded military veterans are accounting for a greater
percentage of the athletes at the Paralympic Games as a result of recent global conflicts and the
subsequent programs developed to rehabilitate injured personnel (Batts & Andrews, 2011;
Brittain & Green, 2012). I have to wonder what influence this sudden influx of veterans into the
Paralympic Movement will have on other groups, particularly youth with congenital or early-
acquired disabilities who might be pushed out by individuals who, though recently injured,
nonetheless grew up participating in able-bodied sport. Given the ease with which many youth
today use computer-based technologies to communicate and to tell stories (for example, making
and posting videos), I have already started planning a postdoctoral research project that will
build on the AthletesFirst model to create an online space to engage with youth with disabilities
and to assist them in publishing online accounts of their experiences with sport as a site of
inclusion and exclusion.
7.6 Concluding Remarks

New technologies, particularly communication technologies, are usually greeted in one of two ways: they are either perceived to be the technology that will bring people together and lead to richer relationships or they are assumed to be the tools that will dismantle communities and destroy existing lines of communication (Baym, 2010; Earl & Kimport, 2011; Papacharissi, 2010). Then a transformation occurs and these technologies get picked up and adopted and the result is neither utopic nor dystopic but something in between. Over time, the technologies become common, mundane, easy, and familiar and, though they do in some ways alter how we communicate, the technologies also change to meet our needs and to respond to the ways in which they are being used (Baym, 2010).

AthletesFirst was always a somewhat risky project; I was proposing to experiment with research design and use methods that, although individually well documented, had never been combined in quite this way. But the way the Internet is being used today is also new and rapidly evolving. In many ways, the challenge that I accepted when embarking on this work is the same one that new social movements and their members are also negotiating: learning how to recognize the new affordances offered by emerging technologies and determining how (and when) to use them to our advantage. Like countless activists and advocates worldwide who are “backing into the future” (Meikle, 2002, p. 143), I was also grounding my work in existing bodies of literature and drawing on methods and tactics that have served well in the past — even as I pushed forward and explored the new affordances of the Web as a site for conducting research.

The reasons for selecting the Paralympic Movement as the ‘test case’ for this experimental design were many. The suggestion that the Web is (or could be) particularly beneficial and liberating for people with disabilities dates back to the very birth of the technology (Berners-Lee, 2010). Computer-mediated communication was supposed to break down all sorts of barriers that barred individuals from full inclusion in society (Berners-Lee, 2010; Ellis & Kent, 2011; Goggin & Newell, 2003). Though the existing literature has already clearly concluded that the Web in and of itself is not capable of curing the processes that result in the marginalization and exclusion of people with disabilities (and is in fact just as likely to reproduce or reinforce disabling processes, cf. Goggin & Newell, 2003), I still thought that the Web might have a unique function within the Paralympic Movement. My own observations
(arrived at in conversation with Courtney and others) of how blogging was being used by individual athletes with disabilities and by groups and organizations involved in the delivery and promotion of para-sport suggested that a further investigation was warranted. In observing the interactions that happened on the AthletesFirst blog and during the interviews with blog authors and readers, what I found was that there were indeed examples of the Web being used to advance the goals of the Paralympic Movement, particularly in regards to the compensation for the lack of resources available to generate publicity and the difficulty of attracting widespread media attention. The exact nature of the use of blogs and social media by the IPC and by other para-sport stakeholders needs to be further elucidated and is not exhaustively addressed in this research project. However, based on the interviews with members of the Paralympic Movement and on my own observations during the most recent Paralympic Games, it is clear that these technologies have already been adopted in ways that are different from how they are being used by other mega-sport organizations including the IOC.
References


Brittain, I., & Green, S. (2012). Disability sport is going back to its roots: Rehabilitation of military personnel receiving sudden traumatic disabilities in the twenty-first century. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health, 4*(2), 244-264.


## Appendices

### Appendix A  Index of posts made on AthletesFirst.ca in chronological order

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Permalink</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language and sport</td>
<td>Courtney and Josh</td>
<td>November 28th, 2011</td>
<td><a href="http://athletesfirst.ca/?p=392">http://athletesfirst.ca/?p=392</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the legacies of the Paralympic Games?</td>
<td>Andrea</td>
<td>December 5th, 2011</td>
<td><a href="http://athletesfirst.ca/?p=530">http://athletesfirst.ca/?p=530</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From ‘non-competing participant’ to a place on the podium: Running is a true team sport</td>
<td>Jason</td>
<td>December 12th, 2011</td>
<td><a href="http://athletesfirst.ca/?p=591">http://athletesfirst.ca/?p=591</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspirational stories don’t tell the real story</td>
<td>Blair</td>
<td>December 20th, 2011</td>
<td><a href="http://athletesfirst.ca/?p=639">http://athletesfirst.ca/?p=639</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The case of the missing girl guides: Why we need more women in Paralympic sport</td>
<td>Andrea</td>
<td>January 24th, 2012</td>
<td><a href="http://athletesfirst.ca/?p=825">http://athletesfirst.ca/?p=825</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining advantage: The black out glasses rule</td>
<td>Ryan (guest)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
9. Title: The Oscar Pistorius effect  
   Author(s): Blair  
   Date: January 9th, 2012  
   Permalink: http://athletesfirst.ca/?p=874

10. Title: Athletes first?  
     Defining the Paralympic Games  
     Author(s): Andrea  
     Date: February 16th, 2012  
     Permalink: http://athletesfirst.ca/?p=917

11. Title: Should athletes without disabilities be allowed in para-sport?  
     Author(s): Josh  
     Date: February 29th, 2012  
     Permalink: http://athletesfirst.ca/?p=951

12. Title: Setting the record straight  
     Author(s): Jason  
     Date: March 8th, 2012  
     Permalink: http://athletesfirst.ca/?p=965

13. Title: How do we develop athletes with disabilities in Canada?  
     Author(s): Blair  
     Date: March 15th, 2012  
     Permalink: http://athletesfirst.ca/?p=985

14. Title: Health and high performance:  
   Striking a balance in federal funding  
   Author(s): Jason  
   Date: March 26th, 2012  
   Permalink: http://athletesfirst.ca/?p=1013

15. Title: The myth of independence  
   Author(s): Andrea  
   Date: April 10th, 2012  
   Permalink: http://athletesfirst.ca/?p=1020

16. Title: A voice (or image) in the abyss  
   Author(s): Courtney  
   Date: April 17th, 2012  
   Permalink: http://athletesfirst.ca/?p=1041
17. Title: Adaptive bobsled: The next winter Paralympic sport?  
Author(s): Jeremy (guest)  
Date: April 23rd, 2012  
Permalink: http://athletesfirst.ca/?p=1072

18. Title: Blogging Against Disablism Day 2012  
Author(s): Andrea  
Date: May 1st, 2012  
Permalink: http://athletesfirst.ca/?p=1087

19. Title: I am not ‘special’  
Author(s): Joan (guest)  
Date: May 15th, 2012  
Permalink: http://athletesfirst.ca/?p=1094

20. Title: Plus ça change: The Paralympics return to Stoke Mandeville  
Author(s): Andrea  
Date: May 31st, 2012  
Permalink: http://athletesfirst.ca/?p=1117

21. Title: Profile of a Paralympian: What does it take to make the team in 2012?  
Author(s): Stuart and Andrea  
Date: June 15th, 2012  
Permalink: http://athletesfirst.ca/?p=1129

22. Title: The myths of doping: Why Cheetahs aren’t cheating  
Author(s): Andrea  
Date: June 26th, 2012  
Permalink: http://athletesfirst.ca/?p=1146

23. Title: The 2010 Paralympics: A personal legacy  
Author(s): Lelainia (guest)  
Date: July 18th, 2012  
Permalink: http://athletesfirst.ca/?p=1171

24. Title: Coaches with a disability: Should we or shouldn’t we  
Author(s): Kathy (guest)  
Date: August 3rd, 2012  
Permalink: http://athletesfirst.ca/?p=1197
25. Title: Para-tri: The art of the transition
   Author(s): JP (guest)
   Date: August 15th, 2012
   Permalink: http://athletesfirst.ca/?p=1206

26. Title: ‘Us’ and ‘Them’: The media treat Paralympians differently depending on where they are from
   Author(s): Toni (guest)
   Date: August 22nd, 2012
   Permalink: http://athletesfirst.ca/?p=1222

27. Title: Spastische Autisticus at the Paralympics Opening Ceremony
   Author(s): George (guest)
   Date: September 12th, 2012
   Permalink: http://athletesfirst.ca/?p=1264

28. Title: Are we preaching to the choir? Social media and the Paralympic Games
   Author(s): Andrea
   Date: October 1st, 2012
   Permalink: http://athletesfirst.ca/?p=1288

29. Title: Wake up Canada! Or risk Rio being a repeat
   Author(s): Anonymous editorial
   Date: October 18th, 2012
   Permalink: http://athletesfirst.ca/?p=1312

30. Title: Wake up Canada! Part 2: Inefficiencies in the sport system
   Author(s): Anonymous editorial
   Date: October 28th, 2012
   Permalink: http://athletesfirst.ca/?p=1326

31. Title: Para-athletes excluded from local races … again …
   Author(s): Joan (guest)
   Date: November 26th, 2012
   Permalink: http://athletesfirst.ca/?p=1375

32. Title: Too blind to be sighted/Too sighted to be blind
   Author(s): Courtney
   Date: January 3rd, 2013
   Permalink: http://athletesfirst.ca/?p=1396
33. Title: **(Dis)abling discourses: The “supercrip” in advertising**  
Author(s): Stacey (guest)  
Date: January 22nd, 2013  
Permalink: http://athletesfirst.ca/?p=1413

34. Title: **Honey or vinegar: Advocating for para-sport**  
Author(s): Andrea  
Date: February 15th, 2013  
Permalink: http://athletesfirst.ca/?p=14
Appendix B: Sample of email sent to blog readers

Dear Blog Participant,

**Disability Sport and Online Blogging**

I am a graduate student at the University of British Columbia in the School of Human Kinetics and I am conducting a project that explores how athletes with a disability can use the Internet to discuss topics related to disability sport and network with other athletes. AthletesFirst (www.athletesfirst.ca) is the collaborative product of the Blog Team – five athletes with a disability and I collectively author the blog and moderate the discussions.

I am now recruiting 20 individuals who have read and/or commented on the blog posts to participate in an interview. The interview will ask how individuals found the blog, why they decided to participate, and their experiences while engaging in discussions with others on the blog. It will also explore topics such as the nature and future of the Paralympic/disability sport movement. Interviews will last approximately two hours and can be conducted by phone or by Skype – or in person if you are located in the Greater Vancouver area – at a time convenient to you.

If you are interested in finding out more about this project, please contact me at (604) 240-0796 or ambundon@interchange.ubc.ca and I will send you more information and answer any questions. Please feel free to forward this letter to friends and teammates you think might be interested in the project. If you are not able to participate as a co-researcher but would still like to be involved, **keep an eye out for the blog http://athletesfirst.ca in November of 2011.**

Sincerely,

Andrea Bundon
Graduate Student
School of Human Kinetics
604-240-0796

Laura Hurd Clarke, Ph.D
Supervisor
School of Human Kinetics
(604) 822-4281
Appendix C: Information and Consent Form for Interview Participants

Study Title: The Paralympics and the virtual sphere: Debating disability sport through online blogging

Brief Description of the Study: This project explores how an online blog can provide a space for members of the disability sport/Paralympic movement to discuss and debate topics of common interest. In particular, we are interested in considering:
- How do participants define the Paralympic movement and what do they perceive to be the key issues facing the movement today.
- Whether or not the Internet can provide a space for valuable discussion for the relatively small and regionally dispersed disability sport community.

The results of this study will help understand how Internet technologies can be employed by social groups wishing to engage in meaningful discussion among group members, network with others, and coordinate future actions/activities.

Andrea Bundon, a graduate student in the School of Human Kinetics at the University of British Columbia, will be conducting the research as part of her doctoral dissertation. Her supervisor, Dr. Laura Hurd Clarke, an associate professor in the School of Human Kinetics, will oversee the project.

Your Participation: Your perspectives on disability sport, the Paralympic movement, and the use of Internet technologies is communications to discuss, debate, and share resources among members of these movements would be extremely helpful and very much appreciated as we research the topics mentioned above. You would be asked to participate in one interview lasting approximately two hours. Interviews can be conducted in person at a location of your choosing if you reside in the Vancouver region or by telephone if you do not. The interviews will be recorded on an MP3 player.

Confidentiality and Anonymity: All information resulting from the interviews will be kept anonymous and your name will not be used in any of the documents resulting from this study (e.g. doctoral dissertation, published articles, conference presentations) unless you specifically ask to be identified as a contributor to the project. The transcripts from the interviews and the meetings and the digital audio files will be stored on a password protected computer. Consent forms (see below) will be kept in a sealed envelope in a locked filing cabinet and stored separately from interview transcripts. According to university policy, all transcripts, audio files, and consent forms will be stored for five years and then destroyed.

Interview Feedback: You might request copies of personal interview transcripts to ensure the researcher has accurately captured ideas and opinions. You will only be provided with copies of your own interviews – not those of other volunteers.
Interview Results: Information generated from these interviews and meetings will be published as part of a doctoral dissertation and in scholarly journals. Participants might request a summary of the research findings following the completion of this project as well as copies of published articles.

Your Voluntary Participation: Your participation is entirely voluntary and you have the right to withdraw from the project at any time. You are also free to not answer any question. If you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a research participant, you are encouraged to contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Service at (604) 822-8598 or if long distance e-mail to RSIL@ors.ubc.ca or toll free (1-877) 822-8598.

Risks and Benefits: Although this project is considered to be low risk, you might feel uncomfortable with some of the questions asked. If you do not wish to answer any question, just say ‘pass’ and we will move onto the next section. There might be no direct benefit to you by your participation in this study but your involvement will contribute to our understanding of the disability sport movement and the potential of online communication for members of this group.

Further Contact Information or Concerns: If you have any questions or require further information regarding the project, please contact Andrea Bundon at (604) 240-0796 or her supervisor, Dr. Laura Hurd Clarke, at (604) 822-4281.
CONSENT
I have read the above information and understand the nature of the study. I understand that participation in this study is voluntary and I might refuse to participate in or withdraw from the study at any time.

Please choose one of the following options:
I would like my contributions to this project to remain anonymous – I do not want to be identified by name in any published or presented material resulting from this project. Instead I would like all comments made by me during the interview and on the blog to be attributed to the following pseudonym

__________________________________________________________________________
(Please clearly print a pseudonym of your choosing)

I would like to be recognized for my contributions to this project – please attribute all comments made by me during the interviews and on the blog to

__________________________________________________________________________
(Please clearly print your name as you would like it to appear in printed material)

I hereby agree to the above stated conditions and consent to participate in this study. Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records. Your signature also indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

Signed: ____________________________________________________________________
Date: ____________________
Appendix D : Sample interview guide for interviews with blog readers

BACKGROUND/HISTORY
• Can you tell me a bit about yourself and how you got involved in sport?
• What about more recently – what is your sport involvement now?
• How would you describe your involvement with disability sport/Paralympic sport?

PROJECT INVOLVEMENT
• How did you find the blog?
• What were your first impressions of the blog?
• Why did you decide to participate in the online discussions?
• What has been your involvement with the blog since then? How frequently do you read it? How often do you post?
• What do you think are the strengths of the blog? The weaknesses?
• What posts have you found to be the most engaging? Why?
• What topics would you like to see explored on the blog?
• What is your opinion on the conversations that occur on the blog?
• What changes would you suggest to the blog?

BLOG TOPICS
This section would ask for the participants’ opinion on certain topics that have been discussed on the blog in the previous weeks – specific questions will be written as the project progresses. Likely topics to include:
• The nature of the Paralympic movement
• The relation of the Paralympics to the Olympics
• Inclusion in mainstream sport

OUTCOMES OF BLOG PARTICIPATION
This section will use examples of forms of action that are suggested on the blog and will ask participants what they thought of the suggestions, whether or not they followed up on them, were there any other actions they took as a result of their participation in the blog (ideas that occurred to them but might not have actually been captured in the blog discussions).

FUTURE OF DISABILITY/PARALYMPIC SPORT
• What do you think is the future of disability/Paralympic sport? What new challenges is it facing? Where do you see if going in the next decade? Beyond that?
• What role do you think athletes and others play in determining the future direction of disability sport?