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Disability activism in the new media ecology: Campaigning strategies in the digital era.

Key words: disability activism, Internet, new media ecology, Paralympics, welfare reform, austerity.

Abstract

This article examines the changing nature of disability activism through the influence of social media. As disabled people in the UK have been subjected to acute austerity, this has coincided with a new era of disability activism channelled through increased social media participation. Drawing on the analysis of one group's online activities and a qualitative content analysis of disability protest coverage in traditional news media during the 2012 Paralympic Games, this article positions this shift in the broader framework of 'new media ecology' (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2010). We explore how emerging structures of disability activism have begun to offer a more visible profile to challenge government policy and negative stereotypes of disabled people. This highlights the usefulness of campaigning strategies for generating favourable news coverage for disability protest.

Introduction

This article sets out to highlight how the influence of new media has impacted on the campaigning strategies and ethos of disability activism in the UK. We position this shift in the broader framework of 'new media ecology' - a current theme in media studies - whereby those such as Merrin (2009) have observed that the rise of digital media, the transformation of 'old' media into digital form and on-going developments in online technology, have initiated a new post-broadcast era with augmented opportunities for 'non-elite' actors and previously marginalised groups to acquire visibility in the public arena (Chadwick, 2011). Discussion shows that although the growth in digital activism has initiated new strategies for disability protest, its ability to influence traditional news media debates remains pivotal to its effectiveness and power to represent the voice of disabled people.

We begin by outlining the changing nature of disability activism in the UK. Early campaigns in the 1960s focusing on the exclusion of disabled people from the relative economic prosperity were followed by a long-term global push from the 1970s to 1990s to secure direct payments for independent living and civil rights legislation. Progress was slow but eventually achieved thanks to the continual efforts of disabled people committed to challenging the dominant mis-conceptions around their lives.

The onset of the 2010 austerity cuts brought with them a new era of oppression for disabled people. As we discuss, the acute social and economic impact was matched with an increasingly hostile print media and a dominant focus on disabled people as 'welfare cheats' (Briant et al, 2013). These new challenges to the lives and wellbeing of disabled people emerged in a changing climate of activism and communication technologies. In examining this in more detail, this article turns to explore the actions of a new campaigning group,

Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC). We show how their approach – illustrated through their tactics during the 2012 Paralympics in London – typified a broader ‘new media ecology’ by garnering interest from both traditional and new media outlets. *DPAC*’s approach not only saw disability activism embrace Internet-based media as a key campaign tool, but this was underpinned also by increasing use of personal stories and celebrity endorsements as part of an innovative activist repertoire. The article concludes by considering the importance of adopting a more diverse campaign strategy in order for contemporary disability activism to generate traditional news media coverage and influence policy-makers, as well as public opinion.

The changing parameters of disability activism

Over the past fifty years, disability activism has facilitated a key role in challenging discrimination and oppression. Global links emerged from small groups of local activists, which ultimately led to wide scale policy changes across a number of countries. In the UK, the disability movement grew from a gradual recognition by disabled people that neither party politics nor charitable and voluntary organisations were serving their interests appropriately or well (Oliver, 1997). This began during the 1960s when disabled people challenged their exclusion from the apparent economic prosperity through a campaign for a national disability income (Oliver, 1996). This was a critical new departure in that the campaign was initiated by disabled people themselves, rather than professional policy-makers and experts (Oliver and Barnes, 1998). By the early 1980s local campaigns by disabled people across different parts of the UK had emerged, led by those unhappy with the services they were receiving from local authorities. By the late 1990s, the activities of these local hubs of disability activism supported by empirical research (Zarb and Nadash, 1994) eventually forced government to respond with legislation for direct payments (Pearson, 2000).

The 1980s were also a significant time as a sustained push for comprehensive disability discrimination legislation in the UK took hold. The pathway to achieving rights-based legislation proved to be a slow process. But a change in focus, integrating both a higher media profile for disabled people as a result of mass street protests (Shakespeare, 2006) and the development of an evidence base to highlight the extent of disability discrimination in the UK (Barnes 1991) proved to be the tipping point in securing policy change. Whilst the original 1995 Disability Discrimination Act was viewed by many as falling short in meeting the demands of disabled people (Gooding, 2000) it formed the basis of a framework of new equality laws passed over the following decade, covering disability discrimination across key areas such as employment, education, transport and access to goods and services (Pearson and Watson, 2007).

These two UK campaigns – direct payments and anti-discrimination legislation – signified key achievements for disability activism. In each case, long-term support for policy change was underpinned by clearly defined outcomes and a strategy – incorporating evidence of

systemic discrimination and mass media coverage of protest events – to secure these shifts. After this time, those such as Barnes (2007) argued that the achievements placed disability activism in the UK in a precarious long-term position, whereby its ‘success threatens to undermine its continuity and future’ (Barnes, 2007: 203). This assessment rested on two observations. Firstly, that disability organisations have long been at risk of ‘incorporation’ or ‘co-option’ into government action, whether because of funding reasons or to gain credibility from policy-makers. This could place additional distance between their leaders and those whom they aim to represent (Oliver and Barnes, 2006). Secondly, it was argued that there remained a power imbalance among traditional charities, where an absence of disabled people in leadership positions continued. Whilst there has been a shift in more recent years to secure enhanced participation (Shakespeare, 2006), many have been sceptical of such changes, interpreting them as little more than ‘window dressing’ (Oliver and Barnes, 2012). Several disability writers would argue that following on from the two campaigns, which provided both a common cause and scope to unite a diverse campaigning alliance, activists in the early 2000s struggled to find unity and build on this momentum.

New challenges: disability in an era of austerity

New challenges soon emerged when the global financial crisis of 2008 brought with it a programme of policy responses that initiated a very direct attack on the lives of disabled people. In the UK, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government set in place widespread targeting of austerity measures. Significant cuts were made to Westminster government departments, local authorities and funding allocations to the devolved administrations. It soon became apparent that the impact of the changes was far from even across the population and for a generation of disabled people, the austerity measures were particularly acute (Wood and Grant, 2012; 2013), with reforms impacting across all areas of life (Campbell et al, 2012). Under the austerity programme, the changes had a dramatic impact on the social and economic lives of disabled people and with it producing a destabilizing effect (O’Hara, 2014) on day-to-day living. In particular, changes such as the proposed abolition of the non-means tested *Disability Living Allowance* (DLA) – implemented in 1992 to help disabled people cope with the extra costs of disability - in favour of the medically assessed *Personal Independence Payment*, served to erode the daily support structures of those either in work and/or at home.

Additional monies - available since the late 1980s through the Independent Living Fund (ILF) for those with the highest support needs – were targeted also, leaving local authorities in England and Wales to pick up the shortfall from 2015. This is a trend that has seen similar payment schemes for disabled people elsewhere in Europe decimated by austerity measures too (Pearson, Ridley and Hunter, 2014). As the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, Magdalena Sepúlveda, commented in early 2013, those groups most likely to be left destitute by cuts to essential benefits were also those most likely to be affected by cuts to public services (O’Hara, 2014).

As Soloatic and Meekosha (2012) have argued, whilst many of the disability movement's earlier demands around work have been met in the Global North, the emergence of neo-liberal state strategies to propel disabled people into the labour market to curtail growing social security costs, served to undermine earlier progress. Likewise, the broader collective struggles that typified these earlier campaigns and challenged oppressive structures and attitudes have been restructured increasingly by new discourses of personalisation and individual choice. On the one hand, commentators such as Cooper (2004) depict this as part of a broader de-politicisation of more traditional groupings and activism. Yet, at the same time, the austerity measures initiated widespread opposition through a new age of activism and participation. These have been boosted and to a certain extent also shaped by social media and operating largely outside conventional media channels (Butler, 2012) as the next section discusses in detail.

Disability and new media: A new era of activism

Over the last decade, much has been written that has identified the impact of a digital divide on the lives of disabled people (see Ellis and Kent, 2011). This has centred largely on issues around access, accessibility and social inclusion. By 2013, the *Oxford Internet Survey* (Dutton and Blank, 2013) reported that 51 per cent of disabled people in the UK were using the Internet on a regular basis. This represented a leap in participation amongst the disabled population, although still considerably less than the 84 per cent of non-disabled respondents. Earlier work in this area has highlighted how online technology has reproduced and even exacerbated the environmental barriers that traditionally exclude disabled people from key areas of social life (Goggin and Newell, 2003; Dobranski and Hargittai, 2006). As such, access and accessibility issues arguably resonate with key arguments in both disability and Internet studies. In one sense, the exclusionary design of some of the new technologies 'add[s] significant weight to a social barriers model of disability' (Roulstone, 1998: 1). At the same time, there has been also a tendency among Internet scholars to assimilate accessibility issues to the digital divide paradigm (Vicente and Lopez, 2010; Warschauer, 2003), which points at the inequalities caused by a disparity in Internet access, use and IT literacy to argue that online media may be inherently dangerous for democracy and society more generally (Norris, 2001).

However, despite this awareness of the Internet's ambivalence for disabled people, a number of commentators writing over the last two decades (e.g. Johnson and Moxon, 1998; Polat, 2005) have emphasised its potential for promoting civic participation among disabled users and strengthening the influence of disability organisations in policy-making. This work provided some useful early insights into the significance of online media for disabled users. In particular, it heightened the importance of discussion forums and blogs for the diffusion of alternative, unmediated representations of disability (Thoreau, 2006; Goggin and Noonan, 2007), exposed the role of online communications as a booster and multiplier of interpersonal relationships for disabled users (Andersberg and Jonsson, 2005) and revealed

the benefits of both online support communities (Obst and Stafurik, 2010) and mobile Internet connections (Goggin, 2011) for disabled people. In light of this, it is important to ask whether these new opportunities for disabled Internet users to connect with others is having an impact also on their political participation levels, as well as on the structure and strategies of disability advocacy groups.

Since the outset of the austerity programme, platforms such as blogs, Twitter and Facebook have proved important tools for disability activism in challenging government policy. As the proposed changes were initially debated in the Westminster Parliament, the strength of different social media drives emerged. One line of response came through what the prominent blogger Sue Marsh termed 'from bed activism' (Butler, 2012). This saw a sustained attack on the welfare cuts from the 'Broken of Britain' group in 2010-11 and the 'We are Spartacus' campaign thereafter, which were organised through a small but extremely active group of disabled bloggers. The social media presence of this group on the day of a key government vote helped secure three defeats of the Welfare Reform Bill in the House of Lords. This was achieved when a report outlining a series of contentions with the Coalition plans to remove DLA (Campbell et al, 2012) became one of the top trending Twitter topics of the day. Whilst the Spartacus Report had been largely ignored by traditional news media, interest generated by activists on Twitter led to support across the political and celebrity spectrum and to an unprecedented level of public interest. This was clearly a new era of campaigning in disability politics. The next section explores this shift in more detail by looking at the work of one particular disability organisation, *DPAC*, which has emerged as a key player in the new era of digitised disability activism.

Campaigning 'in flux:' DPAC and the evolving use of new media

As detailed so far, the history of disability activism in the UK has relied strongly on long fought campaigns led by disabled people, unity amongst diverse groups towards a common cause and the production of evidence-based research to challenge strongly held public misconceptions around disability and media interest in reporting protest actions. Likewise, the use of new communication technologies for campaigning purposes, combined with the climate of fear created by the Coalition Government's controversial plans for welfare reform, led to a deep renewal in the structure, action repertoire and leadership of UK disability rights groups. Focusing on group structure, history and relationship with new technologies, a new typology of disability campaigning can be located around three key themes (Trevisan, 2013). Firstly, *formal organisations*, could refer to pre-existing disability organisations (including charities, disabled people's organisations or 'hybrid' bodies) that used the Internet to boost their campaign efforts against disability welfare changes, often by forming temporary *ad hoc* coalitions. Secondly, *'digitised' activists* incorporate groups of experienced disabled self-advocates rooted strongly in the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990) and principles of independent living (Morris, 1993). Many of these activists had previously been involved in the campaigns for anti-discrimination legislation of the 1980s

and 1990s – either in a personal capacity or part of self-advocacy groups - and set up a Web presence after meeting at protest rallies in an effort to carry on campaigning independently of established disability organisations. Thirdly, *digital action networks* include online only initiatives created and maintained by disabled bloggers-cum-activists. Digital media were integral not only to the action strategies, but also to the very existence of this type of groups, whose members were geographically dispersed across the UK and in all likelihood would not have met if not online.

Using this framework, *DPAC* represents the archetypal example of the ‘*digitised*’ activist grouping. *DPAC* was established by several experienced disabled campaigners and academics, following on from a protest rally at the Conservative Party Conference in Birmingham in 2010. They declined an invitation to join a broad campaigning coalition jointly headed by established disability charities and self-advocacy organisations, including the UK’s Disabled People’s Council in March 2011 on the grounds that it saw some of the sponsor organisations as being co-responsible for the oppression and disempowerment of disabled people. In addition, *DPAC*’s website presented it as ‘something more’ than just anti-austerity group and celebrated its first national conference in October 2011. At this time, participants elected a steering group tasked with overseeing the co-ordination of campaign activities on a broad range of issues – from disability hate crime to transport policy.

The personal, the political and changing campaigning strategies

Importantly, *DPAC* ’s engagement with social media evolved gradually from its emergence as a campaigning force in late 2010. At the start, *DPAC* seemed reluctant to engage with more interactive online platforms and provide supporters with opportunities to contribute to their campaigning activities directly through online channels. This mirrored a tendency that previous research by one of the authors (Trevisan, 2014) found to be widespread among Scottish disability organisations prior to the recent anti-austerity campaigns. This reflected a perceived lack of relevance of the Internet for disabled people due to accessibility problems and a contingent fear of losing control over how campaign content is framed. Nevertheless, *DPAC*’s approach to online media changed over the course of several months as the group learned from what seemed to have worked for other groups, in particular those centred on disabled bloggers such as the *Broken of Britain* and *We are Spartacus* (Trevisan, 2013). This process followed a typical pattern in online activism, for which relatively new or less resourced groups that have less to lose tend to be the first to adopt innovative online solutions, which others then copy once their effectiveness has been tested (Chadwick, 2007).

Whilst still embracing more traditional protest tactics such as street marches and sit-ins and positioning themselves within the broader anti-cuts movement (Williams-Findlay, 2011), *DPAC* gradually began to adopt increasingly innovative ‘armchair army’ techniques (Trevisan, 2013). Most notably, in March 2013, the launch of *DPAC*’s online campaign against the

closure of the ILF centred on using personal stories of disabled people affected by welfare changes. This represented a clear strategic change in seeking to win over public opinion and policy-makers, which contrasted with the traditional opposition of the disability movement to using this type of approach. Whilst the use of personal stories in campaign messages has been rejected by many groups (Doddington, Jones and Miller, 1994; Barnett and Hammond, 1999) on the grounds that an individualised focus could be interpreted in ways that promote disabled people's victimization, the use of personalised action repertoires has become increasingly important in contemporary activist strategies (Bennett and Segerberg, 2011). In particular, those such as Sue Marsh, Kayla Franklin and the other disabled bloggers responsible for *We are Spartacus* could be credited with establishing the use of personal storytelling online as a strategic tool in disability rights advocacy. After some initial hesitation, DPAC followed in the footsteps of these 'pioneers,' having seen that this innovative – if still contraversial – approach had enabled them to gather a very considerable online following and put them on the radar of policy-makers, who invited them to meetings in parliament.

The problem with 'established' news media

Despite DPAC's multi-faceted and increasingly innovative approach to its campaigning both online and off-line, disability rights activists have clearly faced a long-term problem of attracting positive news media coverage. This is a fundamental issue for advocates who wish to have an impact on policy decisions, as both print and broadcast media continue to exert a great deal of influence on politicians and public opinion more generally, intervening in the policy making process as a result (Koch-Baumgartner and Voltmer, 2010). Indeed, as Chadwick (2011) argued, the increasing interconnectedness between 'emergent' and 'established' forms of media are affording alternative voices new opportunities to contribute to or even drive the 'political information cycle.' Yet, journalists continue to operate according to standards that cast some degree of suspicion over the legitimacy and credibility of online sources (Jha, 2008), and more often than not tend to disregard or report negatively on protest groups (Lester and Hutchins, 2009). This poses a real threat to the ability of groups such as DPAC to have a concrete impact on policy decisions.

To add to these problems, which at least in part are common to all 'fringe' or alternative groups, disability rights activists are also faced with the need to contrast the negative stereotyping of disabled people, and disabled benefits claimants in particular, in traditional forms of UK media (Barnes and Mercer, 2010). Writing in the late 1980s, Karpf's (1988) work highlighted a number of trends: a prevalence of 'cure stories'; the role of charity appeals; the invisibility of disabled people on television and the stereo-typed portrayals of disabled characters in screen dramas. Others such as Barnes (1991) outlined the prevalence of newspaper stories around disability that centred on narratives of sympathy, courage and 'triumph over adversity'. As Barnes and Mercer (2010) observe, this corresponded with a form of oppression, with disabled people portrayed as weak, unattractive personalities and

objects of pity. Consequently, the early 1990s media interest in the disability movement's street protests to secure anti-discrimination legislation represented a welcome – albeit short-lived – shift from the more dominant media stereotypes of disability.

Whilst the UK Government's austerity programme targeted the fundamental nature of how the state supports disabled people, the reporting of these changes within the traditional media invoked a clear shift in how disability was represented. As Briant et al's (2013) review of the coverage of disability in the print media in 2010/11 showed, there was a significant increase in the number of newspaper articles on disability since the onset of the economic crisis. However, this also coincided with a change in the way disabled people were described. Far fewer presented a sympathetic image. Instead, the dominant focus centred on benefit fraud and entitlement, with words such as 'cheat', 'scrounger' or 'fraud' being used more commonly. For Briant et al (2013), this resulted in a re-evaluation of who is and who is not deserving of benefits. This generated a negative image of disabled people as an 'undeserving poor' (Stone, 1984), which clashed head-on with the efforts of DPAC and other groups to overturn forthcoming cuts and increased conditionality in disability welfare provision. In order to address these issues, some campaign groups such as *The Broken of Britain* and *The Hardest Hit* succeeded in securing coverage from more 'sympathetic' news outlets such as the *Guardian* and the *Independent* by stressing the non-disruptive character of their online campaigns in contrast to traditional street demonstrations, seeking to present themselves as responsible and therefore 'newsworthy' policy actors (Trevisan, 2013). However, this was not an appropriate tactic for DPAC given that street protest remained a key part of their activism. Consequently, their initiatives received attention from specialised disability online press such as *Disability Now* but were otherwise ignored by traditional media outlets.

In this context, DPAC identified a unique opportunity to gain visibility in traditional news outlets during the 2012 Paralympics Games in London. The main focus of DPAC's Paralympic protests was the inclusion of the multinational IT firm Atos Origin as a key sponsor of the event. Controversially at this time, Atos had also been awarded the contract to manage an essential part of the disability benefits assessment process on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). Since then, there had been a wealth of publicity linking the assessment process to numerous deaths of people who had recently undergone or were about to be reassessed for the new benefit regime (Warren, Garthwaite and Bamba, 2014). The 'Atos Games' therefore formed a series of protest events to coincide with key dates in the Paralympics. Protest events took place between the 27th and 31st August 2012 and included an 'Atos Games' opening ceremony in London and local demonstrations in several locations across the UK. Other protests included a 'memorial service' at Atos headquarters for those who had died being declared 'fit for work' and the 'Closing Atos Ceremony', organised jointly with the anti-austerity network *UK Uncut*, which also led to an impromptu occupation of the DWP offices in central London. Parallel events were promoted also through the 'Atos Armchair Games', allowing supporters to protest remotely through the

telephone, email and social media. A useful indication of the success of these protests was provided by the 451 tweets that incorporated hastags suggested by DPAC (#AtosGames, #GoParalympicGB; @Atos), including several by accounts with a large amount of followers such as @OccupyLondon (over 40,000) and @UKuncut (over 60,000).

DPAC's protests against Atos arguably served two purposes. Primarily, they represented an opportunity to reach a very large audience that was already focused on disability issues via the Paralympics. In addition, they had the potential to act as a catalyst to promote participation amongst disabled people and their supporters. The strategy certainly appeared to secure a wider audience as an unlikely ally emerged in the form of the *MailOnline*. In contrast to the dominant discourse around disabled people in traditional printed media (Briant et al, 2013), the *MailOnline* described DPAC as a 'hard working campaign group...forced to campaign...for what amounts to the most basic human rights' (Poulton, 2012). The article also addressed DPAC's protests more directly:

During the Paralympics, the anger and sense of betrayal felt by thousands of disabled people, and mostly contained within social network sites and on blogs, has erupted onto our streets and is refusing to be quiet.

(Poulton, 2012).

Analysis of *Google Trends* records during this period indicated that this type of media report was accompanied by a substantial rise in online interest for DPAC during the Games. This resulted in Internet users being more than twice as likely to search for information about the group or disability protest more generally in August 2012 than they had ever been since DPAC was founded in October 2010. Following this event-related peak in online interest for DPAC's activities, search frequency inevitably dropped, but nonetheless scored on average substantially higher than in the period prior to the Games. It would therefore be reasonable to suggest a lasting impact for the visibility acquired by DPAC during the Paralympics. Hence, key questions to ask are how much news coverage, if any, DPAC's 'Atos Games' generated, what sources were mentioned in the coverage, and how this represented disabled people and their pleas.

Securing the news media interest?: DPAC, the 'Atos Games' and the emergence of a 'new media ecology'

In order to explore these issues, a qualitative content analysis of print and TV coverage was carried out for the period between one week prior to the start of the 2012 London Paralympics and one week after the conclusion of the Games (22nd August – 16th September 2012 inclusive). Using a series of key words to identify news items that focused specifically on DPAC's initiatives (i.e. highlighted them in their headline or first paragraph), reports were identified using the archive of UK publications available through the online database Lexis Nexis. These were coded from several variables, including: date, length and publication title;

type of publication; whether *DPAC*'s protests were the main focus of the news item that mentioned them; all sources cited explicitly; the inclusion of personal stories of disability and connections to broader policy narratives (e.g. the 'myth' of disability benefit fraud; institutionalised disability discrimination; social citizenship/rights etc.). Coding was carried out by two independent coders with an overall Cronbach's Alpha reliability score of .87 (excluding variables that allowed for multiple entries such as mass media sources). The following section moves on to discuss findings from the content analysis.

More coverage: DPAC goes 'mainstream'

It was clear that the 'Atos Games' were indeed associated with a substantial increase in *DPAC*'s visibility in British traditional news media and this was confirmed by content analysis results. During the period under scrutiny (22nd August – 16th September 2012), *DPAC* was the focus of 47 different print and TV items. This constituted a striking rise in coverage given that in the entire year prior to the Paralympics *DPAC* was mentioned in only 39 media items despite holding regular protests against Atos, the DWP and the Coalition government more generally. Furthermore, the level of coverage reached by *DPAC* during the Paralympics appeared also to be sustainable in the longer term, as in the twelve months that followed the period analysed in this study, British news media released a total of 156 items focusing on this group.

The medium is the message: issues around partisanship

In this context, it is important to look at the type of media that covered the 'Atos Games'. Print media reported on *DPAC*'s actions far more extensively than TV channels, for which only three relevant news items were retrieved (Figure 1). Also, the 'Atos Games' were particularly popular with 'sympathetic' newspapers, including both openly political outlets such as the *Morning Star* and those that were more critical of the Coalition government's welfare reforms such as the *Guardian* and the *Independent*. Conversely, publications that were more or less aligned with government policy on disability welfare such as the *Times* and *Daily Telegraph* offered no coverage of *DPAC*'s protests (Table 1).

[Figure 1 about here]

Figure 1 – Distribution of 'Atos Games' coverage across types of UK news outlets

[Table 1 about here]

Table 1 – Distribution of 'Atos Games' coverage in individual UK news outlets

However, there were two notable exceptions to this trend: the *MailOnline* and the *Metro*. A news item dedicated to DPAC's protest featured in each of these outlets on 30th August. Both were particularly interesting and raised broader issues around the representation of DPAC. The *MailOnline*'s report was the longest one among all those examined in this study (1700 words) and mixed news reporting with the style of an opinion piece throughout. The article adopted an ambiguous tone towards the protesters and was critical of the use of what they termed 'able-disabled' stereotypes in the coverage of the Paralympics, although also drawing on some of the same clichés throughout the remainder of the text. The *Metro*'s article title explicitly branded 'the Atos Games' as a 'boycott' of the Paralympics, effectively ignoring the declarations reported on the same day by other news outlets in which protest organisers stated that their actions were directed at Atos, rather than the Paralympics, of which there were fully supportive. As we outline in the next section, these reports stood aside from the broader narrative patterns identified through content analysis.

The role of 'celebrity' voice': Is 'endorsement' a pre-requisite for a successful activist strategy?

Disabled celebrities as spokespersons for disability activism

Clearly any focus on campaigning strategies requires a more in-depth examination of whose voice was being represented in the print media at this time – the protesters, disabled people in general, Atos representatives, government officials or Paralympic organisers? Exploring the 44 print items selected for this study, the process of coding all the sources quoted explicitly in newspaper coverage of DPAC's actions revealed that space was given to a plurality of voices (Figure 2). In the majority of cases, articles cited one or more disabled voices. These fell into 3 categories: DPAC activists (n=21), disability benefit claimants (n=12) or disabled 'celebrities' such as the former track and field Paralympian Stuart Brae and swimming gold medallist Tara Flood (n=12).

[Figure 2 about here]

Figure 2 – Sources quoted in news coverage of the 'Atos Games'

Quotes from disabled ‘celebrity’ spokespersons proved to be particularly popular with broadsheet newspapers. For example, Flood was quoted as stating:

Atos must think that by sponsoring the Paralympics they will convince everyone that they are only here to support disabled people rather than what they actual do, which is destroy people's lives.

The Independent, 29th August 2012

As this type of statement formed an integral part of *DPAC*'s campaign strategy, their successful inclusion in national broadsheets demonstrated their determination to offset some of the barriers that had previously prevented more substantive media coverage of their activism. It was also interesting to note that broadsheets relied on a wider range of sources than other types of print media. This seemed to reflect an effort to provide a more balanced portrayal of the issues. However the same newspapers – those critical of the Government's austerity measures - invariably placed the words of activists and disabled benefit claimants ahead of those of Atos representatives and government spokespersons. This was also apparent in the months after the Games, when a number of Paralympians spoke candidly about how *DLA* had been vital in allowing them to pursue their sporting careers (Gentleman, 2013). The importance of ‘speaking out’, rather than more traditional forms of activism was reiterated by Sophie Christiansen, gold medal winner for the British equestrian team:

I don't want to go and march outside parliament or chain myself to railings, but I know that if I speak out about the difficulties I have it will get in the newspapers and on TV, unlike other disabled people who don't have the luxury of being in the public eye and having their voice heard.

Cited in Williams (2013).

Personal stories, disability and discrimination

As discussed earlier, the use of personal stories from activists formed the focus of the majority of quotes from *DPAC* activists or disability benefit claimants and appeared in half of the articles examined during the Paralympics period. However, content analysis revealed that personal stories of disability were consistently linked to three main overarching narratives: institutionalised discrimination (with particular reference to benefits eligibility and processes of assessment and administration by Atos); the ‘myth’ of disability benefit fraud and disabled people's social rights and citizenship (Table 2). More broadly, issues of institutionalised discrimination and oppression constituted the most prevalent narrative in the content analysis. This featured in over three quarters of the articles examined. Although explicit references to disabled people's rights and entitlements were only occasional, the dominance of issues around discrimination over personal tragedy and impairment provided a strong indication that the news media framing of *DPAC*'s Paralympic protests was in line

with the themes put forward by campaigners and therefore these did not distort their stories.

[Table 2 about here]

Table 2 - Broader narratives appearing in UK news coverage of the 'Atos Games'

Discussion and conclusions

Drawing upon interactions of traditional and new media, *DPAC*'s campaign strategy links in with what Chadwick (2013) terms a 'hybrid media system'. This is based upon conflict and competition between older and newer media approaches, but also includes what Chadwick (2013: 207) refers to as 'important pockets of interdependence'. Therefore *DPAC*'s multi-faceted strategy - as illustrated during the Paralympics - clearly marks a shift in campaigning for the disability movement and is indicative of a broader trend in political activism. More recently, tweets from campaigners issued during a 'Save the ILF' event in January 2015, urged a strong Twitter presence to remedy the limited visibility granted to disability protesters by traditional news media outlets (Figure 3).

[Figure 3 about here]

Figure 3 – Re-tweet from DPAC supporter urging others to keep tweeting about the campaign in the face of little news coverage

As Chadwick argues, politics is increasingly defined by organisations, groups and individuals who are best able to blend older and newer forms of media. Whilst *DPAC* campaigned vociferously from its inception at the end of 2010 using traditional protest tactics and a growing social media presence, their profile was clearly raised during the Paralympics as their online presence was complemented with interest from print news media outlets.

The withdrawal of Atos from its contract from the DWP in March 2014, can be attributed at least in part to public and political anger over the testing procedures used (Siddique, 2014) and *DPAC* have clearly played an important role in getting this message across. Yet, important questions have been raised that this case study was able to answer only in part. More in-depth research is required to illuminate the fluid relationship between disability rights activism and increasingly interconnected mass media forms. For example, it will be useful to understand whether this is likely to lead to a sustainable change in public portrayals of disability in the long term, or instead is limited to high-profile but one-off events such as the Paralympics.

Whilst *DPAC's* approach to online media prior to the Paralympics allowed them to retain full control over communications, the interest from traditional news outlets during the Games enabled a strengthening of their message and more positive images of disability to be promoted. These countered the wider media attack on disabled people apparent in conjunction with austerity policies (Briant et al, 2013). Likewise, the use of carefully framed personal stories highlighting the barriers and discrimination faced by disabled people as a direct consequence of welfare reforms clearly raised the profile of the threat to their social and economic position as a political issue. These personalised accounts have subsequently re-emerged in the printed press since summer 2012 and remain important illustrations of the very real impact of benefit change (Gentleman, 2013).

This process resonates simultaneously with both the tendency for online media – especially social networking platforms – to blur the distinction between ‘private’ and ‘public’ (Bimber, Flanagin and Stohl, 2005) and the need for innovative campaigning groups to also become visible in traditional media debates in order to be able to foster concrete policy change. Therefore, it could be argued that the emergence of personal stories of disability discrimination as both online campaign tools and newsworthy material contributes to the politicisation of the private sphere in a way that promotes a more ‘inclusive’ form of citizenship (Lister, 2007) for disabled people. More broadly, this opens up a new era for disability activism and campaigning. As we have shown here, whilst not negating the role of more traditional protest and the need for a plurality of tactics to be used in combination with one another, the role of digital activism is now embedded in disability protest culture and set to play a crucial role in future disability politics more generally.

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