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Connected Citizens or Digital Isolation?
Online Disability Activism in Times of Crisis

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Abstract

This thesis asks whether the internet can at all re-configure political participation into a more inclusive experience for disabled users, enhancing their stakes in citizenship. This issue assumes particular relevance at a time in which, amidst the worst economic crisis in decades, the rights of those traditionally excluded from civic life are at risk of being compromised even further. In an effort to transcend the restrictive access/accessibility framework applied so far in disability and new media research, this project focused on the "digitalisation" of disability activism in the wake of the radical welfare reform introduced by the UK government between 2010 and 2012. A combination of emerging digital methods and established social science techniques were employed to map and analyse the groups involved in opposing proposed changes to disability welfare online. These included: hyperlink network analysis; an "inventory" of online media; content analysis of Facebook conversations; and semi-structured interviews with key figures from a variety of campaigning groups.

Overall, this work exposed an evolution in the ecology of British disability activism involving both changes in the way in which existing organisations operate as well as the emergence of new, online-based players. In particular, three main group types were identified. These included: formal disability organisations (both "professionalised" charities and member-led groups); experienced disabled activists who experimented with e-campaigning for the first time; and a network of young disabled bloggers-turned-activists who operated exclusively online and rapidly gained visibility on both the internet and traditional mass media (i.e. print and broadcast). Each of these phenomena was explored in detail through the analysis of three emblematic case studies (The Hardest Hit; Disabled People Against Cuts; The Broken of Britain). Several findings emerged that invited reflections on both the changing nature of disability activism in the digital age and the significance of the internet as a civic resource for disadvantaged groups more broadly. To assess the influence of contextual factors on these trends, the online experience of British formal disability organisations was compared to that of their American counterparts, which in the same period were opposing proposals for drastic cuts to federal Medicaid funding.

In Britain, established players were found to be blending traditional repertoires with participatory online tools in a bid to "survive" the pressure of changing user-expectations and the fast pace of contemporary politics. Meanwhile, a new generation of self-appointed

disabled “leaders” used online media to construct a radically different form of disability activism. This was focused more on issues than ideology, aspiring to redesigning protest in a less contentious and arguably more effective fashion. Nevertheless, the high centralisation and rigid leadership style adopted by these very same campaigners also cast doubts on their ability to promote a more inclusive campaigning experience for online supporters, whose involvement ultimately constituted a form of “peer-mediated” citizenship rather than direct empowerment. At the same time, the comparative part of this study captured a counter-intuitive picture for which British formal disability organisations were ahead of their American counterparts in terms of online innovation. This generated some important reflections on the very nature of “context” in online politics with particular reference to the relationship between systemic and circumstantial factors, as well as the importance of acute crisis moments as triggers of progress in e-activism.

Contents

List of Tables **7**
List of Figures **8**

Introduction and Thesis Organisation **13**

Chapter 1 – Disabled People, Citizenship and New Media **19**

1.1 Second class citizens: The exclusion of disabled people from the political arena **20**
1.1.1 – 'Social citizenship' and the British Welfare State *21*
1.1.2 – Moving forward: The disabled people's movement and anti-discrimination legislation *23*
1.1.3 – Towards greater control? Independent living, direct payments and participation initiatives *26*
1.2 A brief history of disability activism in the UK **27**
1.3 Inclusive citizenship: Eradicating barriers and expanding the political arena **32**
1.4 Can new media help? The story so far **35**
1.5 Looking beyond accessibility: Widening the scope of disability and new media research **39**
1.6 Conclusions **42**

Chapter 2 – The Internet, Citizenship and Collective Action **45**

2.1 Forget about technological utopias: Re-booting online politics research **46**
2.1.1 – The power of 'talk': Ordinary users and 'everyday' online politics *48*
2.2 From *talk* to *action*: The discovery and activation of 'latent' ties **52**
2.2.1 – Social capital: Intellectually intriguing, yet pragmatically elusive *53*
2.2.2 – À la carte participation? Online networks, the individual and 21st century collective action *55*
2.3 Looking for evidence: The limits of organisation-based approaches **59**
2.3.1 – The need for a trigger: Issue-focused participation *61*
2.4 Conclusions and research question **63**

Chapter 3 – Methodological Challenges: Mapping and Analysing Issue-Driven Participation Online **66**

3.1 Key aims and objectives: A thee-steps, multi-method inquiry strategy **67**
3.2 Identifying the catalyst issue **70**
3.2.1 – Checking for online interest: Google Trends vs. 'real world' events *72*
3.3 Case study approach: A new ecology of British disability activism? **74**
3.3.1 – Online media inventory *77*
3.3.2 – Hyperlink network analysis with IssueCrawler *78*
3.4 Analysing group dynamics: Content analysis and semi-structured interviews **81**
3.4.1 – Analysing user-generated content *82*

3.4.2 – Semi-structured interviews and the role of the non-disabled researcher *83*
3.5 Comparing British and American disability organisations online 88
3.6 Ethical considerations 92
3.6.1 – Challenging established conventions: "Vulnerable groups" vs. "sensitive topics" *93*
3.6.2 – Presenting results and preserving anonymity *95*

Chapter 4 – Keep Calm and Tweet On: British Disability Activism Goes Digital 98

4.1 Catalyst issue: Disabled people and the UK welfare reform 99
4.1.1 – Checking for user-interest with Google Trends *101*
4.2 One Issue, a plurality of players and spaces 104
4.2.1 – Great expectations, or business as usual? *106*
4.3 Three emblematic case studies 108
4.3.1 – Formal disability organisations: The Hardest Hit campaign *109*
4.3.2 – Digitised activists: Disabled People Against Cuts *119*
4.3.3 – Digital action networks: The Broken of Britain *125*
4.4 Conclusions 131

Chapter 5 – Learning by Doing: The Labours of Facebook Conversation Analysis 134

5.1 Objectives of content analysis 135
5.2 Why Facebook? 137
5.3 Looking in the right places: Sampling, archiving and analysing Facebook content 140
5.3.1 – Sample unitisation *145*
5.4 Coding frame development 147
5.4.1 – Politics, policy, both or neither? *149*
5.4.2 – Who is talking, and what are they saying? *150*
5.4.3 – Personal stories of disability *151*
5.4.4 – Framing variables *153*
5.5 Conclusions 155

Chapter 6 – Easier Said Than Done: Online Discussion and Political Action on Facebook 157

6.1 Offline catalysts and online discussion 158
6.2 Turning supporters into discussants 161
6.3 'Big P,' 'small p,' or 'no p' politics? 166
6.3.1 – Personal stories as filters to understand policy *169*
6.4 The Broken of Britain: Modern campaigning with old problems 176
6.4.1 – Digital campaigning as a 'third way' between corrupted and contentious politics *176*
6.4.2 – Nothing about us without (the five of) us *180*
6.4.3 – The true value of online talk *183*
6.5 Disabled People Against Cuts: Contentious politics 'as usual' 187
6.6 The Hardest Hit: Traditional repertoires meet micro-empowerment 192
6.7 Conclusions 195

Chapter 7 - One size fits all? Formal Disability Organisations and e-Campaigning in Britain and the United States **197**

7.1 Policy 'crisis' in the United States: Medicaid Cuts Proposals **198**
7.2 Same destination, separate ways: coalition vs. fragmentation in online disability activism **200**
7.3 Email is king but not enough for British organisations **207**
7.4 Personal stories as a 'trademark' of online campaigning **214**
7.5 'Membership in the digital era: A shifting concept? **218**
7.6 Social media: *'Mildly terrifying'* or a *'force for change'*? **224**
7.7 *'Showing up on Capitol Hill is equivalent to 10,000 emails'*: Does online action really matter? **227**
7.8 Conclusions **231**

Chapter 8 – Conclusions **235**

8.1 Towards a new ecology of British disability activism **235**
8.2 Work in progress: Digital disability activism and inclusive citizenship **238**
8.2.1 – Formal organisations and 'digitised' activists: Greater engagement but within clear boundaries *239*
8.2.2 – Online networks, de facto leadership and 'peer-mediated citizenship' *240*
8.3 Crisis and the 'context' of contemporary online activism **245**
8.4 Dominant policy narratives and the limits of online activism **248**
8.5 Looking ahead: What next for disability and new media studies? **251**

Appendix A – Online Media Inventory Matrix 253
Appendix B – Interview Guide 254
Appendix C – Interview Information Sheet and Consent Form 255
Appendix D – Facebook Coding Frame 258
Appendix E – Facebook Coding Manual 261

Bibliography **268**

Tables

Table 4.1 – Timeline of UK welfare reform legislative process and related events 102
Table 4.2 – Online media inventory results 109
Table 5.1 – Overview of Facebook content sample 144
Table 6.1 – Average number of Facebook posts per day (including orphans) 159
Table 6.2 – Facebook posts authorship 162
Table 6.3 – Level of Facebook activity among supporters 163
Table 6.4 – Media used in Facebook starter posts 165
Table 6.5 – Structural focus of Facebook discussion threads 167
Table 6.6 – Average length of Facebook discussion thread (The Broken of Britain) 169
Table 6.7 – Proportion of Facebook posts containing personal stories of disability 169
Table 6.8 – Topics of Facebook posts containing personal stories 172
Table 6.9 – Longitudinal distribution of personal stories 172
Table 6.10 – Arguments used to frame Facebook posts 174
Table 6.11 – Factors influencing Facbook's role in contemporary British disability activism 175
Table 6.12 – Proportion of Facebook posts mentioning politicians and institutions 178
Table 6.13 – Proportion of Facebook posts explicitly mentioning political action 183
Table 6.14 – Types of political action mentioned in Facebook content 184
Table 6.15 – Overall proportion of Facebook posts mentioning political institutions 188
Table 6.16 – Arguments used to frame Facebook posts including personal stories (The Hardest Hit) 193
Table 7.1 – Email and clicktivism features (U.S. organisations) 208
Table 7.2 – Email and clicktivism features (UK organisations) 210
Table 7.3 – UK organisations campaign personalisation 215
Table 7.4 – U.S. organisations campaign personalisation 215
Table 7.5 – Facebook key features (U.S. groups) 226
Table 7.6 – Facebook key features (UK groups) 226
Table 7.7 – Key factors influencing disability e-campaigning in Britain and America 233

Figures

Fig. 4.1 – Google Trends keyword popularity index (UK Google searches, May 2010-Nov. 2011) 103
Fig. 4.2 – The Hardest Hit's homepage, October 2011 110
Fig. 4.3 – The Hardest Hit London march, 11.05.2011 110
Fig. 4.4 – IssueCrawler network map, The Hardest Hit sponsor organisations 117
Fig. 4.5 – DPAC's homepage, October 2011 120
Fig. 4.6 – IssueCrawler network map, Disabled People Against Cuts 123
Fig. 4.7 – The Broken of Britain's homepage, October 2011 126
Fig. 4.8 – Online features unique to each UK group/network 132
Fig. 6.1 – Fluctuations in the total number of Facebook posts per day 158
Fig. 6.2 – Fluctuations in the number of Facebook posts per day (excluding "orphan" posts) 160
Fig. 6.3 – Ratio of starter, comment, and orphan posts over time (The Broken of Britain) 162
Fig. 6.4 – Authorship of personal stories 171
Fig. 6.5 – Problem framing in Facebook content 173
Fig. 6.6 – The Broken of Britain announce a "temporary" campaign break 182
Fig. 7.1 – IssueCrawler inter-actor network map, U.S. formal disability organisations 204
Fig. 7.2 – IssueCrawler inter-actor network map, UK formal disability organisations 205
Fig. 7.3 – Range of Facebook "fan" number for groups under scrutiny 219
Fig. 8.1 – The Broken of Britain communicative styles and citizenship profiles 242
Fig. 8.2 – Dimensions of 'crisis' in relation to e-campaigning innovation 247

Publications

Part of the research carried out for this PhD thesis formed the basis for two book chapters published in edited volumes on the mass media, politics and civic engagement. These included:

Trevisan, F. (2013) "Disabled People, Digital Campaigns, and Contentious Politics: Upload Successful or Connection Failed?," in Scullion, R., Lilleker, D., Jackson, D., and Gerodimos, R., (eds.), *The Media, Political Participation, and Empowerment*, London: Routledge, pp. 175-91.

Trevisan, F. (2012) "ICTs for Empowerment? Disability Organisations and the Democratizing Potential of Web 2.0 in Scotland," in Manoharan, A., and Holzer, M., (eds.), *E-Governance and Civic Engagement: Factors and Determinants of E-Democracy*, Hershey, PA: IGI Global, pp. 381-404.

Furthermore, at the time of writing (July 2013) three more articles derived from this thesis were under review for the following journals:

Trevisan, F., "Scottish Disability Organizations and New Media: A Path to Empowerment or 'Business as Usual'?" under review for *Disability Studies Quarterly* (following minor revisions).

Trevisan, F., "Search Engines: From Social Science Objects to Academic Inquiry Tools," under review for *The International Journal of Social Research Methodology*.

Trevisan, F., and Reilly, P., "Ethical Dilemmas in Researching Social Media Campaigns on Sensitive Issues: Lessons from the Study of British Disability Dissent Networks," under review for *Information, Communication and Society*.

This is in addition to several conference papers I presented at, among others, the American Political Science Association (APSA) Annual Meetings in 2010 and 2012, the Political Studies Association (PSA) Media & Politics Group Annual Conference in 2011 and the European Communication Conference (ECREA) in 2012.

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A final, massive thank you goes to my partner Lotta. I never could have done this without her love, support and encouragement. Having endured the PhD "experience" herself, she knew all about this craziness yet stuck by my side nonetheless. In particular, thanks for helping me tame Microsoft Word and, even more so, for lifting my spirits with the occasional Finnish home baking. *Kiitoksia paljon!*

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Author’s Declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, this thesis is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Filippo Trevisan _____

Abbreviations

ADA	Americans with Disabilities Act
DDA	Disability Discrimination Act
DLA	Disability Living Allowance
DPOs	Disabled people's organisations
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
PIP(s)	Personal Independence Payment(s)
TUC	Trade Unions Congress
WCA	Work Capability Assessment
WRB	Welfare Reform Bill

Disability Organisations and Groups Mentioned in the Study

United Kingdom:

	Ambitious About Autism
	Action for ME
DBC	Disability Benefits Consortium
	Disability Alliance
	Disability Rights UK
DPAC	Disabled People Against Cuts
	Inclusion London
LCD	Leonard Cheshire Disability
NAS	National Autistic Society
	Mencap
	Mind
NCIL	National Centre for Independent Living
RADAR	Royal Association for Disability Rights
RNIB	Royal National Institute of Blind People
	Scope
	The Broken of Britain
	The Hardest Hit
	The MS Society
UKDPC	United Kingdom Disabled People's Council

United States:

AAPD	American Association of Persons with Disabilities
	Access Living
	ADAPT
	The ARC
	Autism Speaks/Autism Votes
CCD	Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities
	Easter Seals
JFA	Justice for All
LDAA	Learning Disabilities Association of America
NCIL	National Council on Independent Living
NDRN	National Disability Rights Network
NFB	National Federation of the Blind
NMHA	Mental Health America
	National MS Society
UCP	United Cerebral Palsy

Introduction and Thesis Organisation

Since 2008, industrialised democratic countries have experienced a deep economic crisis for which, at the time of writing in July 2013, a clear end was not yet in sight. Notwithstanding the direct impact of recession and job losses on the lives of ordinary citizens, national governments as well as international organisations responded to this situation by bailing out distressed financial institutions and supporting an "austerity" agenda that included drastic public expenditure cuts, radical downsizing of welfare programmes and reductions in public services. These policies touched a special chord with citizens in various countries, leading to the emergence of resistance networks that made extensive use of online media to mobilise supporters, organise them and spread their message across different social groups and beyond national boundaries. Such networks included the *Indignados* in Spain and the transnational Occupy movement, both of which rose to prominence in 2011 (Castells, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2012). At the same time, academic literature and, even more so, traditional news outlets have credited social networking platforms with a crucial role in the Arab Spring protests that inflamed Northern Africa and the Middle East in late 2010 and early 2011, overthrowing longstanding dictatorships in Egypt and Tunisia (Howard and Hussain, 2011; 2013). Similarly, the internet has been indicated as a key enabler of the anti-government demonstrations that preceded the 2012 Russian presidential elections in Moscow, which constituted some of the largest opposition rallies in the country since the end of the Soviet era (Oates, 2013).

Although each of these phenomena took place in very different contexts and not all of them achieved tangible outcomes, their emergence nonetheless raised the question of whether both internet use and technology have entered a new phase of maturity in which mass mobilisation and sweeping political change could be reflected – if not ignited – by online media. This could be interpreted as a consequence of the growing tendency for citizens not only to benefit from increased and facilitated access to information online (Howard and Chadwick, 2009), but also to be capable and expectant of a more active role in both established and emerging political organisations (Bimber, Flanagin, and Stohl, 2012). Undoubtedly, these are very broad issues that reach beyond the scope of any individual piece of research and are likely to occupy the centre stage of internet/politics scholarship for quite some time. This will be especially the case if the economic crisis continues to provide citizens with strong motivation to voice their concerns and organise online. However, in this framework it is particularly important to ask what the growing centrality of online media to the dynamics of grassroots organising mean for those who traditionally have been excluded from the political arena. As the politics of austerity carries

on, the rights of social groups typically marginalised in institutional decision-making such as the unemployed, immigrants and disabled people are at a severe risk of being eroded even further due to the lack of fair opportunities and effective ways for them to express dissent. Are disadvantaged people also going to benefit from the digitalisation of protest politics in such times of crisis, or will online organising rather constitute a source of additional inequality and exclusion?

The majority of scholarly work that investigated the internet's potential as a civic resource for disadvantaged groups so far suggests some bleak conclusions. In internet research, people experiencing disadvantage have typically been associated with the raw end of the digital divide, emphasising the tendency for those on low incomes and/or with modest educational attainments to benefit less than others from online media or be entirely "unconnected" (Norris, 2001; Warschauer, 2003). Among these, disabled people have occupied an especially prominent position. In particular, research on disability and new media to date has focused almost exclusively on access and accessibility issues, stressing the alleged inevitability for socially constructed technology to reproduce exclusionary barriers, thus mirroring and possibly amplifying disability discrimination in the online sphere (see for example: Goggin and Newell, 2003; Ellis and Kent, 2011). Intuitively, these issues should set off alarm bells for both researchers and activists as they arguably highlight some important difficulties for disabled people to be fully involved in the changing landscape of grassroots politics at a time in which welfare changes and other austerity measures threaten their fundamental socio-economic rights. Nevertheless, one also has to ask whether such a strong focus on digital divide ideas can truly nurture a comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship between disabled people and the internet. Rather, scratching beneath the surface of accessibility literature a different picture emerges. This is one in which technology may also afford disabled users opportunities to re-negotiate some disabling barriers (Roulstone, 1998: 129) but where alternative research strands have been *de facto* sidelined or altogether overlooked in favour of a dominant narrative that suited both the digital divide paradigm and the barrier-centred social model of disability.

Recent work in internet studies has defied common wisdom by showing that online media can indeed foster social cohesion and civic engagement among those experiencing disadvantage (Gad et al., 2012). In addition, substantial advancements have been registered in the accessibility of online technology in recent years (Ellcessor, 2010) and the cost of connection has been falling at a staggeringly fast pace (International Telecommunication Union, 2012), making internet access not only more affordable but also more relevant to disabled people. This, coupled with ongoing political and economic uncertainty, makes

widening the scope of disability and new media research both timely and worthwhile. Thus, this thesis sets out to investigate whether online media can foster a greater sense of citizenship and political inclusion for disabled internet users. This was not an attempt to underplay the importance of access and accessibility issues, which ought to remain top priorities for researchers, technology developers and policy-makers alike. Rather, it was intended as a contribution towards a fuller and more nuanced understanding of the complex relationship between disability and the internet, as well as a way of determining the position of disabled people in the fast-changing techno-political environment. In other words, this project originated from the need of illuminating under-researched aspects of the relationship between disability and online media by shifting the investigative focus from those who are disconnected to that sizeable proportion of disabled people – over 40% in the UK (Dutton and Blank, 2011: 18) – who, despite accessibility issues, regularly use the internet.

It was crucial for this study to avoid any sort of techno-determinism. As such, this project adopted the idea of citizenship as an overarching theoretical framework and focused on the analysis of issue-focused online participation to capture any effects of online technology on the political inclusion of disabled internet users. Moving from the idea that disruptive events can push otherwise disengaged and disenfranchised citizens towards political action (Woliver, 1993), this study mapped and analysed the online opposition to the disability welfare reform introduced by the UK Conservative-led government between 2010 and 2012. By pursuing this approach, this thesis remained open to all possible outcomes and discussion was consistently informed by empirical evidence. Inevitably, this also meant that opportunities to generalise findings were somewhat restricted by the limitations usually associated with case study research. Nevertheless, given its seminal nature, this project was intended as a starting point rather than a conclusive contribution in reaching beyond the restrictive access/accessibility "framework" applied so far in disability and new media research. Several findings contravened theory-based assumptions, highlighting both positive and negative aspects of the "digitalisation" of disability politics that surrounded the UK welfare reform controversy. The thesis is organised as follows.

Chapters One and Two trace the contours of the issues explored in this project by drawing on relevant literature in the fields of disability and internet studies respectively. In particular, Chapter One explores the origins of disabled people's political exclusion. After discussing the relationship between socio-economic and political rights in citizenship theory, the reasons for the enduring confinement of disabled people to a condition of "second class" citizenship are exposed by reflecting on relevant policy measures as well as

the recent history of British disability activism, its organisational forms and key players. The chapter then reviews the work on disabled people and the internet carried out to date and argues in favour of a substantial expansion in this area, asking whether online media can at all re-configure democratic politics into a more inclusive environment for disabled users. Chapter two builds on this by discussing key trends in the study of e-democracy and the conceptualisation of collective action in the 21st century. Most importantly, it highlights online non-political "third spaces," the practice of sharing personal narratives on social media and digital interaction more generally as enablers of political participation for users otherwise unfamiliar with public debate and disenfranchised from representative democracy. While these channels and practices are explored as potential opportunities to overcome the organisational barriers that led to stagnation in disability activism in recent years, the role of disruptive events as "triggers" of participation is discussed as well, laying the foundations for an effective research plan.

Chapter Three reflects on the research strategy developed for this study. As such, it deals with the issue of where on the internet researchers should look for evidence of issue-focused participation without getting lost in the virtually limitless "sea" of online content. In addition, it addresses the need for truly meaningful internet research to complement and contextualise the analysis of "on screen" data obtained through emerging digital methods with in-depth qualitative information acquired by means of established social science techniques. Following a brief discussion of the case study approach adopted in this thesis, the synergistic use of publicly available search engine records, hyperlink network analysis, online media "inventory," content analysis and semi-structured interviews is addressed. Rather than examining the potential as well as the challenges associated with each of these methods separately, these are considered as part of a composite strategy. In this framework, the decision to set up a comparison between online disability rights campaigns in Britain and America is tackled, providing a useful opportunity to highlight the need for more comparative internet/politics research. Furthermore, this chapter also discusses the specific ethical challenges involved in this project, including those presented by the analysis of user-generated content posted on "semi-public" online spaces such as Facebook and the role of the non-disabled researcher in disability studies.

Chapters Four through to Seven present and discuss the study's findings. Chapter Four focuses on the role of the welfare reform controversy as a catalyst for digital "renewal" in British disability activism. Three main group types are uncovered that relied heavily on online media to campaign against government plans for a disability welfare overhaul. These included: pre-existing, formal disability organisations (both "professionalised" charities and member-led self-advocacy groups); groups of experienced

disabled activists that embraced e-campaigning for the first time; and emerging digital networks born out of the efforts of young disabled bloggers-turned-activists who operated exclusively online. Three emblematic case studies (The Hardest Hit campaign; Disabled People Against Cuts; The Broken of Britain) are then selected for in-depth analysis. This includes an "inventory" of their respective online media repertoires, as well as hyperlink network analysis with IssueCrawler to determine their position *vis-à-vis* the surrounding online environment. This first stage of the analysis indicates a very vibrant online campaigning scene, capable of providing disabled internet users with choice but also raising some important questions with regard to the structure of these groups and their inclination to promoting truly meaningful participation for online supporters. Such questions are then tackled through the analysis of discussion threads drawn from each group's Facebook page, which occupies Chapters Five and Six.

In particular, Chapter Five focuses on the process of adapting traditional content analysis techniques to study Facebook material. Collecting and coding Facebook posts presents researchers with several substantial challenges. Nevertheless, it also provides unprecedented opportunities for capturing and interpreting the relationship between core organisers and online supporters in both established and emerging campaigning organisations. The coding process generated methodological findings in their own right. Thus, it is hoped that reflecting on the lessons picked up throughout this project may encourage others to also delve into Facebook content analysis, which so far has lagged behind that carried out on other social networking sites such as Twitter. Thereafter, Chapter Six provides an exhaustive analysis of coding results. First, general trends that span all case studies are explored. These include the role played by core organisers in nurturing – or indeed hindering – the transition of their supporters from mere observers to active participants in online conversations, the tendency for discussion to cluster around specific policy issues rather than quintessentially "political" or ideological topics, as well as the use of personal narratives as vehicles for users unfamiliar with political discussion to understand and articulate complex policy issues. Second, the analysis draws onto each case study in greater detail, discussing their respective tendency to (not) using Facebook as a vehicle to promote online or offline collective action. Overall, three different perspectives on the role of social media in organising emerged, which in turn underpinned different action repertoires and user-experiences, ranging from "contentious politics as usual" to seemingly participatory campaigning.

Having provided a detailed assessment of the digitalisation of disability activism in the UK, Chapter Seven asks to what extent these changes can be ascribed to the influence of contextual factors by comparing the British case to that of American disability rights

organisations. To do so, the traditional notion of "context" in internet/politics is expanded to account not only for predictable systemic factors, but also for time-sensitive circumstantial elements. The results of this comparison were surprisingly counter-intuitive. Despite America's reputation as a particularly fertile ground for innovative e-advocacy initiatives, British disability organisations were found to be the "trend-setters" in this case. Instead, their U.S. counterparts emerged as a rather "conservative" exception in a national context that is otherwise particularly inclined towards experimentation in e-campaigning. Such unexpected results provided an important opportunity to reflect on the relationship between e-campaigning and context, ultimately calling for a better conceptualisation of the idea of "crisis." This point is explored in detail in Chapter Eight, which elaborates on this study's key findings to put forward a series of conclusive remarks. In addition to the relationship between "crisis" and online activism, this final chapter focuses on the new ecology of British disability activism uncovered in this project and its effects on the citizenship levels of disabled internet users. Furthermore, it also advances reasonable hypotheses as to why such a vibrant campaigning environment ultimately failed to affect the UK government's agenda and achieve tangible policy goals. Opportunities for further work are highlighted, including both ways of building directly on this study's findings as well as broader issues for researchers in disability and internet studies to consider.

Overall, this study questioned established paradigms in both disability studies and internet/politics research, calling for a more nuanced approach to the relationship between disability and new media on one side, as well as for a broader re-evaluation of the political significance of the internet for disadvantaged groups on the other. Social science scholarship is at a crossroads. Not only are online media becoming increasingly integral to all aspects of social, economic and political life in democratic countries, but internet use also leaves behind useful "footprints" that provide new ways of identifying and investigating emerging socio-political trends. This thesis sought to make the most of these opportunities while also avoiding to lose sight of the broader context of activism and policy-making. As the economic crisis continues, some of this project's findings will hopefully also be relevant to grassroots activists and campaign organisers wishing to harness the potential of new media in order to build more engaging as well as more effective forms of citizen-mobilisation.

Chapter 1 – Disabled People, Citizenship and New Media

This chapter discusses the reasons at the root of the persistent political exclusion of disabled people in the UK. Anti-discrimination legislation was first introduced in Britain nearly twenty years ago and the official discourse has since progressively espoused both the rhetoric and the main principles of the social model of disability (Barnes, 2007). So why do the majority of disabled Britons continue to face considerable barriers to civic and political participation? In order to tackle this question, the first part of this chapter turns to both citizenship and disability theory. As noted by disability (Beckett, 2005) as well as feminist writers (Lister, 2007a: 49), citizenship scholars have generally overlooked the relationship between citizenship and disability, whether because of its inherent complexity or because of a perceived lack of relevance to their field. Thus, it was useful to carry out a detailed review of the conceptualisations of citizenship that underpinned the development of social policy and disability rights in the UK in recent decades. In light of these considerations, this chapter then argues that the persisting entrapment of disabled people in a position of "marginal" citizenship was generated, at least in part, by the incomplete model of citizenship applied so far to disability policy.

Empirical work is reviewed that shows how disability policy has so far inadequately supported or altogether overlooked the development of political rights for disabled people by failing to challenge sources of institutional discrimination within formal and informal democratic processes. Equally, the experience of the disabled people's movement and the advocacy work of disability organisations more generally are discussed to clarify their contribution to the advancement of political rights. Overall, some important steps forward have indeed been taken. Yet, following the introduction of landmark legislation in the 1990s, progress almost ground to a halt as in recent years advocacy groups pursued the "defensive engagement" of acquired rights, rather than fighting for their expansion (Beckett, 2005: 405-6). In addition, some scholars continue to be extremely critical of the role of disability charities, which in the last decade "have experienced a resurgence, while the power and influence of the disabled people's movement has undoubtedly declined" (Oliver and Barnes, 2012: 169).

Having traced the contours of the exclusion of disabled people from the civic arena, this chapter then considers whether new media can be a vehicle for the realisation of a type of politics more supportive of their needs. The concept of "inclusive citizenship" and a re-definition of the relationship between "formal" and "informal" politics are discussed as potential alternatives to both institutionalised discrimination practices and the limited

efficacy of disability organisations as we know them. In particular, the idea that online media may provide disabled internet users with viable channels to meet, discuss and self-organise, thus circumventing established organisations, is explored. While Chapter Two will include a detailed review of relevant literature in internet studies, this one focuses on how scholarly work has addressed the relationship between disability and new media so far. The limits of interpreting this relationship exclusively through the lens of access and accessibility issues are exposed. Restricting scholarly investigation solely to the problems experienced by those who cannot benefit from online media, or who benefit from it in a limited fashion, can only lead to partial and potentially misleading conclusions. Rather, the need for a wider, more balanced approach is discussed, highlighting the benefits of reaching beyond the dualism derived from digital divide theory – i.e. the idea that the internet can create new inequalities or at least reinforce and amplify existing ones – through in-depth work that focuses on those disabled "pioneers" who regularly use the internet in spite of difficulties.

1.1 – Second class citizens: The exclusion of disabled people from the political arena

As anticipated above, the relationship between citizenship and disability has yet to be tackled organically in theoretical literature. This poses a problem to researchers wishing to investigate the ontology of the confinement of disabled people to a condition of "second-class" citizenship (Tisdall and Kay, 2003: 25-8) because it generates a lack of clear reference points, whether in the form of normative benchmarks or more flexible working criteria. However, reviewing the evolution of legislation, policy and activism concerned with both disability and inequality constituted a useful solution to this issue. As such, it was possible to trace back developments in disabled people's position *vis-à-vis* the dynamic, ever-changing idea of citizenship (Turner, 1993: 2; Faulks, 2000: 3) and, more importantly, expose the roots of their political marginalisation. Thus, this section discusses how competing conceptualisations of citizenship have shaped successive policy interventions. In addition, it also assesses the influence of both the social model of disability and the disabled people's movement on the expansion of disability rights in the UK. While this is primarily a theoretical discussion, it is complemented throughout by references to recent empirical work on perceptions of citizenship among disabled people to generate a conceptual framework that accounts for their experience.

1.1.1 – "Social citizenship" and the British Welfare State

For much of the post-war period up until the 1990s, social policy in Western democracies found an important source of inspiration in the concept of "social citizenship" devised by British sociologist Thomas Humphrey Marshall (1950/1992). In short, this paradigm was based on the assumption that, besides civil and political liberties, members of a democratic society also have a fundamental right to socio-economic equality and individual dignity. According to Marshall, the development of citizenship rights was characterised by an evolutionary dynamic for which, while fundamental civil (legal) rights had been established in the 17th and 18th Centuries and political rights secured in the 19th Century, social rights were bound to follow in the 20th Century (1950/1992: 70-1). This deterministic vision called for government action to ensure the realisation of socio-economic equality, with the development of the British Welfare State arguably providing the ultimate testimony of the liaison between theories of social citizenship and the intended outcomes of social policy measures from the late 1940s onwards (Heater, 2004: 271-3).

Although the idea of social citizenship represented a crucial step forward in the debate on the range of rights associated with democratic ideals, it subsequently came under fire for its inability to promote "full" citizenship for minorities and disadvantaged social groups. In particular, critics have pointed out that this view overplayed the importance of socio-economic rights to the detriment of other fundamental components of citizenship, namely political rights and related civic responsibilities (Roche, 2002: 77). Policy measures inspired by these principles, it was argued, determined in fact a perverse "watering down" of citizenship for those who already found themselves in disadvantaged situations, pushing them into a precarious condition of welfare dependency without simultaneously providing for their involvement in relevant decision-making processes (Heater, 2004: 274). In other words, Marshall's view was too strongly tied to liberal ideals and emphasised excessively issues of socio-economic status over citizenship practices (Tisdall, 2003: 21). Thus, this model supported the development of an intrinsically incomplete type of citizenship by erroneously taking the acquisition of political rights for granted (Faulks, 2000: 10-1). Furthermore, given the centrality of social class and the role of paid employment as primary avenue for the achievement of socio-economic equality in this model, social citizenship has also been criticised for being primarily concerned with elevating the condition of the white male worker (Turner, 1986: 86-7). As such, despite fostering important interventions for the reduction of poverty and deprivation (Lister, 2007a: 55-6), social citizenship was arguably unable to cater for minority groups and guarantee sustainable dignity, fairness and empowerment for all in the long term (Fraser and Gordon, 1994: 93).

Disabled people constituted a particularly problematic case for Marshall due to their (perceived) inability to work and therefore fully benefit from socio-economic rights. To overcome this *impasse*, he resolved to consider disabled people as entitled to state support without being required to contribute (economically) to society (1950/1992: 45-6). This view, strengthened by the framing of disability as an inescapable "personal tragedy," has underpinned welfare policy until very recent decades. As Michael Oliver wrote, such theoretical premises fostered the establishment of a welfare system based on the idea of "needy disabled people," which "added to existing forms of discrimination and […] created new forms of its own including the provision of stigmatised services" (1996: 75-6). In particular, means-tested benefits, the role of medical "experts" in welfare administration and the failure to involve disabled people in key decisions over their own lives have been repeatedly criticised for their disempowering effects (Barnes and Mercer, 2003). Put simply, these practices sanctioned the crystallisation of disabled people's condition as passive recipients of welfare dependant on a system that was not accountable to them, contributing to the consolidation of negative stereotypes, especially in the case of people with mental health problems and learning difficulties (Barnes, Mercer, and Shakespeare, 1999: 154; Drake, 1999).

Such dissociation between socio-economic rights and participation carries severe risks for those at the receiving end of charity-like welfare systems, who find themselves trapped between economic dependency on one side and political marginalisation on the other. This issue becomes particularly poignant in times of economic uncertainty and in conjunction with administrations that are politically or ideologically opposed to large welfare systems. For instance, these pitfalls were crucially exemplified by Thatcher and Reagan's 1980s "New Right" politics in Britain and the United States respectively. In both cases, the explicit hostility of government leaders to fundamental aspects of social citizenship, coupled with a period of deep economic instability and the lack of involvement in policy-making processes put those dependant on state welfare in a position of high vulnerability (Dwyer, 2004: 61-6). Arguably, the erosion of social rights has continued in more recent years. Scholars such as Taylor-Gooby (2008) pointed out how in Europe social citizenship has been endangered by the growing emphasis that governments have placed on individual responsibilities over rights, as well as the rampant marketisation of public services provision. Thus, contrary to Marshall's utopian expectations, these trends revealed citizenship as a status that, rather than invariably expanding, can indeed contract if the members of a given social group are unable to exert effective political agency and fend for their rights (Turner, 1986: xii; 1993: 6-8).

It was against this theory and policy backdrop that the social model of disability and the disabled people's movement originated, flourished and achieved important policy successes in the UK (Campbell and Oliver, 1996: 62). As such, it is crucial to gauge the extent to which disabled activists, the issues that they pushed on the agenda and the legislation that originated from their efforts succeeded in supporting an alternative, more balanced and truly empowering conceptualisation of citizenship for disabled people. In other words, was the re-definition of disabled people's socio-economic rights also accompanied by a strengthening and institutionalisation of their political rights? This issue is especially relevant at a time in which the UK government's strategy to reduce the national debt in the wake of the protracted economic crisis that started in 2008 threatens to push those prevented from voicing their concerns in the political arena into an extremely precarious position (Oliver and Barnes, 2012: 144-7).

1.1.2 – Moving forward: The disabled people's movement and anti-discrimination legislation

From the late 1970s, the tendency for social policy to cast disabled people in a position of dependency was strongly criticised by disabled scholars and activists supporting a revolutionary conceptualisation of disability: the social model. Put simply, their main contention was that disablement does not originate from individual impairments but rather from a series of exclusionary social barriers, including traditional approaches to welfare (see for example: UPIAS, 1976; Finkelstein, 1980; Abberley, 1987; Oliver, 1990). Such marked dichotomy between disability and impairment, albeit questioned more recently by a "new wave" of disability scholarship as discussed below, provided a fundamental catalyst for the growth of the British disabled people's movement throughout the 1980s. In turn, this was instrumental in pushing the issue of disability discrimination on the agenda (Campbell and Oliver, 1996: 146-58), leading to the introduction of landmark legislation in response to the petitioning from an unprecedented campaigning alliance forged in the early 1990s between disabled self-advocates and national disability charities (Barnes, 2007: 208).

Denouncing that the existing redistributive system had in fact contributed to the creation of "false" citizenship for disabled people and was in urgent need of "participatory" transformation constituted a key merit of social model theorists (Barnes, Mercer and Shakespeare, 1999: 164-75). Fundamental to those claims and the political battle that ensued was the idea that citizenship can expand only through social struggle and political agency (Faulks, 2000: 4), which had previously been instrumental to the achievements of the feminist and civil rights movements (Turner, 1986: 86-90). While some citizenship

scholars remain sceptical with regard to the role played by new social movements in the expansion of rights in recent decades (Hadenius, 2001: 60-5), it is undeniable that the ideas of the social model and their ability to inspire political action among disabled people have contributed to re-shaping the policy approach to disability and re-framing the principles on which disability welfare provision is based (Campbell and Oliver, 1996: 86-91). As such, a substantial body of literature has emerged in disability studies that focuses on the relationship between policy measures and the rights of disabled people. A brief review of the key arguments put forward in this work, which has been both theoretical and empirical, can help defining the citizenship status with which the majority of disabled Britons are currently associated.

In 1995, the UK Parliament passed the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). This represented the culmination of over ten years of struggle by disabled campaigners and their allies, which involved fourteen consecutive attempts to get similar legislation passed as well as a dramatic u-turn by the then Conservative government on their assertion that disabled people did not face systematic discrimination following the publication of quantitative and qualitative evidence collected by disabled researchers that proved otherwise (Barnes, 1991; Barton, 1993). The DDA constituted the first-ever organic attempt to tackle disability discrimination through specific legislation in the UK. Thus, despite featuring a markedly medical definition of disability (Woodhams and Corby, 2003: 161-5; Pearson and Watson, 2007: 105-7) that was criticised by disability activists (Campbell and Oliver, 1996: 16; Barnes and Mercer, 2001: 18) and remained largely unchanged in subsequent revisions and updates (i.e. DDA 2005; Equality Act 2010), it made for an important step forward. That said, some scholars have since noted that such legislative measures have been heavily oriented towards ensuring equality in the labour market and eliminating disability discrimination in the workplace (Floyd and Curtis, 2001). Indeed, this tendency has not been exclusive to Britain. For example, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), passed in 1990, also focuses extensively on employment rights, introducing affirmative action measures to augment the chances of disabled citizens to find a suitable job (Lunt and Thornton, 1994). More recently, disability welfare provision was also reviewed in Australia as part of a welfare-to-work programme "to produce *productive* citizens who are able to contribute to the national goal of maintaining competitiveness in the global economy" (Lantz and Marston, 2012: 853). Furthermore, since its original iteration, the DDA has been expanded to cover areas such as transport, education and the provision of public services (Pearson and Watson, 2007).

Nevertheless, the role bestowed upon employment in British legislation, coupled with the shift to a work-oriented model of welfare as the basis for social rights (Dean, 1999)

and a more general emphasis on citizen obligations during the New Labour years (Dwyer, 2004: 71-4), bears an interesting relationship with both disability theory and the idea of social citizenship. In particular, the centrality attributed to paid work in anti-discrimination legislation echoes the influence of Marxist theory on much of the original social model literature, where the oppression of disabled people was connected to the capitalist mode of production (see for example: Oliver, 1990). In turn, this could also be interpreted as a reaction to welfare policies based on Marshall's idea of work as a vehicle for the achievement of "full" citizenship. Thus, it could be argued that, in an attempt to facilitate the inclusion of disabled people, anti-discrimination legislation paradoxically embraced rather than challenged the notion of employment as a basic, non-negotiable component of citizenship. In recent years, the materialist conceptualisation of disability that inspired this type of policy intervention has been criticised by scholars who suggested that the social model has in fact outlasted its original purpose and called for urgent changes to the way in which disability is understood (see for example: Shakespeare and Watson, 2001 and 2010; Thomas and Corker, 2002: 48; Armer, 2004; Tregaskis, 2002: 461). Building on the work of feminist disability writers such as Morris (1992), French (1993) and Crow (1996), these authors have emphasised the need for theory to be re-aligned with the lived experiences of disabled people and for disability to be operationalised as a multi-faceted combination of both environmental barriers and "impairment effects" (Thomas, 1999; 2010) in order to generate policy measures that adequately capture and effectively address disablement in the 21st century.

While a detailed review of this debate would reach beyond the scope of this project, arguments such as Shakespeare and Watson's (2001) claim that "a mature society supports everyone on the basis, not of the work they have done, but of the needs they have" (p. 19) have successfully highlighted the need to look beyond a system that is primarily geared towards the (utopian) inclusion of all disabled people in the cycle of productivity. That is not to deny the importance of work for social participation, but rather to warn that over-emphasising this relationship might determine the automatic exclusion from citizenship of those, disabled and non-, who choose to not engage in paid employment or are prevented from doing so by environmental barriers, especially in an era "when conditions of full employment can no longer be taken for granted and when welfare budgets have been under strain from the cost of supporting those without jobs" (Lister, 2003: 20). These remarks are particularly poignant *vis-à-vis* the emphasis placed by the current UK Conservative-led coalition government on work as a fundamental civic duty and entry to the labour market as the primary objective of public welfare programmes (Roulstone, 2011).

1.1.3 – Towards greater control? Independent living, direct payments and participation initiatives

Following the approval of anti-discrimination legislation, a second fundamental achievement for disability activists was the introduction of the Community Care (Direct Payments) Act 1996. Based on the principles of Independent Living (IL) and on a person-centred approach to welfare, this new legislation aimed at putting disabled people in control of their support by offering cash payments in lieu of services. Despite several implementation issues, including some severe geographical disparities across the UK (Priestley et al., 2007; 2010), these measures sanctioned, at least on paper, the right of disabled people to choice in the personal sphere, thus laying the foundations for empowerment on a wider scale (Morris, 1997).

However, scholars of disability welfare have since noted that, although direct payments have undoubtedly afforded a number of disabled Britons a greater share of control over their lives, this tends to be limited to the individual or local level while a severe lack of meaningful involvement in system-wide decision-making processes has continued to date. As pointed out by Rummery (2006a), this is consistent with a wider negative trend associated with initiatives seeking to promote the development of "joined up" governance, bringing central government, local authorities and citizens closer to one another. In particular, a Disability Equality Duty (DED) was enforced in late 2006, requiring public sector organisations to make provisions for the inclusion of disabled people in the design and delivery of policy and services. However, recent work on this issue has shown the implementation of this measure to be affected not only by substantial geographical disparity but also by specific difficulties for public bodies to set up meaningful channels of engagement with disability organisations (Pearson et al., 2011). More broadly, the analysis of institutional forums designed to afford marginalised citizens opportunities to engage directly with policy-makers has also revealed this type of initiatives to be largely unfit for purpose (Barnes et al., 2004), as discussed in the next chapter with specific reference to government-sponsored digital consultation and deliberation platforms.

As such, the predominant view within the literature is that policy-based interventions have fallen short of developing meaningful ways for disabled people to become involved in policy design and delivery, thus failing to boost their political agency (Rummery, 2002: 178-80). Designing paths for the involvement of people with complex needs, particularly in the case of those affected by learning difficulties (Stainton, 2005; Beckman, 2007), is undoubtedly challenging. Yet, empirical research has shown that although disabled people would in many cases be eager to participate directly in public

decision-making, this is often precluded by a persisting attitude within institutions and society more broadly to regard impaired people as "unable" or "unwilling" to take on civic roles and associated responsibilities (Rummery, 2006b: 641-2). As Barnes (2002) noted, the "rules" of the democratic deliberation "game" tend to privilege rationality over the emotional component of lived experiences, thus hindering the expression of disabled people's concerns and consequently casting them, as well as other social groups such as children, young people and those living in poverty, as "unqualified" for decision-making.

Similarly, political parties have been criticised for being reluctant towards the selection of disabled candidates, in contrast with a recent push to include more women, particularly in marginal constituencies (Barnes and Mercer, 2003). Crucially, Morris (2005) found this prejudice to be broadly reflected across policy "initiatives to encourage 'active citizenship' [that] tend not to treat disabled people as potential active citizens" and "sometimes […] have reaffirmed the assumption that disabled people are passive recipients of care" (p. 20). This final point echoes Marshall's outdated view of the relationship between citizenship and disability, exposing the culture of exclusion that continues to hinder the involvement of disabled people in institutionalised politics, starting with participation in elections (Gilbert, Sarb, and Bush, 2010). As the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) stated in their first triennial review of equality in the UK (2010), "people with a disability or a long-term limiting illness are generally less likely than those without to say that they can influence local decisions, and a majority of polling stations at the last [general] election presented at least one significant access barrier" (p. 576).

1.2 – A brief history of disability activism in the UK

Having discussed the lack of a clear policy framework to support the development of disabled people's political rights, it is also useful to review the evolution of disability activism in the UK with a view to understanding whether grassroots initiatives can effectively make up for the discrimination that characterises formal channels of participation in policy-making. Arguably, the simultaneous commitment of many disability scholars to both research and activism has inhibited the formulation of an in-depth critique of the disability movement. Nevertheless, it is useful to reflect on the structure and ethos of the groups responsible for key disability rights battles in order to provide some clear points of reference for the investigation of their successors in the current political arena.

As mentioned above, the emergence of disabled people's self-advocacy groups from the 1970s onwards was strictly connected to the growing popularity of social model

ideas. Until then, the role of disabled Britons in the realm of organised disability interests was traditionally limited to that of passive recipients of "charity" dispensed by voluntary organisations. Social model scholars denounced this type of arrangement as intrinsically disempowering and explicitly criticised organisations such as the *Cheshire Foundation* (renamed *Leonard Cheshire Disability* in 2007) as well as the *Spastics Society* (renamed *Scope* in 1994) for perpetuating disabled people's oppression in the UK (Oliver, 1990: 98). In particular, charitable bodies were accused of exclusionary practices that prevented service users from taking up positions of responsibility (Drake, 1994) while at the same time undermining the confidence of the few among disabled people who may have been involved in their governance structures in spite of discriminatory attitudes. As Jenny Morris (1991) put it:

> *"a disabled person who holds a position within a conservative charitable organisation has been told all their lives […] how inadequate and pitiable disabled people are. Small wonder then that such people, when asked to involve more disabled people in their organisation, commonly respond that there just isn't any capable person with the relevant expertise amongst the disabled community"* (p. 177).

Inspired by the successes of the American independent living movement (Vaughn-Switzer, 2003: 70-76), Britain's disability rights pioneers founded the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) in 1974. Simultaneously, a number of local self-advocacy groups were launched across the country, which eventually found coordination and a unitary voice at national level with the foundation of the *British Council of Organisations of Disabled People* (BCODP, later renamed the *UK Disabled People's Council* – UKDPC) in 1981. In particular, this umbrella organisation played an instrumental role in promoting the introduction of the landmark anti-discrimination legislation discussed earlier in this chapter (Barnes and Mercer, 2001: 14-16). Although the composite nature of the BCODP led to some internal disagreement among disability self-advocates (Campbell and Oliver, 1996: 78-80), taken as a whole Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs) saw themselves as fundamental adversaries of disability charities, which "do [did] not *want* us [disabled people] to control our own lives. These groups often separate[d] disabled people according to their impairment" (BCODP, 1997: 8), hampering the development of political agency for disabled people. Such premises generated a rift between emergent, loosely structured and advocacy-oriented member-led groups on one

side, and established, bureaucratic and service-focused charities on the other, which were accused of spreading disabling imagery through their advertising material (Morris, 1991: 183-184) and even actively campaigning against anti-discriminatory legislation to guarantee the preservation of the *status quo* (Oliver, 1990: 105).

Unsurprisingly, such a bitterly oppositional advocacy context failed to promote significant advancement for disabled people's rights. However, this changed with the foundation of the *Voluntary Organisations for Anti-Discrimination Legislation* (VOADL) *Committee* in 1985 (renamed *Rights Now!* in 1992), which "heralded an uneasy alliance between organisations controlled by disabled people, such as the BCODP, and the more traditional organisations for disabled people like RADAR [the Royal Association for Disability Rights]" (Barnes and Mercer, 2001: 16). Although the dynamics underpinning the formation of this coalition remain contested, with some authors regarding it as a result of the pressure exerted on "household" charities by DPOs rather than an autonomous change of direction for the voluntary sector (Campbell and Oliver, 1996: 151-152), this experience is widely considered as a driving force behind the introduction of anti-discrimination legislation in the UK, showing that substantial policy success is more likely to be achieved through targeted collaborative effort (Pearson, 2012). That said, this coalition proved fragile and ephemeral as the introduction of the DDA in 1995 generated "tensions between organisations willing to work with the government's own legislation (mostly organisations 'for' disabled people) and those who were fundamentally opposed (overwhelmingly organisations 'of' disabled people)" (Pointon, 1999: 234), which led to to a rapid dissolution of the campaigning alliance.

Although intuitively it could be tempting to consider these events as evidence of the impossibility to create a unitary front in British disability activism, it is crucial instead to reflect on the way in which these organisations evolved after the dissolution of *Rights Now!*. While in fact a certain part of the literature continues to emphasise the exclusion of disabled people from strategic decision-making in charitable bodies (Drake, 2002) and interpret statute changes in these organisations as opportunistic "window dressing" (Oliver and Barnes, 2012), others have pointed out that the lack of a sustainable merger between organisations "for" and "of" disabled people should not be mistaken for no change at all. Most notably, Tom Shakespeare (2006) usefully warned against simplistic generalisations in this area, stressing how changes have occurred instead at both ends of the organisational spectrum so that "the major disability charities have changed out of all recognition" (p. 159) and "the traditional dichotomy between 'organisations for' and 'organisations of,' which may have appeared useful in the 1980s, now fails to represent the complexity of organisations working with disabled people" (*ibid.*: 161). In particular, national charities

such as Scope and RADAR have since reformed their governance structure, putting disabled people in control of strategic planning, at least in principle. Furthermore, these organisations also have engaged in an increasingly greater amount of advocacy work alongside their traditional preoccupation with care and support services. At the same time, DPOs do not necessarily correspond any longer to those small membership groups that were once heralded as the backbone of the British disability movement (Oliver, 1997). Rather, many of them have sought to attract public funding and donations, and branched out into service provision. This has generated a context in which "charities have become more like disability rights groups, and disability rights groups have become more like charities" (Shakespeare, 2006: 161), for which "a more rational approach would be more selective in its critique, and recognise the successes as well as the failures of the charitable sector" (*ibid.*, p. 162).

Undoubtedly, these observations have introduced much needed nuance to the study of British disability activism. Yet, two key arguments have also emerged from recent literature that cast severe doubts on the ability of disability organisations in their current form – whether "of" or "for" disabled people, or a mix of the two – to perform as effective channels of democratic participation. On the one hand, veteran disability scholars like Colin Barnes (2007) claimed that "while disability activism has had an important influence on disability policy in the UK, this very success threatens to undermine its continuity and future" (p. 203). Such a pessimistic outlook rests primarily on the fact that disability organisations, including self-advocacy groups, have long been at risk of "incorporation" or "co-optation" into government action. Indeed, several factors contributed to this situation, including the "joined up" governance approach championed by New Labour and discussed above, as well as the desire of DPOs to attract public funding (Shakespeare, 2006: 160) and gain credibility in the eyes of policy-makers in what is a very competitive advocacy environment. Nevertheless, these developments were criticised for putting additional distance between the leaders of these groups and those whom they claim to represent (Oliver and Barnes, 2006).

On the other hand, much of the literature has also noted that the end of the campaigning alliance that brought about anti-discrimination legislation in the mid 1990s determined a crucial loss of momentum for British disability activism, which *de facto* "downsized" to what has been defined "defensive engagement" (Beckett, 2005: 405-6). Broadly speaking, this has been connected to two explanatory factors. As Beckett (2006a; 2006b) argued in her seminal work on citizenship and vulnerability, the continued exclusion of disabled people from institutional arenas has perpetuated a power imbalance that makes it especially difficult for disability activists to engage in pro-active efforts to

strengthen and expand disabled people's rights. In addition, a second issue that has prevented unitary mass mobilisation from continuing in the long term has been the reluctance of many impaired people to identify as "disabled," a label that they see as both negative and alien (Shakespeare and Watson, 2001; Watson, 2002). Although an in-depth examination of identity issues would go beyond the scope of this study, social movement theory has often highlighted the strong link that exists between shared identity and collective action (Benford and Snow, 2000). Thus, while the battle for independent living provided a common cause capable of sealing together a very diverse campaigning alliance (Pearson, 2012; Pearson and Riddell, 2006: 4-6), activists have since struggled to find unity and lacked the foundations to build new momentum.

Overall, the picture emerging from these considerations is one in which, although some positive steps towards ensuring "fuller" citizenship for disabled people have been taken, the finish line still lies a long way ahead. Several obstacles remain that make the current configuration of the British political space unsuited to the needs of disabled people, including:

- physical barriers (lack of access and accessibility);
- financial barriers (poverty and shortage of resources to "invest" in participation);
- cultural barriers (disempowering attitudes reflected in practices of participation and representation);
- psychological barriers (largely a consequence of the above, through the widespread sense of "powerlessness" and "unsuitability" to civic and political participation amongst disabled people);
- institutional barriers (exclusionary aspects of representative and deliberative processes); and, finally,
- organisational barriers (lack of clarity as to how different groups along the current organisational spectrum of disability advocacy involve disabled people in their representative work).

Indeed, it has been argued that most citizens encounter some of these obstacles on the path to civic engagement and political participation (Tonn and Petrich, 1998). However, these barriers tend to affect disabled people in a disproportionate manner due to the discrimination they face in other domains of social life and the lack of recognition and appropriate support for their needs. In particular, institutionalised barriers to political participation for disabled people have been inadequately addressed or *de facto* ignored by

policy-makers (Morris, 2005: 24-5). Furthermore, disability activism lost much of its thrust in the wake of some significant victories and never fully recovered. Measures such as direct payments have afforded some disabled Britons unprecedented control over their lives, leading to "micro-empowerment" on an individual or, at most, local scale. However, as noted by feminist scholars in connection to the inequality experienced by women on the national political stage, truly meaningful citizenship requires participation and influence at a higher level (Siim, 2000: 101).

To evoke a classic governance metaphor, one could therefore suggest that disabled people remain confined to the bottom tiers of the "ladder of citizen participation" (Arnstein, 1969), locked in a position that Cohen (2009) has defined as "semi-citizenship," which is typical of minorities in democratic countries. The solution to this issue requires not only measures aimed at making such "ladder" more accessible but also "a re-articulation of the relationship between formal and informal politics, so that those who opt for the latter can nevertheless influence the former and those who choose the former are not cut off from the concerns and demands articulated in the latter" (Lister, 2003: 165). The next section elaborates on this point, discussing how an "expanded" understanding of politics may support the achievement of more meaningful levels of citizenship for disabled people.

1.3 – Inclusive citizenship: Eradicating barriers and expanding the political arena

In recent years, the debate on citizenship theory has been reinvigorated by the work of scholars who argued that a genuinely "inclusive" form of citizenship could only be achieved by reaching a working compromise between liberal-social positions focused on rights and republican views emphasising civic obligations. Originating from Fraser's (2003) work on the apparent oxymoron between redistributive policy measures on one side and the recognition of minority rights on the other, the idea of "inclusive" citizenship has subsequently been developed through the work of feminist scholars such as Ruth Lister (2004) and development researchers like Naila Kabeer (2005). This concept is centred on the assumption that the achievement of "full" citizenship by every member of a given society becomes realistic only if "participatory parity amongst peers" is realised. As Fraser explained (2003: 35-6), participatory parity is a "two dimensional" concept that rests upon two equally indispensable conditions: a fair distribution of resources and equal opportunities for participation in public life.

Thus, by avoiding a hierarchy of rights and responsibilities, inclusive citizenship arguably resolves the tension between the social and civic republican conceptions of

citizenship, providing a synthesis of socio-economic redistribution and participation in public affairs as complementary rights (Fraser and Gordon, 1994). Moreover, it importantly highlights how previous understandings of citizenship have systematically excluded specific social groups because "the status of human being was often selectively rather than universally applied" (Kabeer, 2005: 10) in connection with concepts such as social class, employment, gender and race. This view, however, is also characterised as a pragmatic approach in which the misrecognition of rights and obstacles to equal participation opportunities ought to be assessed on a case-by-case basis (Fraser, 2003: 45-8). In other words, this is less about legal rights and more about identifying and removing those socio-political, economical, institutional, cultural as well as psychological "barriers that prevent the rights and responsibilities of citizenship from being fairly distributed" (Faulks, 2000: 163).

Undoubtedly, there are some clear parallels between these arguments and those made by independent living scholars as well as activists. However, feminist writers have gone one crucial step further than disability researchers by theorising the need for a change in the way politics itself is conceptualised as the only way for realising "participatory parity" and full citizenship for marginalised groups. Building upon the thought-provoking work of pioneer authors such as Longo (2001), Lister (2003: 159-65) identified two directions in which the political realm needs to move in order to facilitate the realisation of truly inclusive political citizenship. On the one hand, access to "formal" politics ought to be improved through the removal of institutionalised barriers to participation. On the other hand, the relationship between "formal" and "informal" politics also needs to be tightened. This makes way for a bold expansion of the civic arena, which implicitly recognises the limits of policy-based interventions – in particular affirmative action measures – and ultimately rests upon the awareness that members of under-represented groups such as women, poor, young and disabled people are more likely to engage in informal political spaces concerned with "everyday" issues at the local level (Siim, 2000: 101). This goes beyond emphasising the centrality of political participation to the achievement of true equality (Levitas, 1998: 173), questioning instead what exactly counts as "politics." Similarly, this is more than a mere revival of the debate among those who invoked the primacy of traditional political institutions such as political parties (Hadenius, 2001: 40-1) and those who championed instead more fluid, social movement-like organisations (Turner, 1986: 89-92). Rather, it revolves around a re-evaluation of more elementary forms of "micro-politics […] embedded in the daily lives of individuals" (Mann, cited in Lister, 2003: 27) as a way for "marginal citizens" to access and develop fundamental political rights (Janoski and Gran, 2002).

Although theoretical literature still outweighs empirical investigation on these issues (Lister, 2007a: 58), qualitative work has emerged in recent years that illustrated the positive impact of programmes aimed at involving those experiencing social disadvantage in decision-making on issues affecting their lives (Lister, 2004; Lister et al., 2005), suggesting ways of amplifying such positive outcomes (Lister, 2007b). In addition, this research also highlighted the benefits of comprehensive engagement in public affairs and community life, as opposed to an involvement geared towards particularistic group interests (Kabeer, 2005: 12). With regard to disabled people, it could be argued that the ethos behind direct payments legislation went some way towards supporting such an expanded understanding of politics and promoting "micro-empowerment." However, the issues associated with the implementation of such measures, as well as those characterising policy-based interventions more generally, highlighted the limits of institutional attempts to re-shape democratic governance into an overall more inclusive process to the advantage of disabled citizens.

In a recent article on social inequalities and human rights in the UK, Riddell and Watson (2011) stated that "there is clearly a danger that Britain is locked in a high inequality equilibrium, which can only be disrupted by massive state-driven re-distribution, prompted by severe social unrest" (p. 202). This makes for an arguably persuasive, if concerning, scenario in the wake of phenomena such as the transnational Occupy movement that emerged in 2011, anti-austerity networks such as the Spanish *Indignados* (Gerbaudo, 2012; Castells, 2012) and protests against G20 summits that took place in recent years (Bennett and Segerberg, 2011). However, to gather a truly comprehensive picture of the shifting political landscape in this period of economic difficulty and emerging social tensions, it is also necessary to ask whether there are other, less disruptive channels for marginalised citizens to express dissent and re-claim political agency. In the case of disabled people, it is necessary to look beyond both institutionally-sponsored paths to public engagement and traditional organisational models to understand whether emerging alternative forces are in fact re-modelling the political space along Lister's inclusive vision.

In this context, recent work in internet studies defied the popular stereotype that the online medium would be "a marginal resource for civic identity" for those on low incomes, relying on state benefits or otherwise excluded from societal mainstream (Olsson, 2006: 85; Mossberger, Tolbert, and Stansbury, 2003: 123-4). Rather, online technology was unexpectedly revealed as a potential multiplier of social cohesion and platform for the creation of "communities of interest" among people who experience disadvantage (Hampton, 2010). In particular, quasi-experimental work found that, when provided with the necessary IT infrastructure, people living in high poverty areas were "as motivated to participate and deliberate on local issues as people of other [more affluent] communities"

(Gad et al., 2012: 10). At the root of such motivation were common interests and latent affiliations that thus far had been suppressed by physical and structural barriers. As such, this work exposed the limitations of assessing the internet's significance for socio-political inclusion/exclusion by merely looking at quantitative survey data (cf. Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal, 2008), making instead a strong case for the qualitative contextualisation of online media use (and non-use) among the members of marginalised and minority groups (Mehra, Merkel, and Peterson Bishop, 2004). In light of these findings, it was crucial to investigate whether in times of crisis new media can provide viable channels for disabled internet users to meet, discuss, organise and be heard by decision-makers, which in today's overloaded information environment cannot be taken for granted (Jorba and Bimber, 2012: 30-4). Before issues of online politics and digital citizenship are discussed in detail in the next chapter, the remainder of this one focuses on the relationship between disability and new media with specific reference to the potential of the latter *vis-à-vis* exclusionary barriers to both formal and informal political participation.

1.4 – Can new media help? The story so far

The idea that disabled people could benefit from new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) is, strictly speaking, not new. In 1980, disabled scholar and activist Vic Finkelstein wrote that in a not too distant future "impaired persons will […] no longer be oppressed by disabling social conventions and disabling environments but will be absorbed in the mainstream of social interactions" (p. 37). At the centre of this optimistic vision was a strong belief in the transformative potential of technological development. Within this framework, ICTs were assumed to facilitate the empowerment of disabled people. Building upon this line of thought, other early cyber-enthusiasts went even further, claiming that although "the implications of such advanced technology as virtual reality will likely remain of concern for some time […] the potential for aiding mankind – and in particular in improving the lives of those with disabilities – seems to make this quantum leap well worth the risk" (Nelson, 1994: 208). While such optimism resonated with the deterministic assumptions made by political scientists like Barber (1984), who claimed that information technology was poised to herald an era of radical democratic renewal and direct participation, to date there is still a real dearth of empirical work investigating the relationship between new media and disability politics. Thus, a meaningful debate on the effects of online communications on disabled people's status as "political" citizens is yet to be had.

Instead, research on disability and new media has so far concentrated overwhelmingly on access and accessibility issues. As such, key theoretical work in this area has postulated that online technology, being socially constructed, inevitably reproduces and possibly exacerbates the environmental barriers that traditionally exclude disabled people from central aspects of social life (Goggin and Newell, 2003; Dobranski and Hargittai, 2006). Indeed, the latest data on online media usage in the UK would appear to support this pessimistic view, indicating that internet penetration rates among disabled people stand at just over half of those for the general population, with 41% and 78% respectively (Dutton and Blank, 2011: 18). Thus, judging purely on these numbers, access and accessibility issues arguably resonate with fundamental theoretical arguments in both disability and internet studies. On the one hand, the exclusionary design of some new technologies "add[s] significant weight to a social barriers model of disability" (Roulstone, 1998: 1). On the other hand, there has also been 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 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). Despite substantial progress in recent years, poverty, unemployment and low educational attainment remain crucial drivers in a lack of internet use in countries such as the UK (Dutton and Blank, 2011) and the U.S. (Zickuhr and Smith, 2012). These problems continue to affect disabled people in a disproportionate manner (Aldridge et al., 2012) and therefore interact with accessibility issues to generate an increased risk of digital exclusion. Thus, initial optimism for the "liberating" potential of ICTs turned into scepticism or even pessimism among disability scholars, mirroring the evolution of theory-based approaches in the infancy of internet studies (more on the last point in Chapter Two).

Undoubtedly, this approach had the merit of de-bunking the myth of the internet as a "panacea" for the exclusion of disabled people, establishing instead a principle for which "control, and not technological innovation alone, will determine the potential benefits of communication technology for disabled people" (Thornton, 1993: 348). However, it is reasonable to ask whether the popularity of access and accessibility studies simultaneously encouraged researchers to unduly overlook other aspects of the relationship between disabled people and new media in a similar fashion to the one for which the rigidity of the social model has made it an unsuitable paradigm for capturing the diversity of the disability experience (Shakespeare and Watson, 2001). Recent work on accessibility issues has registered some progress towards the development of more inclusive digital media and accessible online content. Such changes were ascribed to three main factors. These

included: more effective legislation introduced in countries that drive internet development, chiefly the United States (Ellcessor, 2010); the positive response of global technology companies such as Apple and internet services providers (ISPs) such as Twitter to universal design pleas coming from disabled users (Ellis and Kent, 2011); and, finally, what Goggin and Newell (2007) have defined as "the business of digital disability", i.e. the commercial value of accessible technology. This has prompted renewed calls for the perspective of that sizeable minority of disabled people who "increasingly, […] rely on the [online] medium to provide more independence, work opportunities, and social interactions" (Ellis and Kent, 2011: 59) to be adequately investigated. As such, researchers are presented with a range of alternative options for analysing the relationship between disability and new media, exploring how different online technologies, in the hands of disabled internet "pioneers," may have different empowering effects in specific social life domains such as employment, personal relationships and civic engagement.

Nevertheless, the vast majority of recent empirical work in this area has continued to focus on access and accessibility, which have been characterised as political rather than merely technological issues (Goggin and Newell, 2003; 2007). Thus, this research framework has been operationalised primarily through the analysis of policy documents, accessibility standards and design protocols in search of "virtual rights" for disabled people (Fitzpartick, 2000). As such, literature in this area has highlighted how accessibility remains an "afterthought" for both technology developers and policy-makers, meaning that hardware, software and content are very rarely designed to be universally accessible and generally need to be retro-fitted for use by people with impairments. This forms a global pattern across democratic countries such as the UK, the U.S. (Easton, 2011), Australia (Ellis, 2012) and Canada (Stienstra, 2006). While some of these scholars have usefully hinted at the potential benefits of online media for disabled users, they have done so in an instrumental fashion to strengthen arguments in favour of universal design policy (Ellis, 2010) and support the inclusion of disabled representatives in international organisations such as the World Wide Web Consortium (Easton, 2010). As part of this general trend, the lens of access and accessibility has therefore been applied also to the limited amount of research on the relationship of disabled people with online government and e-democracy platforms carried out to date. Universal access has invariably been interpreted as either a straightforward success benchmark in evaluating e-government initiatives (Kuzma, 2009; Stienstra and Troschuk, 2005) and the provision of human services through the internet (Watling and Crawford, 2010), or as a key policy goal for the work of disability rights advocates (Adam and Kreps, 2009; Cheta, 2004; D'Aubin, 2007).

Indeed, this research should be credited with pointing out that, while "some would suggest that ICT is a luxury for the poor, […] it is in effect becoming the electricity of the informational era […] (Warschauer, 2003: 9) and that "the ability to access, adapt, and create new knowledge using new information and communication technology is critical to social inclusion in today's era" (*ibid.*: 29). Disabled internet users have only just started to gain visibility and a more nuanced research approach that considers the needs of people with communication difficulties (Parr, Watson and Woods, 2006) and learning impairments (Kennedy, Evans and Thomas, 2011) alongside those of people with visual, auditory and motor impairments is finally emerging. Internet access and accessibility remain therefore poignant problems and will constitute an important research area for the foreseeable future. However, the unrivalled predominance of this type of studies also signals a dangerous tendency for scholars to reduce a complex and multi-layered relationship to a single variable. Although this trend resonates with both social model and digital divide theories, such stringent research focus has ultimately generated a lack of in-depth qualitative work on disabled people's own perspective with regard to the online medium. This is particularly problematic because, as Pilling, Barrett and Floyd (2004) pointed out in a seminal study on disability and the internet in the UK for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, a truly nuanced and exhaustive understanding of this relationship can only be achieved through a detailed exploration of the experiences of that substantial minority of disabled people who regularly engage in online communications in spite of persistent accessibility problems.

It is therefore essential to re-align investigations of disability and new media with the lived experiences of disabled internet "pioneers." This is not a case of underplaying the importance of accessibility issues, but rather one of pursuing a fuller understanding of the internet's significance for disabled people. The fact that the online sphere undoubtedly reflects and possibly exacerbates some pre-existing disabling barriers need not to overshadow the possibility that other obstacles, be those physical, cultural, psychological, or organisational, may simultaneously be re-negotiated (Roulstone, 1998: 129). Gaining a better understanding of new media's significance for the disabled online "vanguard" will augment pressure on both policy-makers and technology developers to tackle the issue of digital exclusion more effectively. In accordance with the emerging principle of "online groundedness" of social change, for which internet research can anticipate new social trends at the same time as technology nurtures them (Rogers, 2009: 8), focusing on disabled internet users is poised to offer valuable insights into the future of political participation for disabled people. Although at the time of writing too many disabled people remained locked out of the internet, elements are emerging that could lead to positive

developments in the coming years. In particular, universal design principles are becoming increasingly more widespread as discussed above and the cost of connection is falling at a staggeringly fast pace in advanced industrialised nations (International Telecommunication Union, 2012: 65-6). This is likely to reduce financial barriers and make access more ubiquitous for potential users on low incomes, especially through the expansion of mobile broadband. In light of these considerations, the next section discusses the need for widening the focus of disability and new media research by assessing the implications of digital activism and online politics for disabled people's citizenship status.

1.5 – Looking beyond accessibility: Widening the scope of disability and new media research

Pioneering work on attitudes to new media among disabled people has repeatedly highlighted the enthusiasm of early technology adopters for online communications regardless of affordability and accessibility issues (Sheldon, 2004; Pilling, Barrett, and Floyd, 2004; Goggin and Newell, 2004). Despite being profoundly aware of the internet's ambivalence for disabled people, scholars like Johnson and Moxon (1998), Ritchie and Blanck (2003) as well as Polat (2005) emphasised its potential for promoting political participation among people with impairments and strengthening the influence of disability organisations in policy-making. Yet, following these speculative claims, just a handful of scholars then ventured into empirical research with disabled internet users. Virtually all of these studies used qualitative methods (primarily interviews) to investigate the perspective of disabled users on the impact of new media on the daily life, focusing on aspects such as work, shopping and interpersonal relationships.

This work provided some useful preliminary insights into the significance of online media for disabled users. In particular, it highlighted the importance of discussion forums and blogs as platforms for the diffusion of alternative, un-mediated 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 (Anderberg and Jönsson, 2005) and revealed the benefits of both online peer-support communities (Obst and Stafurik, 2010) and mobile internet connections (Goggin, 2011) for disabled people. Following Roulstone's seminal study on the effects of technology on the relationship between disabled people and employment (1998), others have highlighted the advantages and disadvantages of both adaptive and mainstream IT for disabled workers. Overall, this research stressed the utopian character of full employment expectations for disabled people (Michailakis, 2001), confirming that "the fullest realisation of the benefits

of enabling technology is highly dependant on a wider supportive and flexible environment" (Roulstone, 1998: 129).

Throughout this pioneering work, close attention was paid to how disabled internet users negotiated their identity in the context of online interaction, focusing on whether they chose to disclose their impairment(s) and, if so, under what circumstances. For example, Bowker and Tuffin noted that "the idea that identity can be constructed according to the demands of the situation is a powerful framework for disabled people" (2002: 342), who greatly valued opportunities for leaving impairment out of online social interaction with non-disabled people. Similarly, Moss et al. (2004) also found that on the internet people with aphasia held the freedom to build their own personal identity free from externally imposed "roles" in high regard despite at the same time being frustrated by the inadequacy of online resources provided by relevant charities. Blogs and forums were particularly praised by participants for promoting "alternative [disability] narrations that are not necessarily in accordance with the dominant paradigms, including those proposed by social model theorists" (Goggin and Noonan, 2007: 165) as well as for expanding the geographical reach of peer-networks to enable experience sharing irrespective of distance and physical barriers (Anderberg and Jönsson, 2005: 729). Crucially, this meant that impairment and impairment-based discrimination were frequently discussed on these platforms (Thoreau, 2006), which may go some way towards finding a solution the lack of a group identity discussed above.

Indeed, the same studies also identified possible negative consequences stemming from the disappearance or segregation of impairment in the online sphere. In particular, the risk that this may limit "political action by rendering invisible the very phenomenon which invokes political debate, reaction, and a sense of solidarity amongst disabled people themselves" (Bowker and Tuffin, 2002: 341) was highlighted as well as the danger that this may increase the distance between disabled people and the rest of society. Nevertheless, empirical evidence ultimately led these scholars to conclude that the positive effects of online media on the political participation of disabled internet users would most likely outweigh the risks associated with it. As Anderberg and Jönsson (2003) argued in their detailed qualitative study with experienced disabled computer users, "increased activity and knowledge, and the ability to form social networks will be an additional tool in the struggle for an equal and discrimination-free society" (p. 731).

Furthermore, survey research revealed that internet use amongst disabled Britons is heavily weighted towards younger generations (Williams et al., 2008), who at the same time have also been found to be more civically engaged than their older counterparts (Schur, Shields and Schriner, 2005). Crucially, these trends parallel those for the general

population in democratic countries, where young users are far more often and more deeply engaged with online media, as well as especially inclined towards political uses of the internet (Owen, 2006; Lupia and Philpot, 2005). Indeed, these patterns remain influenced by the socio-economic background of individual users (Livingstone, Bober, and Helsper, 2005) and their familiarity with technology (Di Gennaro and Dutton, 2006). Nevertheless, the growing popularity of dedicated online spaces to promote civic engagement among young people has led some to question assumptions about youth's political apathy in countries such as the UK and Australia, inviting researchers to look instead beyond government-sponsored forums and focus more closely on youth-led platforms (Vromen, 2008; 2011) as well as issue-focused online initiatives (Ward, 2008). While these issues are discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two as part of a wider need for researchers to expand their understanding of "politics" in order to not overlook subtle but fundamental transformations occurring in the online sphere, these considerations add a further dimension to the present investigation. As Barnes, Mercer, and Shakespeare noted (1999), youth years are particularly crucial to the formation of a disabled identity. Thus, given the patterns discussed above, it is important to ask whether online media – especially those promoting the expansion of peer-networks – can perform civic education and participation functions for young disabled people, boosting their sense of collective agency and possibly laying the foundations for generational renewal in disability activism.

Do the benefits experienced by disabled internet users in their everyday lives also translate into the political arena, or does the voice of disabled advocates continue to be silenced in online venues too? In other words, are digital media re-designing politics along more "informal" and thus inclusive lines to the benefit of disabled users? In order to tackle these questions, it is essential to assess whether online media are providing disabled users with opportunities to defy the barriers that continue to prevent the full exercise of their political rights. In addition to its relevance *vis-à-vis* physical access barriers and role in peer-community building anticipated above, online communication has arguably been credited with the potential to reduce the "distance" between citizens and political elites and enable the former to organise independent of formal institutions and pre-existing organisations (Shirky, 2008). This is crucial for disabled users, who, as discussed above, are affected by institutional and organisational hindrances to participation that restrict access to both "formal" and "informal" political spaces.

Indeed, it could be argued that, although disabled internet pioneers may be able to come together and mobilise online, barriers would nevertheless continue to exist in the "real" world, possibly remaining even more unchallenged due to the shift of politically-minded disabled people to the "virtual" sphere. Yet, interpreting online and offline politics

as separate entities would erroneously mirror the fictional distinction between "real" and "virtual" that characterised the study of the internet in its early years. Rather, that conception has since given way to a more mature understanding of online and offline interaction as complementary and deeply interconnected components of a single socio-political continuum (Rogers, 2010a: 242). As such, online media can do more than just providing a place to meet by also serving as tools to engage in new forms of "digital" action, which can be equally if not more effective than traditional lobbying and street protest (Carty, 2011). Thus, online organising may provide a genuine alternative for disabled internet users as it has the potential to influence "real" politics independent of the barriers that have so far determined their discrimination and exclusion.

Undoubtedly, a number of important questions remain unanswered at this stage. What elements of the online sphere are relevant and where exactly should one look for evidence of this transformation? Is it about acquiring information, the ability to form networks, that to change institutions from the ground up, or all of these issues combined? Are digital media *per se* enough to foster the revitalisation of disability activism and its expansion to include otherwise disengaged people? And, perhaps most importantly, what type of role, if any, could disabled internet users be expected to perform in this hypothetical new political environment? Are they going to be leaders and drivers of change, or rather leave it to others, maybe existing organisations, to take the initiative? The next chapter turns to both theory and empirical evidence in internet studies in order to discuss these issues in greater detail. In particular, the relationship between motivational factors and the formation of online networked "communities" will be addressed, with a view to understanding what specific elements and circumstances may promote or hinder political discussion and online participation among disabled users. This will provide an opportunity to sharpen the focus of this project and devise an overarching research question, thus laying the foundations for empirical investigation.

1.6 – Conclusions

In conclusion, disabled people in the UK remain confined to a position of "semi-citizenship" (Cohen, 2009) in spite of substantial developments in anti-discrimination legislation and policy interventions inspired by the principles of independent living. Within this context, the problem of disabled people's marginalisation in the political and civic arena is especially poignant, resulting from the combined influence of a series of persistent exclusionary barriers. In particular, institutional barriers to participation have not been adequately challenged, while policy measures designed to encourage citizen participation

in public decision-making have either failed to support the needs of disabled people or ignored them as legitimate political actors. At the same time, disability rights activists went separate ways shortly after the introduction of landmark anti-discrimination legislation in the mid-1990s, limiting themeslves to the defense of acquired rights rather than promoting their expansion. In this context, feminist citizenship theorists have put forward an unconventional perspective for which the realisation of a truly "inclusive" model of citizenship will require a profound re-configuration of the relationship between "formal" and "informal" domains in politics. Alongside other traditionally disadvantaged groups, disabled people may also have a lot to benefit from this transformation. Yet, as policy intervention fell short on promoting this process and disability organisations have been either too weak or too close to the government apparatus to fill the gap, change is poised to follow other avenues.

As online media are becoming increasingly integral to political participation by affording new ways for citizens to become mobilised and voice their views and concerns, it is therefore particularly important to investigate their role *vis-à-vis* the political exclusion of disabled people. While some pioneers in disability studies displayed great enthusiasm for the "emancipatory" potential of ICTs, empirical research so far has concentrated overwhelmingly on access problems and accessibility standards. Although in opposite directions, both these approaches mirrored the determinism that riddled the study of the internet in its infancy. Indeed, access and accessibility remain key issues for both researchers and policy-makers to address. However, at the same time they do not provide a valid justification for underplaying the fact that over four in ten disabled people in the UK regularly do use the internet. As such, and in connection with broader changes in the British political landscape as a result of interactive social media, this is likely to have consequences on both the political inclusion of disabled internet users and disability activism more generally. Thus, choosing to ignore this phenomenon is not only patronising towards disabled users but also means that researchers have so far been missing out on understanding what type of effects the digital transformation of the political arena is having on disabled people. In addition, from a broader internet studies perspective, it is of particular interest to establish how the internet affects a social group that has traditionally been excluded from power.

While this chapter made a strong case for the investigation of the effects of the internet on the disabled people's citizenship, at this stage it is also crucial for empirical research to remain open to all possible outcomes. Indeed, the preliminary observations made above on the basis of pioneering research with disabled internet users highlighted a series of ways in which online media may provide the former with ways to circumvent

disabling barriers to participation, including institutional and organisational obstacles. Yet, the new and exploratory nature of this type of research, as well as the number of variables that are likely to intervene, require maximum cautiousness in avoiding premature assumptions that may compromise the direction of the analysis. Formulating expectations of technology-enabled "mass" empowerment as in Finkelstein's utopia (1980) would therefore be just as short-sighted and non-helpful as the current prevalence of accessibility research. Thus, the next chapter focuses on relevant literature in internet studies in order to identify more nuanced expectations and formulate a specific research question.

Chapter 2 – The Internet, Citizenship and Collective Action

This chapter sets out to review the mechanisms by which online media are re-configuring the civic arena and transforming collective action in ways that could facilitate political participation for disabled internet users. Where on the internet are disabled users most likely to discuss politically relevant issues and, possibly, become mobilised? This is a complex issue that connects to a wider debate as to where internet researchers should look for evidence of online political participation. As such, the impact of new media on the relationship between "formal" and "informal" politics, as well as the scholarly debate on e-democracy and online civic engagement are reviewed with a view to generating a clear research question and supporting the formulation of an effective investigation strategy. The first section of this chapter discusses the increasingly sceptical literature that followed initial assumptions that the internet could "revolutionise" democratic politics by favouring the emergence of previously marginalised voices. While much of this work might be praised for its methodological rigour, its negative conclusions were ultimately skewed by the tendency among researchers to adopt an excessively "narrow" definition of politics, which led them to overlook more nuanced changes. In addition, the popularity of pessimistic and sceptical ideas was also linked to the excessive emphasis placed by these studies on institutionally-sponsored e-democracy initiatives, which revealed themselves to be intrinsically unable to promote participatory change. More recently, a new agenda has emerged in this field that highlights the need for researchers to examine the significance of politically relevant discussions in "non-political" online spaces.

Such online spaces may be especially relevant for users who are otherwise unfamiliar with or feel daunted by politics with a "big P." This is because they are helping to re-configure the civic arena into a wider and more flexible environment where users can become involved in politically relevant debates by means of "private" narratives. However, as the emergence of deliberative and participatory democracy remains as utopian as ever, political *talk* only represents the very first step towards meaningful participation and empowerment. As such, this chapter subsequently turns to examining the impact of new media on contemporary dynamics of collective *action*. In particular, concepts of social capital and networked participation are discussed. As new forms of engagement are emerging and established organisations are increasingly embracing participatory media and personalised action repertoires, disabled internet users can not only get in touch with others in a similar situation, but also discuss their shared interests and organise around these in

ways that do not prescribe a strong common identity, circumvent traditional organisations and reduce the distance between them and public decision-makers.

In light of these considerations, this chapter then continues by considering whether it would be reasonable to expect the mere availability of new media to be a sufficient reason for disabled users to take part in political debates, possibly fostering the emergence of a new ecology of disability activism. In particular, the outcomes of a pilot study carried out in preparation for this project by analysing the web presence of national Scottish disability organisations are briefly discussed (Trevisan, 2012a), together with those from other work focusing on the dynamics of digitally-enabled collective action. Crucially, this research suggested that new media *per se* offer no guarantee of participatory change. Rather, disabled users are more likely to experience the benefits of online organising in conjunction with specific issues or events capable of catalysing their interest, (re-)activating latent ties and boosting their motivation to become involved in collective action. As such, this chapter concludes by putting forward an overarching research question and discussing the benefits of adopting an issue-focused approach in seeking to assess the significance of the internet for the empowerment of disabled users.

2.1 - Forget about technological utopias: Re-booting online politics research

Following an initial wave of utopian enthusiasm for the internet's potential to facilitate "forms of communication, interaction and organisation that undermine unequal status and power relations" (Spears and Lea, 1994: 248), thus fostering participatory politics and direct democracy (see for example: Rash, 1995; Stromer-Galley, 2000), sceptical or altogether pessimist positions have tended to prevail in the study of online democracy in more recent years. Such negative conclusions have been based upon the straightforward and relatively convincing argument that online politics would simply be dominated by the same groups and individuals who have traditionally been in control of politics as we know it. In particular, it was argued that major political parties and resourceful interest groups were best placed for translating their offline primacy into the online sphere, which would therefore represent a mere extension of "politics as usual" (Margolis and Resnik, 2000; Margolis and Moreno-Riaño, 2009). Furthermore, much early work on cyber-politics also questioned the internet's viability as a vehicle for the diffusion of political information, casting it as a "second order" medium (Lusoli, 2005) and maintaining that traditional mass media would indeed continue to dominate both the political discourse (Barnett, 1997) and the promotion of democratic citizenship more generally (Scheufele and Nisbet, 2002).

In just a few years, a large body of evidence was collected that provided seemingly strong support for these views. In particular, much of this work highlighted that expecting traditional institutions such as political parties, central and local government to actively promote the development of truly meaningful e-democracy initiatives was simply unrealistic (Bennett, 2003a; Wright, 2006; Wright and Street, 2007). On the one hand, it was argued that the "managerial" approach taken by Western governments to online technology restricted opportunities for e-deliberation, meaning that "individuals may get better service as consumers from their governments, but as far as the possibilities of interactivity that are represented by the Internet are concerned, this is a bare minimum" (Chadwick and May, 2003: 293). On the other hand, early analyses of citizen-input to rulemaking via electronic media went as far as suggesting that established and emerging interest groups were in fact impoverishing the quality of deliberation by promoting the use of template email messages for e-lobbying (Schlosberg, Zavestoski, and Shulman, 2007).

As Coleman and Blumler usefully summarised in their work on the internet and democratic citizenship, this research showed that "e-democracy exercises […] are ignored by elected politicians and are mistrusted by participating citizens who do not perceive there to be a credible link between their input and policy output" (2009: 115), while "at its worst, pseudo-participation entails attempts by elites to domesticate and defuse participatory energies which […] could become a threat to their power" (*ibid.*). Although some of this empirical work was set up as an attempt to disprove the pessimistic rhetoric discussed above, its results revealed that institutional online initiatives were in fact regularly "preaching to the converted" (Norris, 2003; Norris and Curtice, 2006). As such, even online discussion platforms that had been designed with the genuine intention to engage disenfranchised users and extend citizen participation at the local level were found to be ultimately dominated by "gladiators" who were otherwise politically active and, whether consciously or not, pushed online minority voices into a "virtual" corner, perpetuating and potentially exacerbating their marginalisation (Jensen, 2006; Albrecht, 2006). More broadly, the citizen experience with e-consultation spaces was also found to be typically hampered by exclusionary barriers that replicated some of the pitfalls of politics as we know it, both in terms of design and with regard to the overall impact of consultation processes on policy outputs (Wright, and Coleman, 2012; Tomkova, 2009).

Such findings contributed additional strength and further sophistication to the digital divide paradigm discussed in Chapter One. Thus, taken in isolation, these results boosted the development of a broad theoretical strand for which online media, in spite of their potential for interaction, turned out to be reinforcing existing elites and consequentially perpetuating the exclusion of disadvantaged groups (Weber, Loumakis, and Bergman,

2003). Moving from an expanded understanding of the digital divide as determined by differences in internet access, proficiency and usage patterns, Mossberger, Tolbert and McNeal (2008) argued that there is a strong correlation between "digital citizenship," i.e. "the ability to participate in society online" (p. 1) and social inclusion/exclusion in the 21st century. Others such as Pajnik (2005), focused more closely on the marked user-preference for "non-political" online activities and "mundane" content, claiming that the commercial nature of the medium "encourage[d] the individual to look for private solutions to problems of a public nature" (p. 355). Following this line of thought, some re-cast the divide as a gap between a small minority of "net-itizens" and a large majority of digital "consumers" (Gandy, 2002). Finally, another part of the literature concentrated specifically on the nature and influence of emerging online "voices." For example, Hindman's useful analysis of the U.S. political blogsphere concluded that "blogs have given a small group of educational, professional, and technical elites new influence in U.S. politics" (2009: 103), while at the same time they "have done far less to amplify the political voice of average citizens" (*ibid.*). In light of these considerations, it was therefore suggested that new media constituted unsuitable platforms for mass empowerment and were at best inclined towards the replacement of existing elites with new ones.

2.1.1 – The power of 'talk': Ordinary users and 'everyday' online politics

As such, a dominant narrative was rapidly established in internet studies for which online political participation was seen as largely "normalised" and instances of digital mobilisation were confined to a small minority of young(er), politically-minded users (Hirzalla, van Zoonen, and de Ridden, 2011). At first impression, these arguments exposed an apparent paradox. While in fact events such as the Arab Spring protests of 2011 seemed to suggest that in non-democratic contexts sweeping political change can be reflected – if not ignited – by the internet, at the same time online media would fall short of promoting further democratisation in Western countries. However, could it rather be that so far researchers have actually looked in the wrong places and relied on misleading benchmarks for the identification of online democratic participation? In very recent years, this thesis was espoused by scholars who critiqued the bleak conclusions discussed above, questioning the very foundations upon which such sceptical research is based. In particular, authors such as Wright (2012a) and Chadwick (2012a) argued that negative hypotheses have *de facto* been self-fulfilled by the widespread tendency among researchers to concentrate excessively on online platforms set up by institutional actors and explicitly branded as "political." In other words, evidence of change has paradoxically been sought in online spaces in which

"formal" politics is conducted according to the "rules" set by those same figures that are central to the representative system as we know it. Given that the former tend to be particularly resistant to innovation, this approach arguably generated a vicious circle for which negative views have been reinforced by repeated attempts to test exaggerated expectations of a democratic "revolution" on platforms that "can [instead] be read as a strategy for disciplining civic energy within the constraining techno-political sphere of managed cyberspace" (Coleman and Blumler, 2009: 115). In turn, more subtle but still substantial elements of change may simultaneously have been mistaken for no change at all by researchers looking for a complete overhaul of representative democracy in favour of participatory governance.

Rather than asking "what's really new about the new technology" (Newhagen, 1998: 112), researchers who concentrated on party and candidate websites, as well as institutionally-sponsored discussion forums, fell therefore into the trap of applying outdated frameworks to the study of an emerging media environment, thus mistaking a partial understanding of online politics for the whole picture. For example, even those studies that went against the sceptical "tide" by highlighting a slight positive trend in the use of technology for political purposes relied nonetheless on a limited set of quintessentially political variables such as "searching for political information" and "making contact with politicians" (see for example: di Gennaro and Dutton, 2006). In order to achieve a more balanced assessment of the effects of online media on politics and society, critics of this approach have suggested that further research should concentrate on "everyday" online conversations in which politics and policy issues may also be discussed in conjunction with personal interests. In particular, scholars such as Wright have advocated a shift towards the study of "third spaces" broadly defined as "non-political online spaces where political talk emerges" (2012b: 5).

Moving from the assumption that citizenship fundamentally develops outside formal institutional settings and through ordinary conversations that take place in public venues, this perspective invites to look for evidence of "political" talk in seemingly "mundane" online spaces, from price comparison websites to forums discussing reality TV programmes. As Wojcieszak and Mutz (2009) explained, this is because "internet users who are not sufficiently engaged in politics to self-select into explicitly political online chat rooms or message boards inadvertently encounter political views online in hobby and interest groups in particular" (p. 50). Similar points were also made by scholars researching youth political engagement online (see for example: Owen, 2006; Vromen, 2011; Vromen and Collin, 2010). In particular, Vromen and Collin (2010) stressed how younger generations are not nearly as disenfranchised as one may assume but rather oriented towards alternative and

informal ways of participating in civic life focused on "everyday" issues, online as well as offline. In addition to explaining the failure of institutionally-sponsored online initiatives to "democratise democracy," these considerations called for a more fundamental expansion of what counts as "online politics," which stretches well beyond discussions taking place in formal arenas.

Indeed, these ideas owe a lot to both Habermas' public sphere concept (1989) and Oldenburg's work on politically relevant talk in "everyday" life venues such as cafés, pubs and community centres (1989). Yet, as Wright (2012b) pointed out in his useful attempt to conceptualise online "third spaces," these are free from some of the restrictive caveats that have typically characterised their ideal offline precursors. In particular, while public sphere theory has tended to emphasise the value of rational discussion over emotional talk, in online "third spaces" the latter is understood to be potentially as politically relevant as logical, evidence-based debate. Furthermore, discussions hosted on online "third spaces" also transcend the geographical boundaries associated with physical public places as well as the tendency for talk to focus primarily on local issues that comes with them. Although a detailed examination of the nature of "third spaces" would go beyond the purpose of this study, it is important to note that this conceptualisation rejects theory-based objections to the ability of commercially-driven online platforms to support civic education, encourage political participation (Pajnik, 2005) and boost citizenship (Coleman and Blumler, 2009: 11). In light of this, the distinction between online citizens and consumers cited above could be not only unhelpful but also misleading. This widens the scope of online politics research to include a variety of non-obvious spaces that attract and engage a much greater number of users than the internet's explicitly political "niches" discussed above.

Undoubtedly, analysing the interaction that takes place in these online venues presents great challenges due to the number of variables involved and difficulties in distinguishing between politically relevant content and what is just "chatter" (Graham, 2008). This explains, at least in part, why this type of research only made it onto the agenda at a time in which both internet scholarship and the medium itself have entered a new age of maturity (Chadwick and Howard, 2009). One way in which some have sought to circumvent methodological challenges was by carrying out surveys with users of non-political interactive spaces. Crucially, this work revealed users to be widely aware of the fact that much "participation in non-political chats or message boards regularly involves some discussion of political topics and controversial public issues" (Wojcieszak and Mutz, 2009: 45). Yet, a real breakthrough in this field has come from more recent developments in the area of deliberative analysis, which have strengthened the idea of online "third spaces" both theoretically (Lupia, 2009) and methodologically (Dahlberg, 2004), providing

researchers with increasingly refined tools for the investigation of naturally occurring online conversations. As such, pioneering empirical work has highlighted how seemingly frivolous online talk provides in fact an indirect channel to regularly discuss politically relevant issues (Graham, 2010a, 2012; Graham and Auli, 2011). In contrast with the inhibitive influence of internet "gladiators" that characterises explicitly political spaces as discussed above, this research also exposed the positive role performed by regular or "super-" users in non-political platforms as facilitators of discussion and debate (Graham and Wright, 2013). Furthermore, evidence has also been found of the importance of "mundane" discussion forums for the growth of civil society groups in countries of relatively recent democratisation (Bakardjieva, 2012).

While the issue of deliberative analysis will be returned to in greater detail in the context of content analysis design and execution (see Chapters Three and Five), it is important to note that this alternative outlook on online participation strongly resonates with the ideal of inclusive citizenship discussed in the previous chapter. In particular, the unconventional and flexible conceptualisation of where in the online sphere one should expect to find "politics," and the expanded definition of "political" contribute to a substantial extension of the civic arena, promoting that re-evaluation of informal politics indicated by feminist scholars as a fundamental condition for the realisation of "participatory parity." If, then, political talk is mixed with, or even disguised as, "everyday" conversation, users who are otherwise disenfranchised and excluded from public debates and decision-making stand a better chance to be able to participate in politically relevant online interaction, whether consciously or not. In turn, this could activate a virtuous mechanism that enhances their civic culture, making them fuller citizens (Dahlgren, 2002). This is in stark opposition to quintessentially political platforms, which have frequently been designed with "fully informed" and "hyper-active" users in mind (Vedel, 2006: 232). In the case of disabled users, this is particularly relevant as it signals the existence of alternative channels where "psychological" barriers to participation such as feelings of inadequacy and powerlessness may be circumvented effectively by discussing public issues and articulating political opinions through the lens of one's personal interests and daily experiences.

Overall, this expanded approach to online politics highlights an important affordance of the internet for disabled users. Flexible or possibly even inadvertent access to politically relevant conversations constitutes a decisive step towards civic education and an opportunity to familiarise with the "building blocks" of public discourse (Mansbridge, 1999). Yet, it has also been argued that truly meaningful political participation, online as

well as offline, ought to go beyond mere *talk*. As Vedel pointed out in a useful review of e-democracy ideals, "exchanging ideas and opinions is only one step in the democratic process" (2006: 233). Rather, "power continues to reside in government agencies, elected legislatures and transnational, intergovernmental bodies" (Coleman and Blumler, 2009: 135), for which "there need to be channels of common discourse between the official and informal political spheres" (*ibid.*: 136). Thus, a fundamental trait of meaningful participation continues to be the ability of a given group to exhibit some form of coordinated collective *action* capable of reaching and influencing public decision-makers (Scott, 1985: 299-301).

As the rise of direct deliberative democracy remains as utopian as ever, it is therefore essential to avoid over-emphasising the discursive aspect of online participation. Instead, it is crucial to understand if and when *talk* can translate into agency and collective *action*, either in traditional forms such as street protest and petitions, or as new, innovative and unpredictable online repertoires. More or less persuasive analyses of digitally-enabled political action abound in the mass media as well as in part of the academic literature (e.g. Shirky, 2008). Yet, for the purpose of this study it was it is useful to start by addressing this issue at the conceptual level. As such, the next section discusses the influence of new media on the contemporary structure of collective action. In particular, notions of social capital and online networks are explored to understand whether new media have the potential to help disabled users take the next step forward from online political talk, self-organising to challenge traditional organisations and overcome institutional barriers to participation.

2.2 – From *talk* to *action*: The discovery and activation of "latent" ties

The idea that online media could promote coordinated collective action has long been associated with two "trademark" concepts of contemporary sociological theory, namely: social capital and the idea of "network society." On the one hand, the former has proved especially popular among researchers who sought to compare the impact of new and "traditional" mass media on citizen engagement (see for example: Jennings and Zeitner, 2003; Scheufele and Nisbet, 2002). On the other hand, network society theorists have credited the internet with the proliferation of "communities of choice," which aggregate people around shared interests and particular issues in more horizontal, fluid and economical ways than geographically-bound "communities of place." An extensive body of literature exists on these concepts. Therefore, providing an exhaustive review of the theoretical and empirical work that has incorporated these ideas would reach beyond the

scope of this study. Rather, the following paragraphs discuss the most salient aspects of these scholarly strands *vis-à-vis* the potential for online media to represent more than a mere discussion space for disabled users, supporting instead coordinated action for the realisation of that "participatory parity" advocated by inclusive citizenship theorists.

2.2.1 – Social Capital: Intellectually intriguing, yet pragmatically elusive

As anticipated above, in recent years the idea of social capital has enjoyed great popularity with political communication as well as new media scholars. This theory considers public participation to be fundamentally driven by strong interpersonal connections and high levels of trust among the members of a given community, which in the long term foster a virtuous circle of civic education and engagement comparable to the mechanism of "learning by doing" first described in de Tocqueville's work on 19th Century American democracy (2000). Following Robert Putnam's immensely popular account of the perceived decline of community and civic engagement in the U.S. in recent decades (2000), many speculated on the internet's potential to either resuscitate ties that had been weakened by the use of "individualist" mass media – chiefly television - or, rather pessimistically, further debilitate any remaining social bonds. On the face of it, the idea that the internet may constitute an alternative source of social capital makes for an intriguing argument in connection to its potential *vis-à-vis* disabling barriers: if online discussion and interaction can support the creation of mutual relationships and trust among disabled users, then collective action may reasonably follow. In addition, if disabled internet users are "wired in" the disability community at large, they may also be able to promote the involvement of those who are not online through a "cascading" mechanism similar to the one experimented by Democrat primary hopeful Howard Dean in 2004 (Hindman, 2005; Kreiss, 2009), perfected by the Obama '08 campaign and attempted by other political organisations thereafter (Gibson, 2009; Kreiss, 2012). However, a review of empirical work carried out to date in this area highlighted a series of important issues with regard to the operationalisation of this concept, which ultimately advised against its adoption in this study.

First, the evidence collected in case study research as well as larger quantitative projects focusing on social capital and ICTs is contradictory. As with much early internet research permeated by idealism, these data have arguably supported three main positions. Proponents of either of the aforementioned optimistic and pessimistic conclusions have emerged, with the former envisaging a "re-birth" of community thanks to online ties (see for example: Putnam and Feldstein, 2003; Ester and Vinken, 2003; Best and Krueger, 2004; Henderson and Gilding, 2004; Pruijt, 2002; Steinfield et al., 2009) and the latter objecting

to the idea of the internet as a "reservoir" of trust and social capital (Uslaner, 2004). Thus, as Putnam himself clarified that social capital "can [also] be directed toward malevolent, antisocial purposes, just like any other form of capital" (2000: 22), many have associated digitally-enabled ties with the consolidation of like-minded groups and further polarisation (bonding social capital) rather than the promotion of pluralism and deliberation (bridging social capital), suggesting that online relationships are of inferior quality in comparison to offline interaction (Matzat, 2010). Furthermore, others have simply given in to the ambiguity of contrasting empirical evidence and adopted a somewhat "agnostic" position by stating that the internet's effect on social capital cannot be proven (Norris, 2004). Such inconclusiveness has been linked to the lack of a commonly accepted and consistently applied definition of social capital[1], which makes it difficult to compare different studies with one another, giving individual researchers leeway in the interpretation of empirical results (Chadwick, 2006: 103). In particular, a rift has been exposed between those who regard social capital as an attribute of communities and those who instead highlight the role of the individual in its formation (Brehm and Rahn, 1997: 1017; Katz and Rice, 2002). Registering levels of social capital is further complicated by the fact that it "may be specific to certain activities. A given form of social capital that is valuable in facilitating certain actions may be useless or even harmful for others" (Coleman, 1988: 98). In addition, "unlike other forms of capital, social capital inheres in the structure of relations between actors and among actors" (*ibid.*), thus making it a particularly elusive target.

Second, the idea of social capital remains closely anchored to "traditional" understandings of social interaction, political participation and citizenship. Although this is consistent with a widespread tendency for scholars of civic engagement to be "nostalgic" about a past "golden era" and characterise today's citizens as apathetic and disenfranchised (Papacharissi, 2010: 12-13), it is nevertheless problematic as it may actively restrict the perspective of those who seek to evaluate the political significance of online relationships. This led part of the literature to replicating the fictional dichotomy between "virtual" and

[1] Although this is not the place for an exhaustive discussion of social capital theory, it is useful to provide some examples of how this concept was interpreted and operationalised in internet literature. Undoubtedly, Putnam's (1995) own definition of social capital as the "features of social organisation, such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and collaboration for mutual benefit" (p. 67) has enjoyed unparalleled popularity in internet scholarship. Yet, different studies emphasised different elements of this composite concept, depending on their specific focus and objectives. For example, Bolam et al. (2006) sought to understand the influence of social capital on health inequalities by casting it as a "psychological" factor opposed to material disparity in resources and power distribution. Others such as Kavanaugh and Patterson (2001) almost entirely identified social capital with the quality of communication among the members of a given community, proposing the measurement of a series of communicative actions as proxies for social capital levels. Finally, others also added further criteria to the elements proposed by Putnam, with Wellman et al. (2001) advocating in favour of assessing "community commitment," i.e. people's attitude towards their community and sense of belonging. While countless more examples could be cited, it is clear even from this small sample that such a plurality of ways of measuring social capital somewhat detracted from the overall strength and significance of empirical work in this area.

"real" worlds by setting out to compare respective levels of trust and reciprocity in online and offline gatherings (Sessions, 2010). Others have gone even further, hypothesising an offline-online continuum only to then conclude that online social capital performs a merely supplementary function alongside in-person interaction (Katz and Rice, 2002). Furthermore, and more importantly, some political communication scholars have also indicated that the production of social capital would be favoured only by "informational" uses of the internet, while "recreational" browsing would instead be associated with individualism and isolation (Shah, Kwak, and Holbert, 2001). These arguments are in stark contrast with the expanded conceptualisation of online politics discussed above. Rather, they reveal a persistent bias in favour of offline relationships and "formal" participation channels (Baym, 2010: 73), which signals a counter-productive preference for using "old" frameworks to assess and interpret new phenomena.

As far as theory is concerned, social capital is a captivating concept that makes a useful contribution to our understanding of the nature and dynamics of collective action. In particular, its focus on trust and interpersonal relationships made it a plausible candidate for assessing the internet's potential to foster political participation for disabled users. Yet, the issues highlighted above as well as the lack of clarity surrounding its adoption in previous work invited further reflection to identify a less controversial and more flexible framework to investigate the ability of online platforms to support political *action* as well as *talk* among disabled users. As such, the next section discusses the merits of a concept that resonates with the very structure of the internet: that of network society.

2.2.2 – À la carte participation? Online networks, the individual and 21st century collective action

Network theory emerged long before the commercial expansion of the internet in the mid-1990s. However, both its sophistication and popularity have greatly increased alongside the expansion of digital media in recent years. In short, the idea of network society contends that the nature of communities is changing from one of "place," based on strong local connections, to one of "choice," stitched together through loose, interest-based ties that enable individuals to be associated with multiple groups at the same time regardless of geographical boundaries (Castells, 2002: 125-9). Thus, citizen engagement is being re-configured rather than disappearing (Wellman, 1979; Wellman, Carrington and Hall, 1988: 133; Wellman et al., 2001), inviting a reflection on the need to expand definitions of participation to capture new and unconventional forms of political agency in the 21st century (Norris, 2002: 24). In other words, the idea of network society preserves the

centrality attributed to interpersonal connections in social capital literature, yet at the same time it also provides a more flexible framework to interpret otherwise elusive patterns of contemporary civic engagement. Although some have argued against the use of the term "community" to describe the social structures that emerge from connections based on shared interests (Baym, 2010: 72-3), others have pointed out that "weak" ties are in fact likely to enable better informed deliberation and support mutual understanding among diverse and distant groups (Granovetter, 1973). The main merit of this approach is therefore that it focuses on the bigger picture of participation rather than concentrating on the strength of interpersonal relationships *per se*. Thus, network theory is not in opposition to social capital nor it represents a "watered down" version of the latter. Rather, it provides a broader perspective that crucially values connectivity and pluralism.

As mentioned above, the growth of the internet and increasingly ubiquitous connectivity have been credited with augmenting the speed and magnitude of this social transformation (Castells, 2000; 2004: 9-13). Thanks to its networked structure, the online medium is arguably suited to promoting less hierarchical forms of association that are free from the influence of gatekeepers and in which power tends to be distributed across a plurality of actors rather than centralised in the hands of few (Wellman, Carrington and Hall, 1988: 137). Substantial amounts of empirical evidence have been collected that support these assumptions (Chadwick, 2006: 103-7), indicating that direct control over mass communication – described by Castells as "self-directed mass communication" (2004: 13) – can ultimately empower network members. As such, online discussion is seen as the first step towards the formation of "communities" that can mobilise users around a common interest by granting the latter control and leaving them free to withdraw at their will (Olsson, 2008: 665 and 671). This is especially relevant for groups like disabled people, who are concerned with issues of social justice and feel un-represented by existing advocacy bodies (Castells, 2007: 248-9). As such, "amateur" online networks have been able to take on established organisations that did not represent their interests effectively, with a significant example being that of online health advocacy groups in the United States, which successfully aggregated users to rival the representation offered by mainstream non-profit organisations (Brainard and Siplon, 2002: 166-70). More broadly, peace and environmentalist campaigners, building on their experience with networked activism that first emerged in the 1970s (Castells, 2012: 230), were also able to translate online interaction into organised political action, in some cases punching above their actual weight (Pickerill, 2004: 178 and 185-6; Gillian, Pickerill and Webster, 2008: 170).

Crucially, this process has experienced an even greater acceleration by virtue of the unprecedented expansion of Web 2.0 technology in recent years (O'Reilly, 2012) – which

has blurred the distinction between users and producers of content – and following the adoption of an "always-on" lifestyle by many, connected to the growth of mobile internet (boyd, 2012). In particular, it has been argued that the ambivalent nature of social networking platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Flickr, which are both "public" and "private" media at the same time (Baym and boyd, 2012; boyd and Ellison, 2008; boyd, 2007), can facilitate user mobilisation on "public" issues from within a user's own "private" sphere (Papacharissi, 2009: 244; Häyhtiö and Rinne, 2008: 14). In this context, "neither the personal nor the political are prevalent, but rather a peculiar mixture of both, which simultaneously renders citizenship less political than it was in the past, but also more autonomously defined" (Papacharissi, 2010: 162). Although this makes for a potentially confusing context that has so far proved hard to conceptualise adequately, such re-configuration of the private/public distinction into a fluid continuum echoes the arguments put forward by inclusive citizenship theorists with regard to the transformation of the civic arena. This is because "collective actions of all kinds entail individuals' transition from a private domain of interest and action to a public one. […] When boundaries between private and public domains are porous and easily crossed […] people's negotiation of the boundary typically involves less intentionality and calculation [and] the transition may even be unintentional" (Bimber, Flanagin, and Stohl, 2005: 377-8). Thus, the growing focus on private aspects of the political debate, as well as the identification of online platforms as "personal" spaces, may reasonably facilitate participation among users who, like disabled people, are traditionally prevented from engaging in institutionally-sponsored forums by feelings of powerlessness and inadequacy (Wellmann et al., 2003).

As such, individual users lie at the centre of networked participation (Wellman, Boase and Chen, 2002: 160), which is "shaped around an agenda that is personal" (Papacharissi, 2010: 162). Yet, the political efficacy of such "communities of choice" remains tied to their ability to deploy coordinated action capable of reaching the "formal" domain of democratic politics to which policy decisions remain confined, as discussed above (Wellmann et al., 2003). Some have criticised this as a contradiction in terms that may in fact determine a loss of efficacy for citizen-initiated politics and, ultimately, foster disempowerment. In particular, scholars such as Bimber argued that the dependence of online networks on a convergence of "private" interests characterises them as "thin" communities, giving members an easy "way out" and possibly leading to a dangerous fragmentation of political participation (1998). Similarly, the possibility to set up highly personalised filters to online information and to choose to communicate only with other like-minded users has been interpreted as a source of growing polarisation (Sunstein, 2007). In light of these considerations, it has been argued that "network openness does not lead us

directly to democracy" (Fenton, 2012: 142) and therefore "new media *may* be liberating for users, but not necessarily democratising for society" (*ibid.*). While this type of assumptions may well contain a grain of truth with regard to the overall trajectory of contemporary democratic participation, in the case of disabled internet users these arguments ought to be weighed against the potential benefits that are simultaneously associated with this emerging structure of engagement.

In particular, online networks that revolve around shared interests are poised to re-align interaction and participation with the lived experiences of disabled users. This is because, compared to traditional organisations, they lower the entry threshold by eliminating the need to subscribe to either an ideological explanation of oppression or a controversial "disabled" identity. More broadly, this has been conceptualised as a potential solution to the problem of "free-riding" (Bimber, Stohl, and Flanagin, 2005; Bennett and Segerberg, 2012), for which in traditional collective action contexts many prefer "piggybacking" on the efforts of few as they consider direct participation to be too costly (Olson, 1965). Thus, whereas in recent years organisations "for" and "of" disabled people have struggled to successfully aggregate and empower their primary constituents, online networks may offer disabled internet "pioneers" a more straightforward, less onerous and inclusive alternative to reach out to others in a similar situation, talk and possibly organise. This is however not to say that identity, which has traditionally been at the root of collective action in social movements (Chesters and Welsh, 2006: 130-4), simply does not matter any longer. Rather, in this context identity constitutes less of a pre-requisite for mobilisation and more of an element that is negotiated throughout the process of mobilisation, ultimately pertaining to the long term sustainability of networks more than their immediate present (Häyhtiö and Rinne, 2008: 18; Cavanagh, 2007: 75).

In addition, the most pessimistic positions reviewed above ignored the fact that personal interests, beliefs and connections have traditionally been at the centre of aggregation in social movements, where participation is arguably driven by cost-benefit analysis oriented towards specific gains, be those rationally or emotionally perceived (della Porta and Diani, 1999: 112-8). If, then, on the one hand the internet is promoting further individualism, on the other it can also represent a vehicle for discovering and activating "latent" ties among users who otherwise would have no or little chance to get in touch with one another, kick-starting a process that may ultimately generate new forms of coordinated collective action (Haythornthwaite, 2005). Therefore, online media can arguably defy "informational" obstacles to human interaction by enabling users to find out about "shared interests, shared desires, or common experiences and acquaintances" (Bimber, Flanagin, and Stohl, 2005: 382) more readily than in physical settings. This may be especially

relevant to disabled users penalised by access barriers or who generally lack opportunities to meet others in a similar situation on a regular basis.

As such, some have spoken of "better organised pluralism" rather than fragmentation for those cases in which online networks are capable of generating viable alternatives to the shortcomings of both existing advocacy organisations and state institutions (Coleman, 2005: 211). Undoubtedly, a fine line runs between these two potential outcomes of online communication. Therefore, empirical research is essential to achieve a correct understanding of what Bennett and Segerberg have dubbed "connective action," i.e. 21st century collective action born out of digitally-activated "latent" ties that "has a logic of its own, and thus […] deserves analysis on its own terms" (2012: 760). Where online, then, should researchers look for evidence of a transformation in disability politics, whether towards fragmentation or alternative forms of collective action? In order to devise a clear research question and lay the foundations for an effective strategy of inquiry, the next section discusses the limits of an organisation-based approach *vis-à-vis* the benefits of adopting an issue-focused perspective.

2.3 – Looking for evidence: The limits of organisation-based approaches

Intuitively, the web presence of existing disability organisations may look like a useful place from which to start investigating the implications of new media for disabled users' citizenship. The rationale for this type of research would undoubtedly extend beyond the fact that this makes for a practical departure point. This is because in recent years a number of established organisations have assimilated participatory elements typical of social movement groups into their e-advocacy and campaigning repertoires, offering flexible opportunities for user-engagement, shifting power to grassroots supporters and ultimately generating "hybrid" structures (Chadwick, 2007). This trend has influenced a series of traditionally bureaucratic and centralised organisations, including British political parties, in which the proliferation of blogs has injected additional pluralism and raised the influence of their emerging "virtual grassroots," especially in the periods between elections (Gibson et al., 2012). As such, it was interesting to ask whether groups "for" and "of" disabled people had also embraced participatory online media in response to a growing demand for "entrepreneurial engagement" from users who are ever more inclined to creating their own opportunities for involvement and expect to perform an active role in organisational agenda setting (Flanagin, Stohl, and Bimber, 2006; Bimber, Stohl, and Flanagin, 2009; Bimber, Flanagin, and Stohl, 2012). To verify these assumptions, a pilot study investigating the online behaviour of Scottish disability organisations was carried out

in 2010 (Trevisan, 2012a). This focused on a purposively selected sample of nine national disability groups that included traditional charities, member-led networks and hybrid bodies. Their relationship with online media was examined through content analysis and semi-structured interviews.

Indeed, some groups were always expected to perform better than others as e-democratic actors on the basis of their pre-existing structure, underpinning ideology and overall mission (Burt and Taylor, 2008). Yet, the results of this preliminary study were strikingly negative across the entire organisational spectrum. Far from promoting horizontal interaction, Scottish disability organisations effectively operated as alternative "filters" of user-participation, revealing a resistance to participatory technology and user-generated content that was confirmed in interviews with their officers. In particular, there was a real dearth of opportunities for users to share their concerns in an un-mediated fashion. For example, any personal disability story that appeared on the blogs of these organisations had been carefully selected and edited, or sometimes altogether written, by staff members. Paradoxically, this meant that online media could in fact be used to put more distance between disabled people and those who advocate on their behalf. In addition, when these organisations had engaged in social networking sites, this was invariably as part of an effort to mobilise users around a pre-determined agenda rather than to launch genuinely dialogical exchanges (Trevisan, 2012a: 397). While at odds with the general trend outlined above, these findings were in fact not entirely surprising given that established and institutionalised campaigning organisations operating in a number of areas have often demonstrated an ambivalent attitude towards online media by virtue of the inevitable tension existing between the open nature of participatory platforms and innate organizational control impulses (Wright and Coleman, 2012; Brainard and Siplon, 2002; 2004). Similarly, previous work on the online presence of organisations serving other disadvantaged groups had also exposed a severe lack of interactive features (Siapera, 2005). As such, these results ultimately echoed the disempowering practices deployed by formal organisations to exclude disabled people from decision-making processes that were discussed in Chapter One.

It could be legitimately objected that looking for evidence of participatory change on the online platforms of existing disability organisations essentially replicated the same mistakes made by those who naively expected e-democracy to flourish on government-sponsored forums. Undoubtedly, focusing on the online presence of a single-handedly selected set of organisations constituted a somewhat "conservative" approach to the study of internet politics. Yet, these results ought to be understood in conjunction with the emerging mechanisms of online aggregation and activation discussed above. In this

framework, they did more than just suggesting that existing organisations and advocacy groups are unlikely to proactively initiate a digital turn in disability activism. Rather, they corroborated the assumption for which, under ordinary circumstances, the mere availability of interactive media does not constitute a sufficient reason for the emergence of new forms of participation and innovative repertoires. Such inability of the internet to serve as a catalyst of participatory change *per se* reiterated the need for studies of online interaction to always take into account relevant offline events, given that the distinction between "virtual" and "real" has been exposed as both fictional and misleading (Rogers, 2010a; Haythornthwaite and Kendall, 2010). This prompted further reflection on the dynamics of online aggregation, inviting to search for an external element capable of performing as both a "trigger" of spontaneous mobilisation and an incentive to participatory transformation for existing groups.

2.3.1 – The need for a trigger: Issue-focused participation

As discussed above, networked participation tends to be centred on "personal" interests and "private" issues (Baym, 2010: 90). This emerging pattern has been widely criticised for contributing to an alleged decline of engagement in community matters and common causes (Curran, 2012). However, such critical perspective fails to recognise that, "as boundaries are more easily crossed between private and public, the mechanisms of collective entrepreneurship become available to a larger array of actors, especially those with fewer resources" (Flanagin, Stohl, and Bimber, 2006: 41). More broadly, work on resistance and collective action among socially oppressed people in the pre-internet era has also shown that "bread-and-butter issues are the essence of lower-class politics" (Scott, 1985: 296). Therefore, "to require lower-class resistance that is somehow 'principled' or 'self-less' is not only utopian [but], more fundamentally, a misconstruction of the basis of class struggle" (*ibid*.). This resonates with "pragmatist" voices from within the disabled people's movement. As Germon (1998) remarked in a piece on the relationship between disability scholarship and activism, "none of us is motivated by altruism. We are in this struggle because ultimately we benefit. It is both naïve and unreasonable to expect that we will not be concerned with our own liberation" (p. 248). Turbine usefully elaborated on these issues in her work on perceptions of rights among Russian women (2007). This study showed that discourses of "everyday problems" among groups experiencing oppression, disillusioned with state bureaucracy and confined to a condition of partial citizenship constitute a proxy for discussing collective rights issues. Crucially, "everyday problems" fostered participation in informal networks for which "there was the potential […] to act as a springboard for

respondents to pursue formal approaches" (Turbine, 2007: 178). This resonates with the fact that a large proportion of the British public discourse on disability has traditionally insisted upon "personal" aspects of everyday life, which are deeply influenced by social policy decisions and play a fundamental role in determining disabled people's overall levels of citizenship. In light of these considerations, it was reasonable to assume that any instance of participation involving disabled internet users necessitates a clear issue and/or event around which those can aggregate and, possibly, mobilise.

Furthermore, this is also consistent with a general tendency for new advocacy groups to pursue a "headline chasing" strategy (Karpf, 2010a). Rather than trying to shape the political agenda by proactively "sponsoring" certain topics, emergent organisations prefer using online media to campaign on the issues that are already at the forefront of the public debate at any given moment. While this practice is generally associated with innovative generalist groups, "niche" and issue-focused ones have started to take a similar approach as well, using online media to reach and mobilise new supporters when their issue of choice climbs to the top of the political agenda (Karpf, 2010a: 34; 2012: 50). Concerns have been expressed over the ephemeral nature of *ad hoc* groups and event-based participation (Lin and Dutton, 2003). In particular, questions have been raised about the ability of online mobilisation to foster long-term political engagement among people with no previous political experience (Lusoli and Ward, 2006: 68). However, some internet-based collective actors have left "sedimentary" traces that enable them to re-emerge in correspondence with both similar and different issues at a later moment in time (Chadwick, 2007; Flanagin, Stohl, and Bimber, 2006). Most notably, this mechanism has been at the root of the expansion and constant renewal of "permanent campaign" organisations such as MoveOn.org in the U.S. (Karpf, 2012; Carty, 2011), its transnational offshoot Avaaz.org (Kavada, 2012) and *GetUp!* in Australia (Vromen and Coleman, 2013). The respective campaign focuses, supporter-bases and action repertoires of these innovative advocacy organisations have changed over time while each of them has simultaneously become a "fixture" of the contemporary political landscape.

From a broader point of view, the outcome of this process is a richer organisational spectrum in which established, hybrid and emerging forms of collective action co-exist in the same space. Although the informational and communicational affordances of new media favour innovative forms of networked participation, "organizations […] are not necessarily giving up institutional modes [of interaction]. Rather, boundaries between modes are becoming blurred" (Flanagin, Stohl, and Bimber, 2006: 49). As such, "organizations do matter, and they potentially make a huge difference in the consequences of a particular participatory style, because organizations create the context that gives meaning to the forms

of member interaction and engagement" (Bimber, Flanagin, and Stohl, 2012: 176), yet their agenda is increasingly shaped by both external circumstances and member-preferences.

In light of these considerations, focusing on issue-centred participation, rather than on organisations or online communities *per se*, represented a promising research strategy. However, not all issues are the same, as not all "personal" problems are bound to lead to online discussion and mobilisation. As Bennett and Segerberg pointed out (2012), "the transmission of personal expression across networks may or may not become scaled up, stable, or capable of various kinds of targeted action depending on the kinds of social technology […] and the kinds of opportunities that motivate anger or compassion across large numbers of individuals" (p. 754). As discussed in Chapter One, in recent years British disability activists have struggled to mobilise disabled people around a proactive agenda aimed at the expansion of disability rights. Responsibility for this has been ascribed to a combination of factors, from the lack of a strong and clearly defined group identity to the co-optation of certain organisations into tokenistic policy-making practices. Thus, common interests may well encourage disabled users to discuss politically relevant issues with others, both disabled and non-, on online "third spaces;" yet, at the same time they make for improbable "triggers" of coordinated action.

Rather, mobilisation is more likely to occur as a reaction to external events, "crises," or controversial policy agendas that touch upon the personal domain, are perceived as violations of fundamental rights and are therefore capable of rapidly uniting an otherwise fragmented community in a battle against a common target (Coleman and Blumler, 2009). Indeed, this resonates with the longstanding assumption for which sudden disruptions of the *status quo* can lead otherwise disengaged and disenfranchised citizenries to direct participation in politics (Woliver, 1993). In addition, this is also consistent with the logic of networked participation discussed above because it provides users with both a strong motivation and channels to become mobilised without the need to subscribe to a set of overarching ideological principles. On the basis of these observations, a research question was devised in order to explore the possibility that online media, in conjunction with strong catalysing issues, may afford disabled users valid alternatives to both institutionalised participation and existing disability organisations. This is outlined in the next section, which also summarises the key points emerging from this chapter.

2.4 – Conclusions and Research Question

For the past two decades, much social science scholarship branded e-democracy and online mobilisation as "niche" phenomena for "initiated" geeks and political junkies likely to

discourage others from participating, strengthen the power of existing elites, or foster the creation of new ones. Undoubtedly, these claims were based on an impressive body of empirical evidence, if one primarily looking at quintessentially "political" online spaces designed and governed by the same institutional actors that have traditionally dominated offline politics. Yet, as Bimber, Flanagin and Stohl (2012) usefully pointed out, "today technology is different, […] in the contemporary environment people are now more able than ever to act however they see fit, readily acting beyond the constraints imposed by a context for collective action once largely dominated and controlled by organizations" (pp. 178-9). This makes for a powerful argument to re-assess the internet's potential for political participation and civic engagement among traditionally disadvantaged social groups for whom the online medium has generally been considered irrelevant. In particular, online media may have a lot to offer to that sizeable, growing and enthusiastic minority of disabled people who identify themselves as regular internet users. Online "third spaces," and especially social media platforms, may facilitate the involvement of disabled users in politically relevant discussions as part of "everyday" talk with other users, both disabled and non-. As such, online relationships and discussion may foster the growth of flexible forms of participation focused on shared interests and capable of circumventing traditional organisations and their exclusionary practices, as well as institutionalised barriers to participation, creating new channels for disabled people to exert influence on the "formal" domain of politics where decisions are taken.

In light of these considerations, this project set out to tackle the following question:

> *Can new media facilitate mobilisation and collective action for disabled internet users in ways that enhance their sense of citizenship and political inclusion?*

Digitally-enabled participatory transformation is most likely to occur in conjunction with specific issues and disruptive events that provide a strong incentive for users to aggregate and mobilise while bypassing the need for a pre-constituted common identity. This is especially relevant in the case of disabled users, as the lack of a strong group identity has proved a hindrance to the expansion of more traditional instances of disability activism in recent years. Thus, it was useful to address this question through an issue-centred approach. This strategy provided scope for making sense of online initiatives without relying on *a priori* categorisations, thus avoiding the "classic" mistake of applying prescriptive and out-dated frameworks to emerging online phenomena. By tackling the question outlined above, this study sought to fill some important gaps in the limited understanding of the relationship

between disability and new media. In doing so, it focused on a series of under-researched issues in both disability studies and political communication. On the one hand, crucial steps were taken to reach beyond the important but limited domain of access and accessibility research. On the other hand, this project intended to contribute to an expanding body of research on the internet's significance for traditionally marginalised and excluded social groups. Finally, besides its scholarly contribution, this study was also poised to generate a series of findings relevant to disability campaigners and activists more generally. The next chapter will clarify how the overarching question was operationalised and discuss key methodological and ethical issues associated with the multi-stage research design developed for this study.

Chapter 3 – Methodological Challenges: Mapping and Analysing Issue-Driven Participation Online

A crucial benefit of doing internet research is that the online medium can itself provide an unprecedented wealth of data, innovative inquiry tools and other resources. However, at the same time this is also constitutes a double-edged advantage, as information overload can make it extremely challenging for researchers of online politics to distinguish relevant material from the surrounding "noise," with the risk of generating inconclusive results. This issue has been at the centre of methodological debates in internet research ever since the first attempts to carry out systematic content analysis of online material (Weare and Lin, 2000) and has been exacerbated by the advent of Web 2.0 technology – in particular social networking sites – where text, hyperlinks, images and multimedia content are frequently fused together in user-generated contributions. In addition, focusing on private/public spaces such as social media platforms and adopting an extended understanding of politics to capture implicitly political content in "everyday" online talk can make this task especially arduous. In light of these considerations, this chapter focuses on the multi-method research strategy that was developed for this project with a view not only to clarifying how data was collected and analysed but also to sharing key lessons picked up along the way with others working on similar issues.

Emerging methods and new types of data are becoming increasingly central to the study of the intersection between online media and contemporary socio-political trends. Yet, at the same time the fundamental principle of establishing a strong connection between research question(s) and inquiry strategy remains the best way of securing a clear focus for a given project and avoiding the risk of getting lost amidst virtually limitless online content. Thus, this chapter starts by considering how the fundamental question set out in Chapter Two was operationalised. Thereafter, the strategy devised to identify and analyse issue-focused online participation relevant to disabled internet users is discussed in detail. Moving from the idea that online participation among traditionally excluded groups is likely to be ignited by disruptive events and controversial issues, the first part of this chapter concentrates on the process of issue selection. The rationale for which this project focused on the welfare reform introduced by the UK Coalition government between 2010 and 2012 is discussed. The study of online media provides useful opportunities to expand the selection of catalyst events beyond the application of theoretical and normative criteria, enabling researchers to test the relationship between a given issue and related internet activity before launching a full-scale investigation. In particular, this chapter discusses how

charting user-interest in disability-related topics with search engine accessory tools was instrumental in verifying reasonable but theory-based assumptions on the catalysing potential of the welfare reform controversy.

Following these preliminary considerations, this chapter turns to an in-depth discussion of the case study approach and methods adopted in this study. Three emblematic collective actors that relied on online media to attract, organise and mobilise users against the disability welfare reform were identified and their relationship with the internet analysed at three different levels. While a first step was to carry out a more or less straightforward "inventory" of interactive media for each one of the groups involved, web link analysis with IssueCrawler was also employed to map the online space surrounding these campaigning actors. Second, the relationship between core organisers and "ordinary" online supporters in each group, as well as their propensity to use social media to organise political action were examined by adapting traditional content analysis to study Facebook conversations. Finally, a third level of analysis involved comparing the UK case to digital disability activism in the United States in order to capture the influence of contextual factors that are too often overlooked in online politics scholarship. "On screen" data was complemented throughout the study by semi-structured interviews with leading figures from the groups under scrutiny. This provided an opportunity to discuss the need for truly meaningful online research to complement and contextualise its findings through qualitative, in-depth methods, highlighting the risks associated with the creation of excessive hype around digital methodologies. In addition, this chapter concludes with an important reflection on the substantial ethical challenges experienced in seeking to preserve privacy and anonymity when analysing social media content.

3.1 – Key aims and objectives: A thee-steps, multi-method inquiry strategy

As stated above, in order to chart an effective strategy for navigating the "sea" of online information without getting sidetracked, it was of paramount importance to reflect closely on the overarching research question:

> *Can new media facilitate mobilisation and collective action for disabled internet users in ways that enhance their sense of citizenship and political inclusion?*

Thus, the primary aim of this project was to identify and analyse instances of online aggregation that could facilitate mobilisation for disabled internet users, providing them

with innovative channels to make their voices heard in the public arena. Although discussing politically relevant issues online can be a useful step towards greater political citizenship, meaningful levels of the latter correspond instead to using new media to support any *action*, whether online or offline, that has the potential to influence public decision-makers. Undoubtedly, this makes for a loose definition of collective action dictated by the need to account for traditional organisational forms, emerging hybrid repertoires and unpredictable innovative uses of online media in the political sphere. Nevertheless, this also goes beyond the "minimalist" position espoused by deliberative theorists who considered *talk* itself to be an accomplished form of political action (Mansbridge, 1999; Graham, 2008). Rather, this approach echoes Bimber, Flanagin, and Stohl's proposition that "individuals maintain a realm of private interests and actions. When they make these interests or actions known to others […] in conjunction with a public good, a collective action has occurred" (2005: 377). While this process is not exclusive to online media, these can greatly facilitate it and expand it.

Some have recently put forward innovative conceptualisations of collective action in the internet age (see for example: Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Karpf, 2012; Hands, 2011). Yet, the need to avoid *a priori* categorisations when studying emerging online phenomena suggested that data collection should not be informed directly by these typologies, which instead contributed to the analysis and discussion of results. As stated in Chapter Two, others have approached the study of online political participation from a platform-centric perspective, focusing on digital "third spaces" (Wright, 2012b; Graham, 2012). While intriguing, this option was ultimately discarded as it would have generated a strategy concerned primarily with political talk rather than action, which in "third spaces" research constitutes more of an "accidental" discovery than the main investigative focus. Rejecting these potential starting points did not, however, equate to taking a leap in the dark when it came to developing a research strategy. Rather, with a view to studying issue-focused networked activism, the main question was divided into several auxiliary queries that provided fundamental guidance in designing an effective research plan, namely:

1. Was user-interest for the given catalyst issue channelled into any sort of coordinated structure, whether set up by pre-existing organisations or "digitally native"?
2. Which online media did these groups/networks use and what for?
3. Were there clearly defined roles within these structures? If so, how were such roles being negotiated? Was there a clear leadership and, in that case, what was its relationship with "ordinary" supporters?
4. What was the position of these groups *vis-à-vis* the wider socio-political context?

5. Did this constitute a new ecology of disability activism?
6. How can user-generated content show the ways in which participants "made sense" of the catalyst issue?
7. Did these groups/networks promote any form of political action, whether online or offline?
8. Was there evidence that users associated with these groups were willing to engage in any such actions?
9. How did the British case compare internationally? To what extent was this process influenced by contextual factors?

Tackling these questions called for a research strategy involving three consequential steps, each of which is discussed in detail in the reminder of this chapter. First, a suitable catalyst issue was selected and its viability as a potential driver of online participation validated by means of archived search engine data available through Google Trends. Second, key online spaces and collective actors concerned with the given issue were identified by searching both Google.co.uk and Facebook.com for a series of relevant keyword combinations. This generated a pool of groups from which emblematic case studies were then selected for in-depth analysis until theoretical saturation was reached. The third stage comprised two complementary processes. On the one hand, the aforementioned case studies were investigated through a variety of methods, including: an "inventory" of their online repertoires; hyperlink network analysis with IssueCrawler; the examination of discussion threads hosted on their Facebook pages; and semi-structured interviews with leading figures. On the other hand, some British groups were also compared to their American counterparts in order to assess the influence of "context" upon digital disability activism. While each of the auxiliary questions listed above was primarily associated with a specific method, this study followed a growing pattern in online research for which both emerging digital methods and established social science techniques are combined in order to strengthen results, compensate for the *lacunae* of individual tools and achieve a solid understanding of complex socio-technological phenomena (Mann and Stewart, 2000; Hewson and Laurent, 2008; Rasmussen, 2008; Rogers, 2009; Vergeer and Hermans, 2008). Thus, different methods were applied simultaneously in a complementary and iterative fashion. In particular, semi-structured interviews proved instrumental in contextualising online discourse, which is never constructed in isolation from the rest of socio-political interaction (Witschge, 2008; Dahlberg, 2004).

Given the nature of the methods involved, this constituted a multi-method qualitative approach rather than a "true" mixed-methods strategy. Overall, this provided a

flexible "roadmap" for the study of issue-focused online participation that, with some adjustments, could be useful for investigating the effects of the internet on the political exclusion/inclusion of other marginalised groups. In addition, this research plan constituted a marked departure from the pioneering studies with disabled internet users cited in Chapter One, which typically relied on qualitative interviews (Anderberg and Jönsson, 2005) and, to a lesser extent, surveys (Pilling, Barrett, and Floyd, 2004). Undoubtedly, that research offered rich insights into the relationship between disability and the internet. Qualitative interviews resonated with the ideal of "emancipatory" scholarship (Oliver, 1992) by providing unprecedented opportunities for disabled users to shape research outcomes. However, that type of approach was excessively narrow to tackle the questions outlined in this chapter. Instead, this project called for a broader methodological perspective capable of capturing and explaining the structure and mechanisms governing online spaces and groups relevant to disabled internet users. As such, it provided scope for introducing new tools and techniques to disability research. In light of these considerations, this study is best understood as an empirical analysis of the affordances of online collective action against disabling barriers rather than an inquiry into the experiences of disabled internet users with digital politics *per se*. Within this framework, the perspective of disabled internet users emerged through interviews with disabled activists as well as Facebook content posted by users who explicitly self-identified as disabled.

3.2 – Identifying the catalyst issue

The first step towards assessing the significance of online media for the political inclusion of disabled users was to choose a suitable catalyst issue around which participation could be expected to flourish. While this was a fairly straightforward process guided chiefly by the criteria set out at the end of the previous chapter (i.e. a disruptive or controversial event, issue, or agenda dependant on external agents – in other words a "crisis" – by which disabled people are likely to be personally affected and therefore capable of provoking a rapid and strong reaction), it is important to clarify why all the issues taken in consideration for this project had a specific connection with disability. As noted in Chapter One, disabled people have complex and multi-layered identities, which should not be reduced to their relationship with impairment or experience of disability and discrimination. For this reason, suggesting that only disability-related issues may have the potential to mobilise disabled internet users would be naïve if not patronising. Instead, the involvement of disabled users in online networks, like anyone else's, is bound to be determined by any type of personal interests, values and beliefs. Thus, from a theoretical standpoint it would

be interesting to study the involvement of disabled users in "mainstream" instances of online collective action.

However, the aim of this project was more ambitious than simply investigating online participation at the individual level. In particular, it was essential to explore collective mobilisation patterns and understand whether digital media could promote changes in the ecology of disability activism by supporting the growth of new, alternative, or hybrid organisational forms. Hence, for the purpose of this study it was useful to limit the choice to a list of disability-related potential catalysts relevant to the majority of disabled people and therefore capable of activating "latent" ties (Haythornthwaite, 2005). The shortlist of potential catalysts included:

a. The welfare reform and public expenditure cuts introduced by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat UK government between 2010 and 2012;
b. The Equality Act 2010, which consolidated several pieces of anti-discrimination legislation, including the Disability Discrimination Act, into one single act;
c. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities, ratified by the UK in 2009 on the implementation of which the government was due to report to the UN in 2011;
d. Disability hate crime, which according to both news reports and official statistics has increased substantially in recent years[2].

After checking each of these issues against the selection criteria listed above, the welfare reform was identified as the one with the greatest potential for mobilising disabled internet users. Its disruptive nature characterised it as a particularly "explosive" policy crisis likely to affect the daily lives of the vast majority of disabled Britons. Such connection to "private" life and personal experiences, as well as the "pan-disability" relevance of this issue made it stand out amidst the other options as one that could foster mass mobilisation – online as well as offline – and create a unitary, issue-driven front. In addition, centring the analysis on the welfare reform enabled to explore participation dynamics in an "ordinary" period between elections, while other work on internet politics, possibly owing to traditional political communication scholarship, has often focused on electoral contests.

Key policy details as well as the political significance of the welfare reform will be discussed in Chapter Four, including a reflection on the pivotal role of welfare policy in

[2] See for example: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-19589602 (accessed: 15th Feb. 2013).

defining "disability" in British public discourse. Indeed, the high levels of coverage that the coalition government's welfare plan received on traditional media outlets from the May 2010 general election onwards made it reasonable to assume that internet users would be aware of the issue, discuss it online and possibly consider some form of lobbying and resistance. Yet, before launching a full-scale investigation, it was important for this hypothesis to be corroborated by some concrete indication that the welfare reform actually constituted a driver behind disability-related online activity. In other words, did internet users demonstrate sufficient interest in this issue in order for online aggregation, discussion and, possibly, mobilisation to cluster around it? A useful way to check for this was by comparing online search trends for disability-related topics with the welfare reform's timeline of events using publicly available search records retrieved through Google Trends.

3.2.1 - Checking for online interest: Google Trends vs. "real world" events

Ever since the internet became commercially available, search engines have played a crucial role in orienting online traffic, distributing content and constructing knowledge (Van Couvering, 2008). While concerns have been raised with regard to the power that such information "gatekeeping" function bestows upon for-profit service-providers (Hess, 2008), to date search engines remain the primary channel through which most users find and access information on the web. For example, as of October 2011, 61% of British internet users regarded search engines as their main gateway to online content (Dutton and Blank, 2011: 21-2). This is despite a slight decline in search engine use in very recent years, which reflected the growth of social networking platforms such as Facebook and Twitter as avenues for finding information online (*ibid.*). As the very act of searching for keywords connected to a given topic implies a specific interest in the latter, search engine usage patterns can be extremely revelatory with regard to user interests, offering unprecedented opportunities to explore emerging social trends as expressed by online information flows. Search giants such as Google and Yahoo! have typically been extremely protective of these data, chiefly for commercial reasons, but also due to the potential privacy implications associated with their release and the risk that they may be used to step up citizen surveillance (Morozov, 2011: 164-5). Yet, raw search data is strictly speaking not necessary to investigate whether a given issue may be influencing the level of online traffic – and therefore interest – connected to a certain topic. Rather, what truly matters are opportunities to acquire an understanding of the way in which searches linked to a given topic fluctuate over time. Juxtaposing this type of information to a timeline of "real world"

events connected to the same topic could provide an important angle from which to assess the relationship between online and offline dynamics surrounding key social issues.

In 2008, Google launched an accessory application that went some way towards enabling this type of analysis: Google Insights for Search. Originally conceived as a "sophisticated" version of Google Trends and eventually integrated into the latter in September 2012, this is a powerful yet freely available tool that enables anyone to visualise fluctuations in the level of searches for individual keywords or multi-keyword expressions associated with any given topic from 2004 onwards. Although it does not grant access to raw search records, this application identifies swings in user-interest by carrying out longitudinal comparisons of the frequency of searches for inter-related terms within one or multiple countries. Given Google's unrivalled dominance of the UK search market, with specialist sites consistently indicating it as the engine of choice for over 80% of searches (see for example: www.marketshare.com; www.statowl.com; www.adept-seo.co.uk), this makes for a useful way of keeping the pulse of user-interest in relation to key socio-economic and political trends. Thus, Google Trends was helpful to observe variations in user-interest in disability issues as rendered by search levels for a series of broad disability-related terms at the time in which the welfare reform was being launched and subsequently discussed.

Terms investigated with Google Trends included: "disability;" "disabled;" and a composite index of generic terms connected to disability welfare – "disability benefit(s), disability welfare, disability (living) allowance, employment and support allowance (ESA)." While the first two were deliberately chosen in order to capture interest trends touching upon any area of disability, the keyword combination focusing on disability welfare was included to generate an aggregate overview of online interest in the main issue with which this study was concerned. Broadly speaking, a positive connection was found between the distribution of "peaks" in disability-related keyword searches and key dates in the welfare reform's timeline. Results, which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter, supported the choice of the welfare reform as a promising issue around which to organise the rest of the analysis. In addition, the identification of periods of particularly intense online activity contributed to the timeframe selection for Facebook content analysis, as outlined in Chapter Five.

Exploring archived search data with Google Trends was instrumental in strengthening the process of catalyst issue selection, as well as better orienting data collection and analysis. However, while this made for an innovative complementary strategy, adopting it as a stand alone method would have been inappropriate due to the mechanisms by which Google Trends operates and the type of data it generates. For

example, the acronym "DLA" (Disability Living Allowance) was also a top candidate for inclusion in the list of key search terms reported above. Yet, searches on Google.co.uk as well as accessory details provided by Google Trends showed that "DLA" is often searched by users who are looking for other types of information, chiefly as a shortened version for the global law firm "DLA Piper." Ultimately, the impossibility of excluding irrelevant searches meant that DLA had to be excluded from the final keyword pool. Such "forced" elimination outlined a problematic lack of granularity and sophistication in search engine accessory tools. Furthermore, as mentioned above, Google's dominance as the main channel for retrieving online information is being eroded by other platforms. This is in addition to Google's secondary role in countries that prefer "homegrown" search engines such as Russia's Yandex and China's Baidu (Oates, 2011), which inevitably restricts the global relevance of trends drawn from a single search provider.

Despite these issues, search engine accessory tools can provide windows onto aspects of user behaviour that could otherwise not be accessed. Undoubtedly, their uses are likely to be bounded by the inability of corporations like Google to share sensitive information with third party researchers. However, "experimenting" with Google Trends in this project highlighted some of the benefits of complementing more "traditional" research strategies with this type of innovative insights. In turn, this calls for more extensive conceptual work on integrating search engine applications into qualitative research strategies. Typically, researchers have seen search engines as objects of study rather than inquiry tools (Rogers, 2010a). Zimmer (2010a) identified four key directions in which "web search studies" have developed, including: search engine bias; their role as gatekeepers of online information; the ethics of search; and legal as well as policy implications. The potential contribution of search engines to social science methodology could make for an intriguing, if challenging, additional strand. Following the selection of the UK welfare reform as catalyst issue, the project moved into its second stage, as discussed in detail in the next section.

3.3 – Case study approach: A new ecology of British disability activism?

Having verified the potential of the welfare reform as a driver of disability-related online activity, the next step was to ask whether such user-interest was in fact being channelled into any collective initiative that could challenge the government's agenda. If so, what did such group efforts look like? Which online media did they use and how? How did they compare to past and existing disability organisations? And what was their position *vis-à-vis* the wider socio-political context? Existing organisations, including both professionally run

charities and member-led advocacy groups, were reasonably expected to intercept some of the online activity connected to this issue. However, it was also crucial to reach beyond the "usual suspects" and expose any new and alternative networks that could have been set up either alongside or in contrast with traditional groups and their organisational forms, possibly for the sole purpose of discussing and/or campaigning on disability welfare changes. Given the seminal nature of this study, the key objective here was to gain a broad understanding of what types of groups and initiatives had clustered around the catalyst issue. Thus, rather than carrying out an exhaustive mapping exercise – which could indeed represent the focus of future research – this part of the analysis sought to identify those initiatives that users were most likely to encounter online, with a view to selecting a restricted number of highly emblematic case studies for detailed examination. Such case studies then served as units of analysis throughout the rest of the project (Yin, 2003: 22-6).

In this context, keyword searches were again instrumental. In particular, searches were carried out on Google.co.uk shortly after the onset of the welfare reform debate (late 2010-early 2011) for several keyword combinations connected to disability welfare and activism. In addition, similar searches were also carried out on Facebook.com to capture groups that were popular among users of social networking sites but whose web page did not rank high on Google (i.e. within the first results page), or did not maintain a website/blog altogether. Indeed, it has been rightly argued that search engine output – particularly Google's – is not neutral (see for example: Introna and Nissenbaum, 2000; Reilly, 2008). From this consideration, an important debate has ensued between those who argue that the very mechanisms governing Google searches contribute to making the internet a less democratic medium on one side (Finkelstein, 2008) and those who say that search engines simply do their job by optimising results for user preferences on the other (Goldman, 2008; 2011). In particular, Hindman (2009) has pointed out that the centrality of "Googlearchy" in directing internet traffic effectively creates a "winner-takes-all" situation for which URLs that rank high among Google results attract the vast majority of users to the detriment of those in lower positions. As top results tend to correspond to online locations managed by the same well-resourced players that dominate politics as we know it, Google would arguably contribute to the perpetuation of "business as usual" and the marginalisation of minority voices.

These are fundamental issues in internet scholarship that rest on the unresolved tension between the commercial nature of popular online services on one side and the egalitarian ideals evocated by much cyber-optimist literature on the other. Indeed, it could be argued that these mechanisms are poised to restrict the possibility for disabled users to come in contact with some alternative networks. However, this debate would go beyond

the scope of this project, which was primarily concerned with capturing and understanding the online experiences of both core activists and ordinary users for what they actually are rather than indulging in normative speculation. Instead, focusing on the top Google results effectively replicated the choice available to users looking for information on disability welfare cuts and activism, pointing the analysis in the direction of those sites that were particularly likely to attract online traffic. As users are increasingly looking at fewer search results and often focus exclusively on the very first output page (Jansen and Spink, 2005: 371; 2006: 257), the top 20 results for each search were taken into consideration. On the basis of the fact that as users grow accustomed to search engines they become increasingly suspicious of advertised results (Fallows, 2005), the very few sponsored URLs retrieved were nevertheless disregarded.

Besides existing networks and organisations such as the Disability Alliance, the UK Disabled People's Council, Scope and Mencap, several other groups and initiatives were uncovered that made extensive use of digital tools as part of their efforts to oppose changes to disability benefits. These were inductively categorised (George and Bennett, 2004: 240-4) on the basis of their structure (how formalised was their membership? did they have centralised headquarters?), their relationship *vis-à-vis* existing disability organisations (were they entirely new groups/initiatives or did they branch out of established organisations?) and relationship with technology (did they operate both online and offline, or online only?). Searches continued until theoretical saturation was reached, generating a total of three main group types and two additional sub-types, all discussed in detail in the next chapter. From these, three emblematic case studies were then selected for in-depth analysis in accordance with the principle for which in comparative case study analysis more can be learnt by concentrating on a set of most different and possibly "extreme" examples, which are especially useful in researching new and emerging online phenomena (Dahlberg, 2004). As such, while this project's conclusions ought to be understood within the usual limitations associated with case study research in terms of theoretical generalisation (George and Bennett, 2004: 111-7), picking somewhat "unique" examples rather than a representative sample meant it was possible to concentrate on those initiatives that had the greatest potential for innovation. The first step following the identification of in-depth case studies was to investigate their online media repertoire. Thus, an "inventory" of their respective web presences was carried out by means of the coding scheme discussed in the next section.

3.3.1 - Online media inventory

A useful departure point in capturing the nature of these groups was to gain a full understanding of their relationship with new media. Which online applications did they use, and what for? This question was tackled by surveying the web presence of these groups through an inventory matrix accounting for multiple online platforms. This was not, however, a case of simply registering any media, applications and communicative practices employed by each case study. Rather, this matrix was tailored to the primary research question and inspired by a general trend for online activism to become more interactive and feature increasingly customisable repertoires. Bucy and Affe (2006: 236) have argued that the possibility for any online group or organisation to empower internet users depends primarily on the quality of the "civic affordances" it offers. In other words, meaningful online participation can only be supported by genuine opportunities for two-way communication and enhanced levels of user-control over campaign operations (MacMillan, 2002: 276), while vertical communication and "clicktivist" applications such as online polls and e-petitions resemble instead tokenistic participation or, worse, can fuel a deceiving sense of engagement among users. In light of these considerations, this part of the analysis focused primarily on recoding interactive media (or lack thereof) and communicative channels.

Several scholars have developed detailed matrixes for surveying the web presence of political organisations. Following Gibson and Ward's (2000) pioneering scheme for the investigation of political party websites, others coding frames emerged that focused not only on the online presence of parties (Gibson et al., 2003), but also on that of candidates (Stromer-Galley, 2007), activist networks (Gillan, 2009) and even terrorist groups (Qin et al., 2007). Most recently, praiseworthy efforts have been made to update and expand some of these schedules in order to cater for Web 2.0 applications, with specific reference to interactive features and personalisation in both political parties (Lilleker and Jackson, 2011: 48-51) and protest networks (Bennett and Segerberg, 2011). Such work crucially informed the scheme devised for this study, which covered four main areas of interaction and communication. These included:

(1) personalisation and user-input;
(2) broadcast information features (top-down communication);
(3) social media and community applications (horizontal communication); and,
(4) collective action resources (for a complete list of variables, see Appendix A).

While the majority of the variables in this matrix were inspired by previous work, some were inductively generated through piloting. Most notably, "clicktivism plus" was added to account for the popular practice of enabling the personalisation of campaign messages that users were asked to send directly to policy-makers.

Crucially, the structure of this matrix and the way in which it was applied to the web presence of the groups under scrutiny sought to overcome some of the limitations that have characterised previous "inventory" schemes. In particular, while others have adopted the websites of given activist groups as starting points from which to map the rest of their online presence (see for example: Bennett and Segerberg, 2011), in this study social media platforms were approached directly to check for the presence of the groups in question. This was to ensure that important features would not be missed in case no direct link had been established between the website of a given group and, for example, their Facebook "fan" page, which indeed occurred in a few occasions. Furthermore, although this matrix included comparatively fewer variables than others devised for similar purposes, an effort was made to enhance the sophistication of the data obtained for each variable. For example, options were included for recording whether user-comments were enabled on blogs and YouTube pages, if each group maintained a Facebook "fan" or "group" page and what types of users (administrators? "fans"-only? or just anyone?) were afforded the opportunity to kick-start a conversation thread on such pages. Although these may appear like relatively small details, they can provide important cues with regard to the intended purpose of interactive online media for a given group, laying firm foundations for additional reflection and investigation.

Overall, this matrix was designed to be amenable to changes and updates, as both technology and user-preferences tend to evolve at a fast pace with new platforms emerging and others falling out of "fashion" almost unpredictably, for which "trying to make a list of digital media is frustrating at best" (Baym, 2010: 13). Yet, it is hoped that some of the innovations discussed here can inspire efficient ways to survey online media repertoires in future research. All the data collected through this matrix for this project was correct as of the 31st of March 2012. The next task was to determine the position of each case study *vis-à-vis* the broader socio-political environment.

3.3.2 - Hyperlink network analysis with IssueCrawler

Were these groups connected to other disability activists and anti-austerity campaigners more generally? To what extent were they collaborating with one another? Did they pursue connections with institutional actors such as government departments, political parties and

traditional media? If so, did this signal attempts to acquire credibility in the eyes of public decision-makers and "play by the rules" of the representative system, or rather oppose institutionalised politics? Hyperlink network analysis provided an effective way of tackling these questions. Inspired by the practice of sociological network analysis (Hogan, 2008: 142), this method uncovers and examines connections between online nodes (i.e. websites), providing detailed insights into the type of context surrounding a given group or organisation's web presence. More broadly, and although the purpose of this study was more modest, hyperlink analysis can also be employed to map entire issue networks, generating exhaustive overviews of the online spaces and actors concerned with a given topic.

Hyperlinks constitute the essential connective element of online networks, ultimately determining the way in which the Web is organised (Halavais, 2008). As such, they influence the direction of internet traffic as they facilitate surfing from one web page to another, restricting the "open-ended-ness" of cyberspace (Rogers, 2010b). Furthermore, they also play a crucial role in determining the popularity of websites because search engine algorithms are designed to interpret high levels of incoming links to a given website as high levels of overall relevance and credibility (Thelwall, 2004: 23-4; Halavais, 2008: 44; Finkelstein, 2008). In turn, hyperlinks are at the same time both the enablers and the most explicit manifestation of social relations among the people behind websites, whether those are amicable, critical, or aspirational (Rogers, 2010b; Baulieu, 2005: 190-1). Thus, web link analysis constitutes a truly "digital" method that harvests the online medium's own potential to expose otherwise less visible social connections (Rogers, 2010a). This method was instrumental in mapping the online environment surrounding the groups under scrutiny, assessing the strength and direction of relationships with other nodes, clarifying the role performed by these groups within the wider picture of welfare reform activism, as well as understanding which other actors, if any, endorsed or opposed them and vice-versa.

In the past decade, social scientists have developed different strategies for retrieving and analysing hyperlink data. These included: manual coding; the use of search engines; and purposely designed web-based "scraper" or "spider" software (Hogan, 2008). Some of the most popular of the latter are IssueCrawler (www.issuecrawler.net), developed by Richard Rogers and colleagues at the Govcom.org Foundation in Amsterdam, Mike Thelwall's SocSciBot (www.socscibot.wlv.ac.uk), Australian-based VOSON (www.voson.anu.edu.au) and NodeXL (www.nodexl.codeplex.com), which was designed by Miscrosoft to work in conjunction with Excel. All of these tools can be accessed freely. After careful consideration, web-based software IssueCrawler was chosen to assist in this study as it presents some important advantages over similar tools. First, IssueCrawler

permanently stores all the data it generates in an online, publicly accessible archive, enhancing the credibility of the findings obtained through this method and providing essential information to anyone who wishes to re-examine a given crawl or create a longitudinal comparison (Park, 2003: 57). Second, this system captures an unparalleled amount of data. Having been instructed by the researcher with one or more "seed" URLs that serve as starting point(s) for the analysis, this software identifies both outgoing and incoming links up to three "layers" (clicks) away from the starting point, coding automatically for link direction, the type of web domains retrieved (.com; .gov; .org; etc.) and their geographical location (Rogers, 2010b). Finally, IssueCrawler facilitates the analysis of results by automatically generating interactive network maps that simultaneously provide both a visualisation of nodes (websites) and connections, as well as a specific breakdown of data for individual websites displayed on a side bar.

Hyperlink analysis with IssueCrawler has featured in a number of recent internet politics projects, including work on political parties in countries such as the UK (Gibson et al., 2012) and Russia (Oates, 2012; 2013), peace activists (Gillian, Pickerill and Webster, 2008; Gillan, 2009) and anti-G20 protesters (Bennett and Segerberg, 2011)[3]. While the main emphasis in hyperlink network analysis remains on quantitative elements (i.e. the number of links coming into or leading out of either a website or a cluster of websites), these studies have not relied on statistical elaborations in order to interpret IssueCrawler output except for basic averages. Rather, discussion has tended to focus on more straightforward interpretations of network visualisations with specific reference to the type of websites involved, the organisations behind them, the nature of central nodes (i.e. those receiving the greatest number of in-links), the presence of any identifiable clusters and the specific role fulfilled by the case studies under investigation (central vs. peripheral). Broadly speaking, this project followed the same pattern, adopting the entire network as a single unit of analysis. Furthermore, the analysis of hyperlink data was also complemented by information acquired through interviews, the online media "inventory" discussed above and Facebook content analysis to ensure that relationships would be interpreted correctly and oppositional connections not mistaken for amicable ones or vice-versa (Park, 2003: 58). Every one of the three types of link crawl supported by IssueCrawler were used, depending on whether the nature of the analysis required to focus on stronger connections (co-link), looser ties (snowball), or just those links connecting "seed" URLs (inter-actor).

Overall, IssueCrawler was instrumental in contextualising the emergence of the case study groups within the broader anti-austerity movement, British disability activism

[3] A more extensive list of studies employing IssueCrawler is available online at: http://www.govcom.org/full_list.html (accessed: 15th March 2013)

and institutionalised politics more generally. Nevertheless, some of its limits also became apparent during the process of data collection. In particular, this method could not be applied to one of the case studies as its website had been designed to ban "bot" software (i.e. automated information scraping software). While content analysis and interviews partly remedied this issue by providing some useful information about this group's connections and its position in relation to representative institutions, this incident exposed the potential ethical implications attached to this type of software. In particular, all of the pieces of hyperlink analysis software listed above take up some of a website's bandwidth during crawls, potentially slowing down access for other users. On the one hand, this echoed IssueCrawler's fair use recommendations, which invite researchers to be respectful of third party websites by seeking to avoid repeated crawls at short time intervals. On the other hand, this also resonated with the need for an effective research strategy to combine the use of this type of tools with other methods, as discussed above. Following the conclusion of this initial phase of group "profiling," the analysis progressed to a deeper level, examining the relationship between those in charge of these groups and online "supporters."

3.4 – Analysing group dynamics: Content analysis and semi-structured interviews

Having acquired a broad overview of each group's online media repertoire and position within the wider socio-political context, the next objective was to gather a detailed understanding of their structure, internal dynamics and propensity towards participatory action. In other words, it was necessary to establish the extent to which the interactivity supported by online media was effectively being translated into a tangible user-experience (Sundar and Bellur, 2011: 488). Were members of these groups playing any clearly identifiable roles? If so, how were such roles being negotiated? Was there a clear leadership and what was its relationship with "ordinary" supporters? How did participants discuss the catalyst issue? And, finally, was there evidence that online supporters were willing to engage in any form of political action, whether online or offline? As this project veered more specifically towards the micro-dynamics of collective action, these questions were tackled by combining the analysis of user-generated conversation threads drawn from the Facebook pages of each group and semi-structured interviews with their leading figures.

3.4.1 – Analysing user-generated content

Internet researchers are still getting to grips with the inherent challenges of analysing user-generated content. This project was no exception to this trend and as such the process of designing, piloting and carrying out the analysis of Facebook conversation threads was one in which several lessons were learnt. As these ultimately represented research findings in their own right, it felt appropriate to discuss user-generated content sampling, collection and archiving, as well as coding frame design and analysis in a dedicated chapter (Chapter Five). At this stage, it is instead useful to reflect on the rationale behind the inclusion of this method in this project. Content analysis was one of the very first social science methods to be adapted to study the internet (Weare and Lin, 2000). Owing to its centrality in traditional political communication scholarship, it rapidly became the method of choice for internet politics researchers, who initially concentrated their efforts on the websites of political organisations (e.g. Gibson and Ward, 2000). In recent years, this paradigm has been vastly expanded, and coding applied to different types of online content in addition to that conceived by political "professionals." Most notably, it has been argued that hyperlink analysis could itself be seen as a "digitally-native" form of content analysis that focuses on inter-node (or inter-organisational) connectivity as opposed to textual communication, while coding dialogic exchanges supported by Web 2.0 technology can instead reveal intra-node (or intra-organisational) relationships in a given group (Herring, 2011). Thus, these two innovative forms of coding usefully complement each other, enabling the study of distinct yet inter-related aspects of online interaction (Park, 2003).

Examining naturally occurring conversations posted on Web 2.0 platforms provides an unprecedented and relatively unobtrusive opportunity to study group interaction as this unfolds. This type of analysis is particularly relevant to the study of digital disability activism as previous work revealed a particular fondness of disabled users for online outlets that enable them to express themselves in an un-mediated fashion (Anderberg and Jönsson, 2005; Thoreau, 2006; Goggin and Noonan, 2007). Furthermore, previous work on online discussion forums also highlighted the benefits of analysing user-generated content for determining what roles are played by different participants in online networks (Cardon and Prieur, 2010). In light of these considerations, content analysis represented the most useful strategy for assessing the position of "ordinary" users within the case studies under scrutiny, investigating their relationship with group founders and co-ordinators, establishing whether and how "politics" was actually been discussed, as well as determining if online media were likely to support action in addition to talk. A variety of interactive platforms can support these types of exchanges, including blogs, forums and

social networking sites. Given the inductive nature of case study selection in this project and the unpredictability of their online media repertoires, the choice of what outlet(s) to focus on was subordinated to the completion of the "inventory" discussed above. Ultimately, Facebook conversation threads were selected as the focus of content analysis both because all of the groups under scrutiny had a popular presence on that platform and because of its extensive reach, as discussed in detail in Chapter Five.

With regard to coding schemes for user-generated content analysis, some important advances have been made in recent years. If in fact this type of research remains very complex, a renewed interest in online deliberation analysis has generated a number of valuable methodological contributions. This has included experimental work (see for example: Stromer-Galley and Muhlberger, 2009), leading some to argue that this kind of research could itself contribute to the very creation of more reflexive citizens (Coleman and Moss, 2012). However, some have also criticised this type of work for relying on excessively normative criteria, assessing online conversation against utopian ideas while that is in fact an organic process that cannot be adequately captured by entirely theory-based matrixes (Dahlgren, 2002). Thus, while such developments in online deliberation analysis inspired the coding scheme devised for this study, their most prescriptive elements were swapped in favour of a focus on how users "framed" policy issues, interpreted their position in relation to extra-ordinary events and discussed collective action (for details, see Chapter Five). Finally, the semi-public nature of Facebook content generated specific ethical issues with regard to data collection, analysis and presentation. While in fact all conversations were drawn from freely accessible Facebook pages, this did not provide a sufficient justification for doing away with anonymisation and privacy issues. Rather, careful consideration was required when dealing with potentially sensitive material. These issues are discussed in detail in this chapter's final section.

3.4.2 – Semi-structured interviews and the role of the non-disabled researcher

As anticipated above, web link analysis and the examination of user-generated exchanges were complemented throughout this study by semi-structured interviews with several leading figures from the groups under scrutiny. In total, twelve interviews were carried out with participants from British groups (Table 3.1) and seventeen with representatives from American disability organisations (Table 3.2). All interviews took place between May and October 2011, including a three-month fieldwork period in Washington, D.C. Participants were drawn from traditional organisations both "for" and "of" disabled people, as well as from informal and issue-driven activist networks. Among these were senior executives,

communication and campaigns experts, bloggers and volunteers. Approximately half of these were disabled people. While the degree of leadership "formality" varied among case studies, all interview participants occupied a central position within their respective group as overall leaders, founders, or volunteers specifically in charge of communications.

Table 3.1 – Overview of British disability groups
(* denotes members of "The Hardest Hit" anti-welfare reform coalition;
^ denotes members of the Disability Benefits Consortium – DBC)

UK Organisations	Interviews	HQ Location	Website
Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC)	2	UK-wide network (offline & online)	www.dpac.uk.net
The Broken of Britain	2	UK-wide network (online-only)	www.thebrokenofbritain.org
Scope*^	1	London	www.scope.org.uk
The MS Society*^	2	London	www.mssociety.org.uk
Inclusion London*^	1	London	www.inclusionlondon.com
United Kingdom Disabled People's Council (UKDPC)*	1	London	www.ukdpc.net
Leonard Cheshire Disability (LCD)*^	1	London	www.lcdisability.org.uk
Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB)*^	1	London	www.rnib.org.uk
National Autistic Society (NAS)*^	1	London	www.autism.org.uk
Mencap*^	--	London	www.mencap.org.uk
Disability Alliance*^	--	London	www.disabilityalliance.org (from Jan. 2012: www.disabilityrightsuk.org)
National Centre for Independent Living (NCIL)*	--	London	www.ncil.org.uk (from Jan. 2012: www.disabilityrightsuk.org)
Royal Association for Disability Rights (RADAR)*^	--	London	www.radar.org.uk (from Jan. 2012: www.disabilityrightsuk.org)
Mind*^	--	London	www.mind.org.uk
Ambitious About Autism*^	--	London	www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk
Action for ME*^	--	Bristol	www.afme.org.uk

The purpose of these interviews was two-fold. First, they followed an emerging pattern in internet research by contributing to the contextualisation of online data. This was not to suggest that online data are less valuable or trustworthy than those collected through more "traditional" methods (Orgad, Bakardjieva, and Gajjala, 2009). Rather, it constituted a crucial way to enrich the interpretation of online data by reaching "beyond screens," enabling a more detailed and better informed discussion by rejecting the unhelpful myth of separate "virtual" and "real" spheres (Rogers, 2009). Second, they also provided a useful "view from the top" to complement and corroborate the "ground level" one captured through the analysis of user-generated content.

As in previous work on political blogs (Fossato, Lloyd, and Verkhovsky, 2007) and online activism (Gillan, 2009; Olsson, 2008), interviews were instrumental in acquiring a sense for the specific campaign strategies pursued by these groups (if any) and clarify the intended purpose of online media versus other forms of communication. In this context, complementing the results of user-generated content analysis with interview accounts was particularly revelatory with regard to the relationship between "leaders" and online supporters. For example, since most interview participants identified social media as a primary channel for engaging in a dialogue with supporters and the public more generally, content analysis provided a useful opportunity to verify whether core-campaigners actually put what they preached into practice. Conversely, interviews also helped uncovering some of the reasons at the root of seemingly ambiguous or inexplicable online behaviour. Given the broad spectrum of groups involved, a semi-structured approach was adopted in order to allow for some degree of flexibility while at the same time focusing on a set series of key issues that would facilitate the comparison among British groups and internationally. As such, an interview guide covering four key themes was developed (see Appendix B). These included:

a) Advocacy and campaigning in the internet age;
b) Digital media strategy;
c) User-preferences;
d) Participation catalysts.

The vast majority of participants were recruited directly via email, phone, or Twitter, while few were introduced to the researcher by other participants. Just over half of these interviews were conducted face-to-face with the rest carried out either via Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) software with video link (Skype) or over the telephone. Although the choice between online and offline settings was essentially dictated by logistical reasons and participant preferences, VoIP interviews were found to generate high quality data while also preserving contextual naturalness in internet research (Kazmer and Xie, 2008: 259).

A project information sheet formulated in accordance with Plain English guidelines (www.plainenglish.co.uk) was distributed to all participants a few days in advance of the interview and a reminder emailed the day before (see Appendix C). All blind and visually impaired participants were able to take advantage of screen-reader technology, which eliminated the need for a Braille version. Participants were given multiple opportunities to raise questions prior to, during and after talking to the researcher. Such precautions were

taken to offset the uncertainty surrounding consent in interviews carried out remotely (Kozinets, 2010: 142-3). As VoIP interviews with video-link effectively re-created most of the circumstances that characterise a traditional face-to-face setting, the issues typically encountered in obtaining fully informed consent through other online channels (i.e. written exchanges, especially if asynchronous) did not affect this project (Eynon, Fry, and Schroeder, 2008: 28-30). Interviews were audio-recorded (in the case of Skype using recording add-on Pamela – www.pamela.biz), transcribed, anonymised and, given the relatively limited amount of data involved, manually coded for inductively emerging key themes. User-generated content analysis and interviews crucially informed one another, taking place simultaneously.

Interviews invited a brief reflection on the role of the non-disabled researcher in disability studies. As a discipline that was itself born out of the struggle and commitment of disabled academics, disability studies have traditionally been credited with an "emancipatory" mission (Oliver, 1992). This inspired an unprecedented effort to enhance the role of disabled people in disability research, developing methods that afford them opportunities to become valued "experts" and co-creators of scholarly output (Barnes, 1992a). In addition, this also introduced the idea of accountability of disability research to disabled people and, according to some, disabled people's organisations (Stone and Priestley, 1996; Barnes, 2003: 7-9). The application of this paradigm has been characterised by some significant tensions, with communication between activists and academics often being insufficient (Germon, 1998) and systematic partnerships created only relatively recently (Priestley, Waddington, and Bessozi, 2010). Nevertheless, this radical critique of "traditional" disability research also made the role of the non-disabled researcher particularly controversial. Not only the motives of non-disabled disability researchers were questioned, but this also resonated with the general opposition to the disempowering "experts know best" philosophy that had historically underpinned disability research.

However, in recent years a powerful review of this "emancipatory" approach as prescriptive and potentially distortive has emerged. In particular, Watson (2012) has argued that "emancipatory research, whilst an excellent basis for a political movement, provides an inadequate grounding for a social theory" (p. 103). This echoes some of the arguments previously put forward by scholars such as Shakespeare (1996), who crucially warned that loyalty to research participants should not be confused with accountability to particular organisations. In other words, while disability research can play an important role in improving the lives of disabled people, it should do so by devising its own agenda in consultation with the disabled people's movement rather than simply subordinating its

priorities to the aims of activist groups. More broadly, these arguments are part of a wider debate on the need to re-conceptualise disability theory, as discussed in Chapter One. Although a detailed review of these issues would go beyond the scope of this study, it is important to note that this debate has involved a re-evaluation of the role of non-disabled researchers in disability studies. In particular, the assumption for which impairment would automatically "qualify" one to investigate disability was questioned *vis-à-vis* the sheer subjectivity of disability experiences (Shakespeare, 2006: 195). Furthermore, given that disability issues cover a wide range of disciplines, the point was also raised that sealing research off to non-disabled researchers would ultimately determine a loss of important competencies and an impoverishment of the academic debate (Watson, 2012). Finally, work on disabled people's own perception of disability research has also revealed that only a small minority are in fact opposed to the involvement of non-disabled academics in disability studies (Kitchin, 2000).

Overall, such re-evaluation of the non-disabled researcher's role resonated with the experience of carrying out interviews with disabled activists for this project. Although the majority of questions focused specifically on online media, lobbying strategies and the political context, opportunities were offered to discuss personal experiences of disability as part of the motives that had led participants to become mobilised. However, disabled participants engaged in that type of conversation only very rarely, preferring instead to talk about the structure of their groups, their experience with digital media and campaigning more broadly. In other words, they framed themselves as activists and citizens before disabled people. Conversely, participants only rarely asked questions about the "motives" behind the project and the researcher's status. Instead, most of them expressed genuine interest in knowing more about internet politics and appreciated the opportunity to talk to someone with a "professional" interest in that field, spontaneously asking for the researcher's opinion on their online initiatives and how these compared with the ones pursued by similar groups, both nationally and internationally. This, alongside the flexibility afforded by semi-structured interviews, contributed to reducing the distance between researcher and participants, ensuring that the latter were aware of their role as "experts" in shaping this project's outcomes. Thus, a mutually beneficial research relationship was created. While the overarching aim of this project was to generate a better understanding of the relationship between disability and new media, such researcher-participants relationship inspired also the preparation of a practitioner-oriented paper for the benefit of the groups involved as well as campaigning organisations more broadly (Trevisan, 2012b). With a view to expanding the scope and relevance of this study even

further, a comparative element was also included in this research design, as discussed in the next section.

3.5 – Comparing British and American disability organisations online

The last step in this project involved comparing the British case with that of digital disability activism in the United States. The main aim of this process was to expand the significance of this study by clarifying the influence of "context" upon online media preferences, collective action repertoires and user-involvement in contemporary disability activism. While in fact the internet is often thought of as a transnational medium, local cultural norms, institutional practices, usage patterns (Oates, 2011) and the inclusion of GeoIP software in search engines (Rogers, 2010a: 254-5) are increasingly creating "national webs." Thus, as context was bound to be different, comparability was ensured by examining similar types of groups (Lijphart, 1971: 687). In addition, given the inductive nature of case study selection discussed above, it was also necessary for this part of the analysis to focus on types of organisation that could reasonably be expected to feature in both countries irrespective of time-sensitive and issue-related circumstances. For this reason, while a wholly comparative study would undoubtedly make for an interesting piece of future research, this project focused exclusively on "formal" organisations, meaning those with a clear leadership and offline structure, including both groups "for" and "of" disabled people.

The choice of the U.S. as comparative case *vis-à-vis* Britain was informed by both previous work in internet politics and a careful reflection on the essence of "context" in relation to issue-driven online mobilisation. Since Gibson, Lusoli and Ward persuasively called for internet politics research to be adequately contextualised (2005), some rigorous comparative work has emerged in this area. Owing to traditional scholarship in political communication, most of these studies unsurprisingly centred on the role of the internet in election campaigns, focussing chiefly on the U.S. and EU countries (see for example: Gibson and Cantijoch, 2011; Lilleker and Jackson, 2011; Jensen, 2009). This research has regularly accounted for institutional variables such as party structure and funding, electoral regulations, cultural norms and media systems. In turn, this also has generated some inspired reflections on the specific methodological and theoretical challenges presented by this type of research (Gibson and Römmele, 2007; Anstead and Chadwick, 2009; Holtz-Bacha and Kaid, 2011). Yet, the centrality of the welfare reform "crisis" to online disability activism in Britain suggested a notion of context that stretches beyond institutional factors, accounting instead for the interplay between national constraints and

circumstantial offline catalysts (Oates, 2008a; 2011). Therefore, the selection of a suitable comparative case involved considering not only "systemic" variables such as governance structure, patterns of internet usage and history of disability activism, but also the disability policy agenda of the moment.

In this framework, the U.S. constituted an ideal comparative case. First, it represented a constitutional setting in which interest and advocacy groups fulfil an institutionalised role in democratic governance (Wilson, 2000: 117-23; Kernell and Jacobson, 2006: 504-15) while their UK counterparts tend to be located "outside" representative forums. Second, the American disability movement has developed in distinctively different ways from the British one, privileging a civil rights rhetoric, court litigation strategies and affirmative action principles to a more organic battle for equality against disabling barriers (Vaughn-Switzer, 2003). Third, American internet users tend to be more "creative" in their approach to technology while British ones seem more comfortable at the "receiving end" of the online medium (Oates, 2008b). Fourth, according to the most recent estimates 54% of disabled Americans use the internet (Fox, 2011: 3), which makes for a slightly larger base of potential online self-advocates than in the UK. Finally, in 2011 American disability politics was dominated by the controversy over cuts to Medicaid [4] funding that were part of the Republican budget plan proposed by Representative Paul Ryan. This was a strong catalyst for American disability advocates, albeit one with some important differences from the UK welfare reform, as discussed in detail in Chapter Seven.

In light of these considerations, the approach of American formal disability organisations to online media was investigated through the same "inventory" matrix discussed above, inter-actor link analysis with IssueCrawler and semi-structured interviews. Given that the main aim of this part of the analysis was to identify and analyse overarching, system-wide differences and similarities, focusing on matching pairs of equivalent organisations would have been restrictive and doubtfully useful. Instead, the comparison embraced two heterogeneous "pools" of formal organisations, each campaigning on either side of the Atlantic to influence policy measures affecting disabled people. Thus, although references to individual organisations were occasionally included to illustrate exceptions or point out particularly relevant findings, this comparison drew primarily on country-wide trends and general patterns. Each "pool" of organisations included both professionalised and member-led groups, as well as pan-disability and impairment-specific ones, all of

[4] Medicaid is the assistance programme on which most disabled US citizens rely to cover their healthcare costs. For more information on Medicaid and the "Path to Prosperity" Republican budget plan, see Chapter Seven.

which operate on a national scale (UK organisations: see Table 3.1 above; U.S. organisations: Table 3.2).

Table 3.2 – Overview of American formal disability organisations
(*denotes members of the Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities – CCD)

U.S. Organisations	Interviews	HQ Location	Website
American Association of Persons with Disabilities (AAPD)*	1	Washington, DC	www.aapd.com
Justice For All (JFA)*	1	Washington, DC (managed by AAPD)	www.jfactivist.org
National Federation of the Blind (NFB)*	2	Baltimore, MD	www.nfb.org
Learning Disabilities Association of America (LDAA)*	1	Pittsburgh, PA	www.ldanatl.org
National MS Society*	1	New York City, NY Washington, DC (advocacy team)	www.nmss.org
Mental Health America (NMHA)*	1	Alexandria, VA	www.nmha.org
National Council on Independent Living (NCIL)*	2	Washington, DC	www.ncil.org
National Disability Rights Network (NDRN)*	1	Washington, DC	www.ndrn.org
The ARC (formerly: The National Association for Retarded Citizens)*	1	Washington, DC	www.tharc.org
United Cerebral Palsy (UCP)*	2	Washington, DC	www.ucp.org
Access Living	1	Chicago, IL	www.accessliving.org
Autism Speaks/Autism Votes*	2	Washington, DC	www.autismspeaks.org www.autismvotes.org
ADAPT	1 (background)	Denver, CO Austin, TX Washington, DC	www.adapt.org
MS Society, National Capital Chapter (DC, Northern VA, MD)	1 (background)	Washington, DC	www.nmss.org /chapters/DCW/
Easter Seals	--	Chicago, IL Washington, DC (gov.t relations)	www.easterseals.com

Furthermore, background interviews were also carried out in the U.S. with representatives from radical activist network ADAPT and from one of the MS Society's state chapters. The data acquired through these conversations did not contribute to the comparison directly. Rather, it provided a sense for other key components of the American disability advocacy community in order to put the work of formal U.S. organisations into perspective at the national level.

Another point that should be considered here is the different number of interviews carried out in each country. While the same, if not an even greater effort was deployed to recruit participants from British organisations, these proved substantially less accessible

than their American counterparts. Ultimately, the depth and distribution of UK interviews across different types of formal organisations were such that the viability of the analysis was not compromised, as key themes shone through despite the amount of data available. However, this pattern hinted at some issues that were in fact integral to the analysis. Several factors lied at the root of this trend, which went beyond the appeal that being invited to an interview with a visiting foreign researcher may have for some groups and can be assumed to be connected to both systemic factors and timely circumstances. For example, most U.S. organisations provided personal contact details for their top officers. Instead, UK groups tended to limit themselves to generic "campaigns@-" or "communications@organisation_name" email addresses and switchboard phone number (Tables 3.3 and 3.4). As such, not only potential U.S. participants could be more readily contacted, but this pattern also signalled the existence of an open communication channel between the top officers of American organisations and their "constituents," as the former often described ordinary members and volunteers in interviews. This emphasised the strong culture of personal accountability shared among U.S. non-profits, government agencies and political institutions more generally.

Table 3.3 – Contact details for U.S. organisations

U.S. Organisation	Personal contact details
AAPD (incl. JFA)	Yes
NCIL	Yes
NDRN	No
Access Living	Yes
ADAPT	Yes
UCP	Yes
Easter Seals	No
The Arc	Yes
MS Society	Yes
Mental Health America	Yes
NFB	Yes
LDAA	Yes
Autism Speaks/Autism Votes	No

Table 3.4 – Contact details for UK organisations

UK Organisation	Personal contact details
UKDPC	Yes
Inclusion London	Yes
NCIL	No
Disability Alliance	Yes
RADAR	Yes
LCD	No
MENCAP	No
RNIB	No
SCOPE	No
MS Society	No
MIND	No
Ambitious About Autism	No
NAS	No
Action for ME	Yes

Similarly, the same culture could also be assumed to underpin the propensity of American organisations to engage in this project, whether because they felt they had an obligation towards both the researcher and their "constituents," or, more simply, because they saw it as yet another way to propagate their message in what is indeed a very competitive advocacy environment. In fact, somewhat more cynically, inter-group competition is another element that may reasonably have prompted U.S. participants to be more forthcoming. While disability organisations in both countries found themselves amidst a

policy crisis during the period of data collection, American groups favoured a rather more fragmented response to these issues than their British counterparts, as discussed in detail in Chapter Seven. Additionally, the severity of the crisis faced by UK organisations meant that these had to prioritise other tasks, as signalled by the sense of urgency that characterised correspondence and telephone conversations between the author and British groups that declined to take part.

3.6 – Ethical considerations

A final point ought to be made with regard to the ethics of internet research in conjunction with disability issues. The formulation of ethical codes of practice has been a key priority for internet scholars since the first wave of online research in the mid-1990s (Mann and Stewart, 2000). Much of this work has had an interdisciplinary focus. Hence, researchers have been encouraged to protect online participants from any potential harm but it is also acknowledged that "more than one set of norms, values, principles and usual practices can be seen to legitimately apply to the issue(s) involved" (Markham, Buchanan, and AoIR Ethics Working Committee, 2012: 5). Therefore, ethical research ought to "remain flexible, be responsive to diverse contexts, and be adaptable to continually changing technology" (*ibid.*).

That said, such calls for flexibility have often translated into guidelines lacking specificity in terms of the types of online media to which they apply, with documents such as the Economic and Social Research Council's Framework for Research Ethics criticised for their characterisation of the internet as "some kind of homogeneous monolith" (Orton-Johnson, 2010). The advent of Web 2.0 has cast further doubt upon both the viability and operationalisation of universal guidelines. Indeed, methodologists detected the specific challenges involved in analysing "everyday" online conversation (Sharf, 1999) and personal narratives (Ridderstrøm, 2003) long before social media went "mainstream." Yet, the explosion of user-generated content in recent years has raised ethical concerns on an unprecedented scale. In this context, the decision to analyse user-generated content drawn from a semi-public platform such as Facebook, in which "personal" and "political" issues were expected to be inextricably interwoven, raised a series of dilemmas that required careful reflection. While the purely observational nature of this project eliminated the most controversial issues associated with studies in which the researcher is also an active participant in the online communities under scrutiny (Paechter, 2013), the paragraphs below discuss they key problems that cropped up before, during and after data collection.

3.6.1 - Challenging established conventions: "Vulnerable groups" vs. "sensitive topics"

A first ethical concern revolved around the issue of whether it would at all be appropriate to carry out in-depth qualitative analysis in such online spaces. While in fact the pages under scrutiny had all been set up in such a way as to allow any Facebook user to freely browse their entire content, that did not constitute a straightforward excuse to dodge the issue of consent. This problem has been previously highlighted in the work of other researchers investigating online disability communities. For example, in their pioneering discussion of methodological strategies for doing internet research with disabled participants, Bowker and Tuffin categorically ruled out using naturalistic discourse analysis because of the high number of variables and the level of risk involved (2004). At first impression, this is undoubtedly the safest of all possible approaches. Yet, it is also at odds with the principle for which "research should attend to what disabled people say and think […] researchers and activists alike should be attentive to the ways in which people wish to define their own experience, to what matters to individuals, to the perspectives and choices which people make in their everyday lives" (Shakespeare and Watson, 2010: 72).

In light of these considerations, applying a blanket "ban" on the examination of user-generated material would in fact have constituted a badly missed opportunity when the online "voices" of disabled users could instead be accessed relatively easily, shaping research outcomes directly. Thus, the decision of whether to carry out this type of analysis was not a straightforward one between doing or not doing harm but a more nuanced one requiring risk to be weighted against the potentially disempowering consequences of renouncing the study of user-generated content. Given the controversial nature of the welfare reform, the view prevailed that writing off the analysis of naturally occurring Facebook discussion among the supporters of disability rights groups would in fact have equated to "silencing" the voices of these communities in the research process. This was consistent with the principle for which "researchers must balance the rights of subjects […] with the social benefits of research" (Markham, Buchanan, and AoIR Ethics Working Committee, 2012: 4). In other words, a decision taken in good faith and with the wellbeing of participants in mind may in fact have paradoxically resulted in more harm than good, mirroring some of the patronising and exclusionary practices that have often riddled policy-making processes and political organisations. As such, a decision was taken to proceed by devising a strategy to minimise risk for (unaware) participants. Part of this plan involved challenging established conventions in social science research ethics. In particular, a consolidated concept that was re-considered in this context was that of "vulnerable social

groups." While disabled adults continue to be referred to as vulnerable subjects by many institutional ethics procedures, which therefore tend to place additional obligations on researchers wishing to investigate experiences of disability, this practice was arguably found to be unhelpful on this occasion. This was mainly for two reasons.

First, it can be difficult, if not impossible, to verify the identity of individual members of online communities. This means that, except for filters set up by administrators, virtually anyone can join a discussion on social media, making the composition of "vulnerable groups" uncertain. Put simply, this defeats the very purpose for which this concept has been devised, calling instead for a more flexible approach capable of dealing with sensitive material irrespective of the identity of those involved. Second, the default categorisation of disabled internet users as "feeble" and "vulnerable" is a contested practice, which disability scholars have criticised as effectively "disabling" since the early days of the social model of disability and disability studies (Finkelstein, 1980). In other words, automatically applying the "vulnerable" label to digital disability rights groups would not only have constituted an inadequate response to the challenges posed by the uncertainty surrounding online identities, but also jeopardised some of the very aims of this study.

This is, however, not to suggest that user-generated content should be dealt with light-heartedly. Rather, focusing on "sensitive topics" instead of "vulnerable groups" when assessing and discussing the political relevance of online personal accounts made for a more suited approach to the social media environment. Concentrating on *what* was said rather than trying to establish *who* said it constituted a strategy that not only was case-specific and free from potentially patronising assumptions, but also enabled the researcher to pay extra attention to those conversations that were actually most likely to present specific ethical dilemmas. It was therefore useful to inductively generate a list of "sensitive topics" to be handled with additional care during the analysis and reporting of results. Examples of such discussion topics included, among others:

- personal daily routines;
- specific impairment and/or medical records;
- detailed accounts of pain and chronic illness;
- income and/or benefits details and other financial information;
- discrimination and abuse episodes;
- criticism/praise of service providers.

User-generated content covering any of these topics was granted additional attention irrespective of who appeared to have posted it, extending the same level of protection to every user as well as any other individual referred to in online content. Furthermore, this topics list was kept open to additions, acknowledging the fact that in the study of social media it is impossible to anticipate the exact content of user-contributions. In this case, this type of approach was possible due to the preference accorded to manual coding and the relatively small sample size (see Chapter Five). Indeed, this would make for an impractical strategy to analyse substantially larger samples of online material, even when the subjectivity involved in this process is accounted for and tolerated.

3.6.2 – Presenting results and preserving anonymity

Having traced the contours of particularly sensitive content, the next step was to devise presentation strategies that would not compromise the privacy of individual users. Traditionally, direct quotes have been the main way of integrating the results of content analysis with rhetorical and conversation examples. However, the "long tail" of online data raises the issue of whether this can at all be regarded as a safe system. While the concept of "online privacy" is a legally contested one (McNealy, 2012), the research guidelines cited above suggest that online participants should nevertheless be protected from any harm through two processes, namely: obtaining informed consent prior to the use of the data; and anonymising datasets (Ess and AoIR Ethics Working Committee, 2002; British Psychological Society, 2007). Clearly, the former may be neither feasible nor appropriate for the study of public Facebook pages, which can be conceptualised as open-access public spaces (Neuhaus and Webmoor, 2011). Thus, data anonymisation may be the preferred option for using content from social media sites.

Recent research has suggested that the redaction or removal of the name used by an online participant may not protect their anonymity. The verbatim reproduction of text might enable the original post to be located via the use of search engines (Markham, 2012). Personally Identifiable Information (PII) may also be inadvertently revealed by the researcher through the use of content that refers to the economic, social, or cultural identity of the poster (Zimmer, 2010b). With specific reference to Facebook, it could indeed be argued that, at the moment, it does not allow for its content to be freely searched[5]. Yet, in recent years Facebook has changed its data management policies multiple times, generally

[5] At the time of writing, Facebook had launched a beta version of their "Graph" semantic search engine on limited release for selected users. While Facebook had not yet publicly discussed a precise timeframe for a general rollout of this application, they confirmed their intention to introduce a semantic search service for all users in the future. See: https://en-gb.facebook.com/about/graphsearch (accessed: 18th March 2013).

without previous consultations with users. As such, and because of wider unpredictability in technology developments, it cannot be assumed that search engines will forever continue to be banned from browsing individual comments and contributions posted on social networking sites. For these reasons, researchers should refrain from jumping to long-term conclusions in relation to privacy and anonymity (Benjamin, 2012).

One innovative practice that draws upon user-generated content without the need for verbatim quotes and might therefore be more effective in preserving the anonymity of these users is the "fabrication" strategy recently proposed by Markham (2012), who criticised the excessive conservatism displayed so far by qualitative internet researchers and the lack of methodological innovation to address these issues. Thus, Markham's solution requires the researcher to create composite accounts that convey key themes from a data set without reproducing the text as provided by participants. This is a bold and unconventional approach that may shock some, yet at the same time intriguingly builds on the idea that qualitative research is ultimately interested in exposing and discussing patterns that may be represented just as successfully through fictional narratives as they would be by direct quotes. However, it can also be argued that its applicability depends on the specific discipline(s) to which a given research project seeks to contribute. While it is clear that specificity may not be necessary in order to illustrate key themes, "fabrication" presents a particular problem in the context of disability studies. As the perspectives of disabled people remain an essential component of this type of research, "fabrication" represented a high-risk practice that may ultimately have resulted in a distortion of disabled people's online "voices" as it works on the premise that the researcher should elaborate "proxy" accounts to prove rhetorical points. Rather, solutions were sought that would protect user-anonymity without requiring excessive data manipulation.

The working solution for this project was to avoid the use of direct quotes if information on "sensitive" personal topics such as the ones listed above was included, which could have facilitated the identification of the poster through online searches. In this way, the study conformed to the "agile" version of online research ethics that has been advocated as an antidote to the rather vague guidelines such as the ones cited above (Markham, 2012; Neuhaus and Webmoor, 2011; Whiteman, 2012). Nevertheless, this approach did not constitute a "mantra" against the use of direct quotes *per se*. Rather, these remained useful when the identification of the author was not possible or would not cause specific ethical problems (i.e. sensitive topics were not involved). Furthermore, a distinction was also made between the content contributed by "ordinary" users and that posted by forum administrators and lead-campaigners. This is because, while the former may not realise the full implications of publishing personal information on publicly

available online forums, let alone expect those to be scrutinised by researchers, the latter can be regarded as public figures. Furthermore, Facebook coding was discussed in interviews with leading campaigners, who were explicitly afforded an opportunity to decline the use of their content in this project. In light of these considerations, this strategy fell in the category of "medium cloaked" approaches as described by Kozinets (2010: 154-5), for which verbatim quotes are admissible under carefully controlled circumstances.

The next chapters discuss the results obtained applying this multi-layered research strategy. Chapter Four draws on the UK welfare reform as e-campaigning catalyst and presents the case studies selected for in-depth analysis focusing on their online media repertoires and connections with the wider socio-political context. Chapter Five discusses the lessons learnt from designing and carrying out the analysis of Facebook conversations. Chapter Six focuses on the results of content analysis. Finally, Chapter Seven compares the British case against digital disability activism in the U.S.

Chapter 4 – Keep Calm and Tweet On: British Disability Activism Goes Digital

Moving from the idea that digital activism is most likely to flourish in connection with disruptive issues and events, this chapter provides a series of initial considerations on the nature of the groups that used new media to oppose a radical reform of disability welfare in the UK between 2010 and 2012. What kind of groups embraced online campaigning to oppose such policy proposals? Were disabled activists and users directly involved in these efforts and, if so, in what role(s)? To what extent did the web presence of these groups facilitate interactive and participatory campaigning? And, finally, what other actors did they connect to and interact with in the online sphere? In order to answer these questions, this chapter employs a combination of different methods including the analysis of keyword search patterns with Google Trends, the online media inventory matrix discussed in the previous chapter and web link analysis with IssueCrawler. The main aim of this part of the study was therefore to establish whether the combination of political turmoil generated by controversial policy measures with the opportunities for communication afforded by digital media had injected renewal and innovation into British disability activism.

After a brief overview of the welfare reform plans put forward by the UK's Conservative-led coalition government, three main group types are identified that relied on online media to oppose that agenda. These included: formal disability organisations (both "professionalised" charities and self-advocacy groups); experienced disabled activists who had previously participated in the disability rights campaigns of the 1990s and again joined forces to campaign on this issue; and, finally, a new generation of technology-savvy disabled bloggers who came together for the first time in the wake of the welfare reform controversy with the specific aim of opposing such policy proposals. In particular, disabled bloggers were able to take advantage of their familiarity with technology to launch a new "genre" in British disability activism. They provided other users with a flexible range of opportunities for becoming involved and ultimately positioned their campaigns somewhere between "institutionalised" lobbying organisations and militant protest groups, potentially attracting supporters unconvinced by either of the other approaches.

Focusing on three emblematic case studies, this chapter then explores the nature and relationship with technology of each type of groups, thus laying the foundations for further investigation on their potential for user-empowerment in the remainder of this thesis. While the analysis uncovered three rather different digital campaigning styles, it also showed that social media in particular were ubiquitous in the online repertoires of the

groups under scrutiny. This marked an important departure from the reluctance of both disability charities and self-advocacy groups to embrace Web 2.0 technology observed by the author in the pilot study carried out for this project (Trevisan, 2012a) and injected new vitality in British disability activism at a time of crisis. However, this also raised fundamental questions about the potential of online campaigning to effectively empower ordinary users, both disabled and non-. This chapter concludes by discussing how the analysis of user-generated content, and in particular Facebook discussion threads, is set to illuminate these issues in Chapters Five and Six.

4.1 – Catalyst issue: Disabled people and the UK welfare reform

It is crucial to start by clarifying what characterised the policy proposals that led to the approval of the Welfare Reform Act in March 2012 as viable catalysts for digital renewal in British disability activism. While in fact the UK government sought to bundle these measures together with its comprehensive "austerity" plan, social policy scholars have strongly contested the efficiency-driven nature of these initiatives. By considering the evolution of Conservative policy in recent years, authors such as Bochel (2011) concluded that plans to reform the welfare system by the coalition government were instead rooted in neo-liberal ideology, which characterised them as "largely a continuation of Thatcherite approaches" (p. 20) and therefore "more than an immediate response to a large account deficit […] that takes the country in a new direction, rolling back the state to a level of intervention below that of the United States – something which is unprecedented" (Taylor-Gooby and Stoker, 2011: 14).

In light of these considerations, the welfare reform was poised to affect the very livelihoods of disabled Britons in the long term, threatening some of their fundamental rights. This made it an issue that resonated with the tendency for disability campaigners to engage primarily in "defensive" action in recent years (Beckett, 2005). In addition, this also characterised it as a pan-disability issue that had the potential to activate latent ties and trigger unity among disabled internet users – although possibly just temporarily – without the need for strong group identity (Haythornthwaite, 2005). Furthermore, Labour's arguably reluctant approach to opposing these measures, particularly during their first reading in the House of Commons, emphasised the need for those who were against such changes to disability benefits to organise independently outside the representative system. This created a favourable environment for the development of citizen-led initiatives and the growth of protest groups.

A drastic reduction in welfare spending was first announced by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government as part of their emergency budget in June 2010, with plans for a comprehensive reform of the benefits system presented at the Conservative Party conference in October 2010 and introduced to the House of Commons in February 2011. It was apparent from these announcements that benefits offered specifically to disabled people were a key target for reform. These included proposals for replacing Disability Living Allowance (DLA)[6] with a new Personal Independence Payment (PIP) for all working age claimants (16-64 year olds). New legislation including these measures was eventually passed in March 2012 and PIPs started to be rolled out progressively from April 2013. Government figures suggested that this measure should save the Department for Work and Pensions in excess of 2.5 billion pounds per year[7]. However, a strong criticism brought against these measures was that they included radical changes to the eligibility assessment process with a new procedure modelled on the controversial medical test for Working Capability Assessment (WCA) already carried out in conjunction with the administration of Employment and Support Allowance (ESA). DLA recipients were not moved automatically onto the new system. Instead, everyone was required to re-apply and will be assessed through the new process. Scholars and campaigners alike denounced this as a way to eradicate social model principles from welfare provision and return to a purely medicalised understanding of disability (Grant and Wood, 2011). Furthermore, severe doubts were also cast on the potential of these measures to support disabled people entering the labour market. This was because much of the rhetoric surrounding disability benefits changes was directed at casting a great proportion of DLA recipients as "undeserving poor" who claimed a benefit they were not entitled to (Patrick, 2011), while in fact the Department for Work and Pensions itself recently estimated fraudulent claims to account for only 0.5% of all DLA applications made every year (DWP, 2012: 13).

Thus, a consensus emerged among disability scholars that these seemingly technical policy details had in fact ample ideological ramifications. While this echoed broader arguments put forward by social policy researchers against the welfare reform, authors such as Roulstone (2011a) crucially added that changes to disability benefits were particularly regressive towards a social group with little political capital and who would therefore find it difficult to respond effectively to this challenge. According to Oliver and Barnes (2012), such measures entailed a paradoxical contradiction. Although they were

[6] DLA was first introduced in 1992 to cover some of the additional costs associated with disability. It is a non-means-tested benefit that includes a care as well as a mobility component. The UK government initially announced it would scrap the mobility component for disabled people living in residential care with the introduction of PIPs, but eventually removed this element from the Welfare Reform Bill in November 2011.

[7] For details see: www.dwp.gov.uk/policy/disability/personal-independence-payment/ (accessed: 21st Feb. 2013).

officially designed to reduce state dependency among disability welfare recipients, their most immediate effect would instead be to plunge a large proportion of disabled people into poverty. For these reasons, it could be argued that these reforms threatened core benefits for many disabled people, thereby challenging their right to live independently. Thus, given the centrality of welfare policy to the public discourse on disability in Britain (Rummery, 2002), such radical modifications to the benefits system could be interpreted as not only a mere redistribution issue but also as a re-definition of equality rights that foreshadowed the withdrawal of other types of support as "proposed cuts in health and social care risk reversing hard won debates around personalised and enabling packages in the form of direct payments and personal budgets" (Roulstone, 2011b: 27). In a similar fashion to the sentiments that supported the fight for anti-discrimination legislation and the introduction of direct payments in the early to mid-1990s (Pearson, 2012; Pearson and Riddell, 2006), this generated a strong motivation for political action, prompting those with previous campaigning and self-advocacy experience in particular to speak out against the dangers of "rolling back" the welfare state (Morris, 2011).

In light of these considerations, there was reasonable ground to assume that that this controversy could re-ignite dissent among disability groups that, as discussed in the introductory chapters, have generally been criticised for having grown excessively close to politicians and government departments in recent years (Barnes, 2007). Such strong motivation, in conjunction with the low cost, high speed (Chadwick, 2012a) and lack of need for physical co-presence afforded by new media (Earl and Kimpert, 2011: 181-2) was thought to be a likely predictor of a surge in digital disability activism. Nevertheless, before launching a full-scale investigation, it was important for such assumptions to be corroborated – or indeed refuted – by some concrete indication of the welfare reform's role as a potential driver of disability-related online activity. Thus, Google Trends was used to compare the welfare reform's timeline with longitudinal fluctuations in the volume of disability-related keyword searches.

4.1.1 - Checking for user-interest with Google Trends

Google Trends proved instrumental in assessing whether there was a correspondence between particularly important moments in the process that led to the approval of the Welfare Reform Act 2012 and increases in disability-related online activity. In addition to investigating the popularity levels of a series of fundamental disability keywords, a complete directory of events surrounding the reform of disability welfare was created (Table 4.1). Thereafter, these two timelines were compared to one another, focusing in

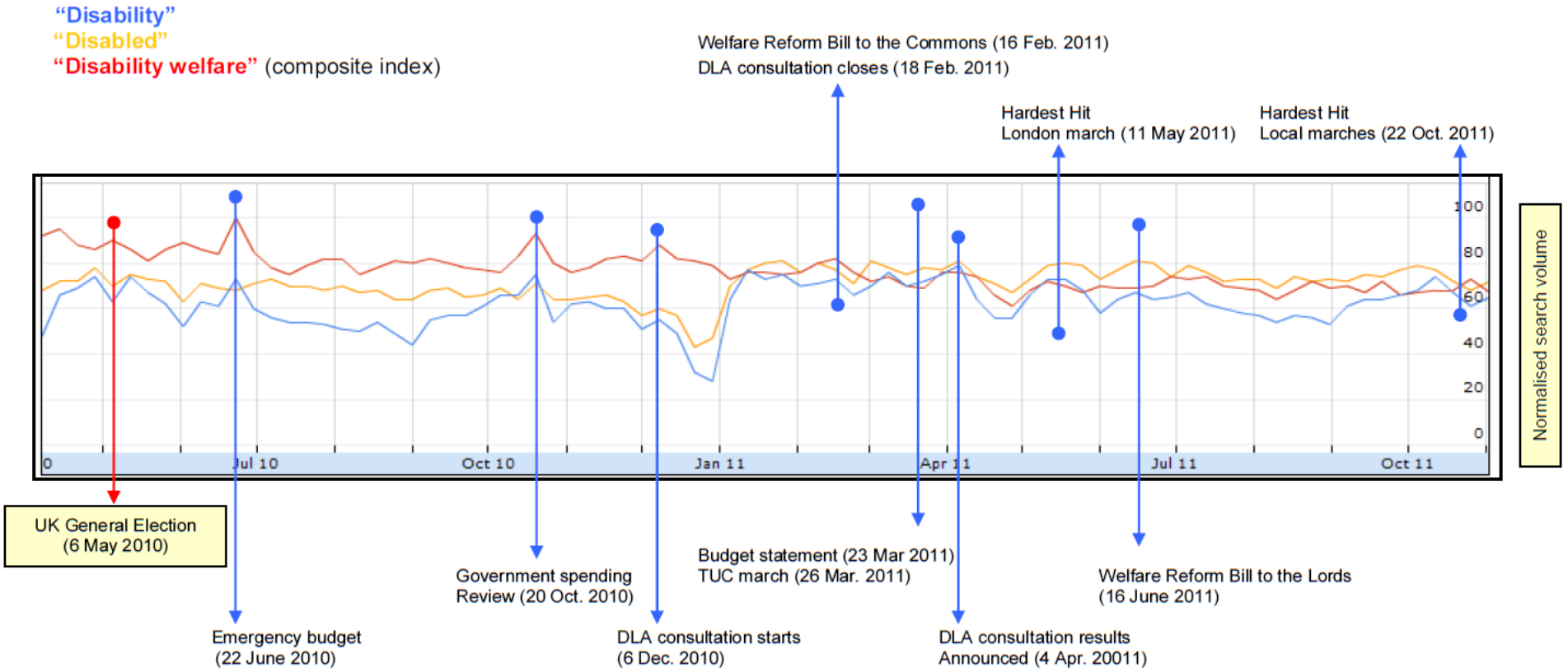
particular on the period from the 2010 general election to November 2011, which included the vast majority of events connected to the welfare reform's legislative process.

Table 4.1 – Timeline of UK welfare reform legislative process and related events

Date	Event
6th May 2010	UK General Election
12th May 2010	New government formed
22nd June 2010	Emergency Budget presented in Parliament
30th July 2010	Government consultation on Welfare Reform opens
1st Oct 2010	Government consultation on Welfare Reform closes
3rd Oct 2010	March against cuts at Conservative Party conference (Birmingham)
20th Oct 2010	Government Spending Review presented in Parliament
11th Nov 2010	DWP releases "21st Century Welfare" report on results of welfare reform consultation and "Universal Credit: Welfare That Works" white paper
6th Dec 2010	Consultation on Disability Living Allowance (DLA) reform opens
13th Dec 2010	Closure of the Independent Living Fund (ILF) by 2015 announced
6/12th Feb 2011	Mobilise for DLA "week of action" – sponsored by several disability charities
16th Feb 2011	Welfare Reform Bill (WRB) introduced to the House of Commons
18th Feb 2011	DLA reform consultation closes
9th Mar 2011	2nd WRB reading in the Commons
23rd Mar 2011	Westminster budget presentation; Trafalgar Sq. demonstration against cuts
26th Mar 2011	Trade Unions Congress (TUC) march against the cuts (London)
04th Apr 2011	Results of DLA reform consultation and government response released
11th May 2011	"The Hardest Hit" march (London)
15th June 2011	3rd WRB reading in the Commons
16th June 2011	WRB introduced to the House of Lords
13th Sept. 2011	2nd WRB reading in the Lords
22nd Oct 2011	Local "Hardest Hit" marches across the UK
14th Nov 2011	Lords committee discusses proposed changes to DLA under WRB
28th Nov 2011	Lords committee returns WRB to the Commons
30th Nov 2011	Government u-turn on plans to scrap DLA mobility component for recipients in residential care
01st Dec 2011	"Fulfilling Potential" discussion document on the future of disability policy in the UK launched by Office for Disability Issues
31st Jan 2012	3rd WRB reading in the Lords
8th March 2012	Welfare Reform Act 2012 gains Royal Assent

As highlighted in Figure 4.1, not only did search trends for all the terms under scrutiny follow broadly similar patterns throughout the entire period, but, more importantly, interest peaks also frequently occurred during weeks of particular significance for the welfare reform. In particular, substantial interest surges for both "disability" and the "disability welfare" aggregate were registered during the week in which the then newly formed government presented their emergency budget to Parliament (22nd June 2010) and the one marked by the announcement of the Comprehensive Spending Review (20th October 2010), which outlined long-term plans to replace all existing disability benefits with PIPs. While these weeks immediately stood out by virtue of the sharp increases and relatively rapid decreases in search volume that characterised them, a closer cross-examination of the two timelines revealed that smaller interest surges frequently occurred around other key welfare reform developments too.

Fig. 4.1 – Google Trends keyword popularity index (UK Google searches, Apr. 2010 – Nov. 2011)



In particular, these included the weeks marked respectively by the opening and closing of the consultation on Disability Living Allowance changes (6th Dec. 2010 and 18th Feb. 2011 respectively), the introduction of the Welfare Reform Bill (WRB) to the House of Commons (16th Feb. 2011), the presentation of the budget to Parliament (23rd March 2011) and the Trade Unions Congress (TUC) march against public expenditure cuts (26th March 2011), the release of the DLA consultation results (4th Apr. 2011), the demonstrations organised by a coalition of disability organisations against welfare cuts in London (11th May 2011) and eight other British cities (22nd October 2011) as well as the introduction of the WRB to the House of Lords (16th June 2011).

Indeed, the purpose of this comparison was limited. In particular, it was interesting to note how certain key dates in the welfare reform's timeline were associated with surges in online interest for disability-related topics while others were not. Although this suggested that some types of events may be more prone to stimulating online activity than others, possibly depending on their nature, magnitude and mass media visibility, the data collected for this project did not allow for statistical inferences to be drawn in order for such a causal relationship to be adequately explored. Nevertheless, these results identified a clear pattern of co-occurrence, showing that the correspondence between the two most prominent "spikes" in online interest for disability-related topics and key moments in the welfare reform's timeline were not exceptional and isolated cases but rather formed part of a more nuanced and extensive trend. This usefully corroborated the assumption made above for which the welfare reform, by virtue of its controversial nature and projected negative impact on both disabled people's living standards and fundamental rights, was bound to catalyse the attention of users interested in disability issues. In light of these results, the next step was to understand whether the interest displayed by internet users was effectively being channelled into any form of online coordinated action, whether set up by pre-existing disability organisations or sponsored by new and emerging groups.

4.2 – One issue, a plurality of players and spaces

In keeping with the research strategy outlined in Chapter Three, searches were carried out on both Google.co.uk and Facebook.com between October 2010 and January 2011 for a series of keyword combinations connected to disability welfare and activism. In spite of search engines' lack of neutrality, this process essentially replicated the choice available to users, enabling the identification of several groups that made extensive use of digital tools as part of their efforts to oppose changes to the disability benefits system. In particular, this strategy made it possible to detect some important campaigns before they gained visibility

in sympathetic news outlets such as The Guardian and The Independent[8]. From the background information posted on the web pages dedicated to these initiatives, it quickly became apparent that different groups were behind them. Overall, such groups fell under three distinct types depending on the profile of their core organisers and their relationship with the previous stages of British disability activism as discussed in Chapter One (see pp. 27-31). These included:

a) **Formal organisations:**
pre-existing disability organisations (including charities, DPOs and "hybrid" bodies) that used the internet to boost their campaign efforts against disability welfare changes, often by forming temporary, *ad hoc* coalitions;

b) **"Digitised" activists:**
groups of experienced disabled self-advocates, strongly inspired by social model principles, who had previously been involved in the campaigns for anti-discrimination legislation of the 1980s and '90s – either in a personal capacity or as part of DPOs – and set up a web presence after meeting at protest rallies in an effort to carry on campaigning independent of established disability organisations;

c) **Digital action networks:**
online-only initiatives created and maintained by disabled bloggers-turned-activists with no prior experience of disability rights campaigning; 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 and in all likelihood would not have met had they not been able to do so online.

Furthermore, the websites of organisations of carers and disabled children's parents, as well as discussion forums hosted on commercial sites such as Moneysavingexpert.co.uk ("Disability & Dosh" board) and Benefitsandwork.co.uk were also found to be hosting a substantial amount of conversation on disability benefits changes. While the involvement of carers and parents organisations came as no surprise given their stakes in the welfare reform, the relevance of commercial forums crucially reiterated the importance for researchers to look for evidence of political discussions in "non-political" online venues

[8] See for example: http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2011/mar/23/disability-protests-benefit-cuts-remote-offensive; http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/rallies-held-over-cuts-for-disabled-2374442.html (accessed: 21st Feb 2013).

(Wright, 2012a; 2012b; Chadwick, 2012a). Albeit challenging to analyse and interpret, these exchanges promise to reveal the dynamics for which talk on disability policy may or may not emerge from "everyday" conversation occurring outside a specific campaign context. As such, future research should focus on these spaces as internet scholars develop more reliable methods for analysing user-generated content automatically. However, these online venues were only indirectly relevant to this project. This is because, on the one hand, carers and parents' organisations are not oriented towards disabled people directly. On the other hand, instead, online forums do not explicitly aspire to promoting political action and policy change. Therefore, this study concentrated only on the three key group types listed above in order to prevent the analysis from being sidetracked.

4.2.1 - Great expectations or business as usual?

While the presence of disabled bloggers among those using the internet to oppose disability welfare changes seemed to support the popular assertion that digital communications would be fostering a "mass amateurisation" of activism (Shirky, 2008), a closer look at the composition of these groups revealed that to be a premature conclusion. In fact, not only were digital action networks flanked by collectives of experienced activists on one side and pre-existing disability organisations on the other, but each of these group types revolved also around experienced campaigners who provided content, guidance and direction. This resonated with the arguments put forward by theorists who claimed that social movement groups, much like institutionalised interest groups, tend to "naturally" organise around a clear and experienced leadership (Campbell, 2005; Burstein, 1999). Whether they sought to implement a hierarchical control structure or merely steer collective deliberation processes, the centrality of lead campaigners emerged repeatedly throughout data collection and analysis. This issue, which warned against disregarding traditional organisational dynamics when studying online disability activism, will be addressed in detail with reference to specific case studies both in this chapter and in the one focusing on online discussion (Chapter Six).

Despite this basic similarity, it was nevertheless apparent that each group type was characterised by a distinct relationship with past disability activism experiences. In particular, formal organisations featured a direct connection to the short-lived but effective coalition of groups "for" and "of" disabled people that campaigned for anti-discrimination legislation in the 1990s. In contrast, a preliminary examination of the rhetoric displayed by "digitised" activists cast them as uncompromising critics of disability charities opposed to collaborating with organisations they considered to be oppressive and disempowering

towards disabled people in spite of the changes that transformed many of them in the past twenty years (Shakespeare, 2006). Furthermore, digital action networks were the expression of a younger disabled generation, new to campaigning but at the same time not clueless about the political game nor necessarily uninfluenced by the previous history of disability activism. In light of these considerations, it was reasonable to hypothesise that such differences may have influenced the digital media choices and action repertoires of each group type too. In particular, formal organisations were expected to be characterised by an ambivalent approach to digital communications, trying to conciliate control impulses with the potential of Web 2.0 technology in order to mobilise and engage ordinary users. "Digitised" activists, given their previous experience with contentious action and commitment to inclusive campaigning, were expected to promote online media as spaces for the expansion of protest, while also being less enthusiastic than other groups about social media due to the complex accessibility issues associated with interactive platforms such as Facebook. Finally, digital action networks, given their familiarity with technology and freedom from organisational constraints, were considered to be more likely than others to develop innovative online campaigning tactics. However, a lack of clear ideological affiliation, as well as the novel character of this type of actor, detracted from the possibility of speculating further on its online strategy. In particular, at this stage it was too early to say whether its online endeavours had a contentious character or rather provided a genuine alternative to traditional protest politics.

In order to verify these assumptions and discuss the most salient features of each group type, it was useful to examine in detail a set of emblematic case studies. Thus, three groups were chosen, all of which had embarked on online campaigning in late 2010, gained considerable media coverage during the following months and, crucially, epitomised the most distinctive traits of each actor type as illustrated above. Their web presence was surveyed by means of the digital media inventory matrix discussed in Chapter Three. As such, this part of the analysis was not concerned with providing a complete list of the online media employed by these groups. Rather, an effort was made to expose whether each of them granted ordinary users opportunities to participate in online discussions and e-campaigning as steps towards empowerment. Furthermore, web link analysis with IssueCrawler was also carried out in order to capture the network(s) surrounding these groups and in particular to better understand their respective positions *vis-à-vis* other disability organisations as well as the "galaxy" of anti-austerity initiatives that flourished in the UK between 2010 and 2012.

The results of this first part of the study are discussed in detail in the next section. Only some were in line with the expectations listed above. Nonetheless, finding that three

different types of disability groups had simultaneously experimented with digital campaigning was a remarkable result in and for itself, signalling a leap forward in the approach of both disability organisations and self-advocates to new media. As shown by the preparatory study carried out for this project, until very recently both disability charities and DPOs tended to regard digital communications as dubiously valuable for campaigning purposes (Trevisan, 2012a). Yet, little more than a year later, that sceptical perspective seemed to have dissipated in conjunction with what was arguably the biggest disability policy dispute since the mid-1990s. As such, despite search engines have a tendency to marginalise minority voices, the online visibility achieved by these groups reflected the composite nature of the digital opposition to the reform of disability welfare. More broadly, it could also be argued that the varied typology spectrum outlined above challenged the popular assumption that online activism is primarily associated with social movement groups and "unconventional" repertoires (Lievrouw, 2011: 159).

4.3 – Three emblematic case studies

Three case studies were selected purposively among the most high-profile campaigns using online media to oppose the disability welfare reform. While this approach placed some limitations on the possibility to generalise this study's conclusions, it also ensured that in-depth, qualitative insights could be acquired, which may instead have been missed by a broader mapping exercise. In order to provide a useful overview of differences and similarities among the online media repertoires of each case study, all inventory results are presented in Table 4.2 below. Nevertheless, for clarity, each case study is discussed individually. Different online platforms and practices are brought into the spotlight throughout the analysis, depending on their specific relevance to each case study. Further to inventory and web link data, interview accounts with those in charge of these platforms are also referred to when appropriate. As such, it is possible to gather a detailed understanding of the relationship between each group and online media, providing the foundations for the analysis of user-generated content that will follow in Chapter Six.

Table 4.2 – Online media inventory results		The Hardest Hit (formal org.)	DPAC ("digitised" activists)	The Broken of Britain (digital action network)
Personalisation & User-input	Audience segmentation	No	No	No
	Share Personal Stories	Yes	No	No
	Polls/surveys	No	No	No
	Clicktivism +	Yes	No	Yes
Broadcast Info (Vertical comms)	Email action network	No	No	No
	Other email list and discussion group(s)	No	Yes	No
	RSS Feed	No	No	Yes
	Regular e-newsletter	No	No	No
	Events calendar	No	No	No
	Personal contact details	No	No	No
	Generic contact details	Yes	Yes	Yes
Community & Social Media (Horizontal comms)	Discussion forum	No	No	Yes (members-only)
	Official blog(s)	No	Yes (comments enabled)	Yes (comments enabled)
	Members-only area	No	No	No
	Twitter	No	Yes	Yes
	Facebook "fan" page	Yes	No	Yes
	Facebook "group" page	No	Yes	No
	YouTube channel	No	No	Yes (individ. videos)
	Flickr	Yes	Yes	No
	Join button	No	Yes	No
	Donate button	No	Yes	No
	Share button	No	Yes	Yes
Action Resources	E-petitions	No	No	Yes
	E-postcard/template letter	Yes	No	No
	Campaign/advocacy section	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Maps/events listings	No	Yes	No
	Virtual protest page(s)	No	Yes	No
	Innovative uses of online media	No	No	Yes
	Other campaign resources	Yes	Yes	Yes

4.3.1 – Formal disability organisations: The Hardest Hit campaign

The Hardest Hit campaign (www.hardesthit.org.uk, Fig. 4.2) was the largest and arguably most visible of the digital initiatives launched by disability rights groups in the wake of the welfare reform. It mobilised thousands of disabled people across the UK, online as well as offline, particularly in conjunction with the street demonstrations it organised in London on the 11th of May 2011 (Fig. 4.3) and eight other British cities on the 22nd of October the same year. Crucially, these events went beyond the lobbying repertoire traditionally employed by disability charities, providing a first indication of how these groups believed

an "extra-ordinary" response was needed under the circumstances created by the coalition government's welfare agenda.

Fig. 4.2 – The Hardest Hit's homepage, October 2011

Fig. 4.3 – The Hardest Hit London march, 11.05.2011 (courtesy of Matt Winyard, RNIB)

The driver behind The Hardest Hit was a commitment by more than fifty disability organisations affiliated to the Disability Benefits Consortium (DBC)[9] to campaign under

[9] The DBC brings together over 50 disability organisations, including both member-led disabled people's organisations (DPOs) and traditional charities. Although member organisations generally run their own individual campaigns, the consortium facilitates discussion on disability benefits and occasionally acts on behalf of its members. The vast majority of the groups organisations involved in "The Hardest Hit" were DBC affiliates. For more information, see: www.disabilityrightsuk.org/disabilitybenefitsconsortium.htm

the same banner against what was considered an unprecedented "threat" to disabled people's future. While at first it could have been tempting to class this as a "mainstream" campaign due to the involvement of virtually all the most prominent British disability charities, a closer observation revealed this issue-focused coalition to be more innovative than it was envisaged initially.

First, The Hardest Hit was considerably more successful at attracting and mobilising a greater number of supporters – both online and offline – than other collective campaigns to which disability organisations also contributed, for example the Campaign for a Fair Society (www.campaignforafairsociety.com). Crucially, initiatives such as the latter grouped together a plurality of different constituencies opposed to the government's social policy agenda, from unemployed people to those struggling to find affordable housing and so on. In that type of setting, the disability community's voice was at risk of being overshadowed by other, better organised or simply more vocal advocates. In contrast, The Hardest Hit's tight focus on disability welfare arguably avoided such dispersion.

Second, The Hardest Hit brought together a wide range of disability organisations, including both professionalised charities such as Scope, Mencap and Leonard Cheshire Disability, as well as member-led advocacy groups such as the United Kingdom's Disabled People Council (UKDPC), Inclusion London and the National Centre for Independent Living (NCIL). This was a historic event in British disability activism. Such a convergence of organisations had only ever occurred before in the "golden age" of anti-discrimination campaigning (Barnes and Mercer, 2001). In addition, The Hardest Hit arguably involved an even greater number of organisations than the *Rights Now!* alliance in the 1990s. In this context, it is reasonable to assume that online technology fundamentally facilitated the development of a composite campaigning coalition. As Bimber (2003) previously noted in the case of internet-enabled advocacy coalitions in the United States, the online medium enabled the creation of a common campaign "hub" for The Hardest Hit without burdensome commitments of ideological or financial nature for the groups involved, which instead retained their individual "brands" and identities. This eliminated the need for "physical" campaign headquarters based at one of the participating organisations as in the case of *Rights Now!* (Pointon, 1999: 227), emphasising the collaborative nature of this initiative. As one of the people in charge of The Hardest Hit's Facebook page explained in an interview:

> *"it was challenging to keep everyone together but technology really helped, […] I think we reached a fine balance between*

sending out joint messages and updates specific to each organisation."

(Communications officer, UK charity, July 2011)

Also, as a participant from one of the member-led organisations involved put it:

"I don't think there is such a thing as a 'disability movement' just now but maybe The Hardest Hit is the start of a new one."

(Policy coordinator, UK self-advocacy group, July 2011)

These words effectively encapsulated the cautious optimism towards this collaborative "experiment" that was shared by all those interviewed for this study. Similarly, participants also emphasised the role of the "emergency" climate created by welfare reform proposals in promoting the use of online media for campaigning purposes. As a communications officer from one of The Hardest Hit's sponsor organisations explained:

"although we would probably have set up one [social media presence] anyway, the welfare cuts undoubtedly precipitated that decision."

(Communications officer, UK charity, Sept. 2011)

At the same time, this also emphasised the issue-related, temporary nature of this online collaboration. While all participants stressed how well they thought joint campaigning had worked, they also consistently added that for it to happen again similar circumstances would have to occur. This is particularly interesting because a similar *ad hoc* coalition failed to materialise in the U.S. despite American disability non-profits also found themselves amidst a major policy "crisis" during the same period. As such, the combined role of both online media and the political agenda of the moment in fostering unity among a diverse range of disability groups will be explored in greater detail in the part of this project comparing UK and U.S. case studies (Chapter Seven). Meanwhile, at this stage it is useful to discuss The Hardest Hit's choice of online media, as this revealed some fundamental traits of the relationship between formal disability organisations and digital communications.

Overall, The Hardest Hit's website clearly highlighted the issue-driven character of the campaign and explicitly identified all the organisations involved in it. Links were provided

to the websites of all participating groups, although only some of those reciprocated with a link to The Hardest Hit's site on their own web pages. For the most part, content included key information about the welfare reform, the legislative process associated with it and details of specific campaign initiatives. While this website was not formally run as a blog, each update allowed users to add their comments at the bottom. Even though the overall number of comments was relatively low, with the majority of updates counting at most a handful of replies, this still signalled a positive attitude towards inter-creativity (Meikle, 2010) among the organisations involved. In particular, user-contributions were actively encouraged on a section of the website titled "Your Stories," which featured a collection of personal accounts on the benefits system and the potential impact of the welfare reform on disabled people's lives, asking users to contribute their own experiences and expectations.

This last point was controversial, as it could be readily interpreted as an extension of the consolidated practice among disability charities to elicit "real-life" disability stories from supporters, which can then be filtered and fitted around a pre-arranged campaign narrative (Barnett and Hammond, 1999). Although in recent years these organisations have generally replaced "pitiful" stories of personal tragedy (Barnes, 1992b) with more positive representations of disability in their advertising material (Pointon, 1999), the narratives posted on The Hardest Hit's website had been centrally edited without including disabled people in the process of crafting such messages, as disability scholars have advocated for the past two decades (Doddington et al., 1994: 219-20). Thus, it could have been tempting to regard this aspect of The Hardest Hit's repertoire as a step backwards in terms of interactivity, where users may have been under the impression of co-creating campaign messages while in fact their contributions were being mediated by the organisations involved. Nevertheless, further analysis revealed that there was more to this practice than just "business as usual." In fact, this campaigning alliance also pleaded with users to publicly post personal stories on the campaign's Facebook page and send highly personalised messages to MPs. The provision of such "DIY" lobbying channels clashed with the initial impression of a "managed" campaign, calling for further investigation into the content and authorship of these stories. In particular, this raised the issue of whether the convergence between *personal* and *political* issues was in fact empowering ordinary users by allowing them to articulate their views on complex policy matters through the lens of what Turbine (2007) described as "everyday" rights, as discussed in Chapter Two. Crucially, the use of personal narratives as both a discussion topic among campaign supporters and a form of attack against government and traditional media rhetoric, while still criticised by some, proved central to this new wave of digital disability dissent, as

emerged from the analysis of user-generated content that will be discussed in detail in Chapter Six.

With regard to interactive and in particular social media, results revealed that The Hardest Hit had engaged in comparatively fewer such platforms than either of the other case studies (see Table 4.2 for details). In particular, at the time of data collection, The Hardest Hit maintained Facebook and Flickr accounts. Crucially, any user was allowed to post original contributions and start a conversation with others on these outlets, irrespective of whether they had endorsed ("liked") these pages. As mentioned above, this was a common trend among all case studies examined in this study, marking an important change especially among disability charities, which had previously seen social media almost exclusively as a marketing and fundraising tool, as opposed to a place for initiating a conversation with potential supporters (Trevisan, 2012a). Yet, at the same time there was no forum or blog for this campaign, which at the time of data collection also lacked dedicated Twitter and YouTube accounts and did not run any type of email list, including e-action alerts. Intuitively, this "minimalistic" approach to online communications could be associated with the involvement of a very diverse range of groups in this coalition and the consequent need to mediate among specific interests and individual perspectives on participatory media. Indeed, such a low involvement threshold may have persuaded more organisations to join the alliance and lend their support. Yet, interviews with those who ran The Hardest Hit's online operations revealed that tactical effectiveness and resource-optimisation were also at the root of this seemingly limited online media repertoire, explaining that:

> *"there was a group of about ten charities who had a person who looked after the website […] so it was a way of sharing out the workload and we concentrated on certain channels, especially Facebook, but also used our existing accounts."*
> (Communications officer, UK charity, July 2011)

Thus, although only The Hardest Hit's website and Facebook account projected a truly collaborative image, at the same time this campaign was promoted also through the existing web outlets of its sponsor organisations, including websites, Twitter and YouTube accounts, as well as specialised forums. Crucially, this allowed campaigners to reach users who had previously shown a positive inclination towards advocacy initiatives, capitalising on existing networks at fast speed rather than trying to attract and mobilise a new "audience" from scratch. More cynically, it could also be argued that this approach

preserved the exclusive relationship between each group and their existing network of online supporters, ensuring that none of those would shift to potential competitors. Most notably, this was demonstrated by the lack of a common action alert email list. From a pragmatic perspective, this was meant to prevent any disputes in relation to the ownership of shared supporter information once the campaign would terminate. However, this also signalled the intention of sponsor organisations to curb The Hardest Hit's electronic "legacy" in an effort to guarantee the *ad hoc* and time-limited character of this collaborative initiative. In addition, some participants also cast The Hardest Hit's online campaign as:

> *"an opportunity to introduce people to the broader resources that we have and getting them to think about the changes that they can make on an everyday level,"*
> (Head of digital communications, UK charity, June 2011)

thus hoping to achieve an expansion in their regular supporter base in turn for user participation in this issue-focused coalition.

Finally, from a user's perspective, The Hardest Hit provided comparatively less choice and flexibility than the other case studies with regard to online action opportunities. Undoubtedly, the inclusion of customisable template messages (i.e. e-postcards/letters) to distribute to policy-makers, as well as the decision not to offer fixed "clicktivism" features (e.g. e-petitions, online polls) were consistent with a general tendency to move away from "push-a-button" tactics towards more sophisticated solutions by both British and American formal disability organisations (see Chapter Seven for details). Yet, in contrast with the other case studies discussed in the remainder of this chapter, this campaign did not experiment with readily available online media to create innovative ways for disabled users to participate in its initiatives. For example, The Hardest Hit did not offer virtual protest pages for those unable to attend its street demonstrations. Thus, the limited variety of solutions displayed by this collaborative campaign was especially problematic as it fundamentally restricted the ability of its online operations to support the wide range of support and accessibility needs experienced by disabled users. While there was no evidence to suggest that this was the result of deliberate choices, it nevertheless cast a shadow over the participatory character of this campaign, which will be investigated further in Chapter Six.

Crucially, web link analysis with IssueCrawler revealed the websites of the organisations involved in The Hardest Hit to be individually linked to one another while also connecting to a variety of government websites. Although The Hardest Hit's own website blocked automated crawling software, it was still possible to map the online environment that surrounded this campaign by using the URLs of its most prominent sponsor organisations as starting points. Thus, starting from the websites of the 14 disability charities and member-led groups whose logos featured on The Hardest Hit's homepage in early 2011, a co-link crawl at depth two was carried out, meaning that all links located up to two clicks away from the homepages of each node retrieved were recorded. In addition to exposing the network surrounding some of the most high-profile British disability organisations, this generated a useful visualisation of the links leading into The Hardest Hit from other websites. Three key observations could therefore be advanced on the basis of the map generated by IssueCrawler (Fig. 4.4).

First, disability organisations were joined to one another by a widely distributed web of connections, which, if not always very strong, linked groups concerned with different impairments to cross-impairment groups and vice-versa. Although not all seed URLs were retained in the final network (UKDPC and Inclusion London being notable dropouts), the absence of clearly defined sub-groups that clustered, for example, around different impairment types somewhat defied the image of a deeply fragmented disability sector. Indeed, the data acquired for this study prevented from establishing whether connections pre-dated The Hardest Hit coalition, thus possibly contributing to its formation, or instead represented a consequence of that joint effort. Similarly, as online networks and coalitions can be quite volatile, one should also ask whether such links were in fact bound to last for any substantial length of time, or at least could leave behind some sort of "footprint" that may facilitate future collaboration in conjunction with relevant issues or events. These issues reached beyond the scope of this project and could provide the focus for a follow-up study on digital disability campaigning in the long term. Nevertheless, the inter-organisational connections revealed by this IssueCrawler "snapshot" still highlighted how cooperation among The Hardest Hit's sponsors stretched beyond the communal website and Facebook page discussed above.

Second, it is also crucial to stress how none of these organisations served as a network "hub." While in fact the Disability Alliance's website (www.disabilityalliance.org) received links from a number of other disability groups, this did not fulfil an "intermediary" role between nodes, which were directly connected to one another, affording this network more flexibility and, potentially, additional resilience.

Fig. 4.4 – IssueCrawler network map, The Hardest Hit sponsor organisations

Co-link Map Details:

Author:	Filippo Trevisan
Email:	filippotrevisan@yahoo.it
Crawl start:	12 Jun 2011 - 04:13
Crawl end:	12 Jun 2011 - 06:32
Privilege starting points:	on
Co-link Analysis Mode:	page
Iterations:	2
Crawl Depth:	2
Node count:	50

Map generated from Issuecrawler.net by the Govcom.org Foundation, Amsterdam.

Legend:

(.org.uk) (.com) (.co.uk) (.gov.uk) (.org) (.nhs.uk) (.info)

Statistics:

direct.gov.uk

Destination URL: http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/DisabledPeople/EmploymentSupport/WorkSchemesA...
Page date stamp: 11 Jun 2011 - 23:41

Links received from crawled population: 3088

Links from network (1 - 20)

1. acas.org.uk
2. adviceguide.org.uk
3. afme.org.uk
4. ageuk.org.uk
5. arthritiscare.org.uk
6. businesslink.gov.uk
7. cafamily.org.uk
8. cqc.org.uk
9. dh.gov.uk
10. disabilityalliance.org
11. dwp.gov.uk
12. education.gov.uk
13. hmrc.gov.uk
14. ico.gov.uk
15. mind.org.uk
16. mssociety.org.uk
17. rnib.org.uk
18. scope.org.uk

Links to network: 14

These were important results, if somewhat unexpected, which subsequently became even more relevant in comparison with the American context, in which an online coalition of disability organisations failed to materialise, as confirmed by hyperlink analysis discussed in Chapter Seven. That said, not all the websites belonging to The Hardest Hit's sponsor organisations actually linked to the joint campaign's web portal. This provided a reminder of the tension felt by some of these groups between promoting a collaborative initiative and preserving their online "audience," which was epitomised by the choice to set-up only a very basic shared web presence for The Hardest Hit, as discussed above. Similarly, this may have been due also to some residual fear among DPOs to become "too close" to charities rooted in the traditional separation between these two components of British disability activism, as discussed in Chapter One.

Third, government websites and those of other state agencies (shown in orange and light purple on the map) featured very prominently in this network, with www.direct.gov.uk being the node that received the greatest number of links among all those retrieved. Other such nodes included both the portals of government branches directly concerned with disability issues, such as the Department for Work and Pensions, as well as third party bodies such as the National Health Service and the Equality and Human Rights Commission. Indeed, it was unsurprising for organisations that seek to propose themselves as legitimate government interlocutors to connect and be connected to this type of sites. However, it was also interesting to note the absence of institutional websites that would allow users to petition government directly, such as www.Number10.gov.uk, or help them monitoring parliamentary activity, such as www.theyworkforyou.com. This was consistent with the primary focus of many of the charities behind The Hardest Hit, which, despite featuring a growing interest in advocacy and campaign work, remain heavily committed to providing support services to disabled people for which they are often in receipt of substantial public funds.

Overall, The Hardest Hit's choice of online media spoke of both the opportunities and challenges associated with seeking to conciliate the strategic priorities and tactical perspectives of a variety of disability organisations. As an issue-driven alliance, it followed in the footsteps of its 1990s predecessor *Right Now!*. Yet, as a technology-enabled coalition it also constituted a more immediate and less cumbersome, if potentially very fragile, inter-organisational bond. Arguably, The Hardest Hit's online "infrastructure" was designed to be effective in the short term. In spite of the optimism demonstrated by some interview participants, this raised serious doubts with regard to its suitability for long term cooperation. Furthermore, some important opportunities to use multiple online media to

cater for the needs of disabled users had also been overlooked. Nonetheless, the internet could be credited with providing useful spaces for existing disability organisations to set longstanding differences and disagreements aside – if only temporarily – and funnel their energies towards a common goal. Web link analysis also uncovered unexpected connections among many of The Hardest Hit's sponsors, which somewhat mitigated the general perception of there being a deep "rivalry" among disability non-profits. Finally, this coalition's determination to keep its web outlets open to comments from any user denoted a positive step towards more participatory campaigning, which broke with the traditional tension between the open nature of social media and organisational control impulses.

4.3.2 – Digitised activists: Disabled People Against Cuts

Disabled People Against Cuts (www.dpac.uk.net, Fig. 4.5) was founded in October 2010 by a group of experienced disabled activists unaffiliated to any existing organisation. Many of this group's core members had previously been involved with the disabled people's movement of the 1980s and '90s in campaigns that led to the introduction of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) and direct payments legislation. Following a protest rally at the Conservative Party Conference in Birmingham in October 2010, these activists set up a web presence as a way to sustain their independent campaigning efforts in the longer term. In spite of the explicit reference to public expenditure cuts contained in their name, this group consistently presented itself as "something more" than just an anti-austerity campaign on its online outlets. Having turned down an invitation to join The Hardest Hit in March 2011, DPAC activists considered themselves as somewhat antithetic to that coalition, some of whose sponsor organisations they denounced as co-responsible for the oppression of disabled people. This position echoed the scepticism that some disability writers continue to express with regard to the effectiveness of the participatory practices adopted by many charities in recent years, as discussed in Chapter One. One of the group's founders explained that:

> *"DPAC is focused on human rights for disabled people, we started because of the austerity programme but things are much broader than that. This government has an ideological stance and we hope to bring disabled people together to fight that."*
> (DPAC founder, June 2011)

While this type of arguments mirrored the scholarly analyses of the coalition government's welfare agenda cited at the beginning of this chapter, DPAC's ambition to go beyond benefit cuts became apparent at their first national conference, which took place in London on the 29th of October 2011. Not only this meeting covered several disability-related issues as well as overarching social justice concerns, but participants also voted to appoint a steering group tasked with overseeing the coordination of further campaigns on a diverse range of issues, from disability hate crime to transport policy.

Fig. 4.5 – DPAC's homepage, October 2011

In addition to a website (complete with blog section), DPAC's web presence included Facebook, Twitter and Flickr accounts (see Table 4.2 for details). A close look revealed this online media repertoire to be particularly in line with the ethos and *modus operandi* typical of new social movements (della Porta, 2005), for which small, less resourceful and loose activist groups tend to approach new media in a more participatory way than established non-governmental and non-profit organisations (Mosca and della Porta, 2009; Pickerill, 2004). Thus, this could be assumed to be especially conducive to meaningful interaction between ordinary users and the aforementioned steering group. In particular, DPAC were the only group among those scrutinised in this study that maintained a Facebook "group" page[10] with multiple administrators identified by personal screen-names as opposed to a "fan" page with a single owner identified by an acronym or title (Kavada, 2012). This type of platform bestowed greater pluralistic potential upon this group's social media presence than an official page would have granted. Not only were content and conversation managed collectively, but the administrators were also clearly

[10] DPAC eventually also set up a Facebook "fan" page towards the end of 2012. However, its "group" page remained substantially more popular counting nearly twice as many members as the "fan" page in July 2013.

identifiable, which enhanced their accountability and facilitated communication between them and online supporters. These initial observations generated the impression of a group of self-advocates who were ideologically driven but at the same time also aware of the need to engage in multiple social media platforms and determined to do so in the most inclusive way possible.

With regard to opportunities for online action, at the time of data collection (March 2012) DPAC made virtually no mention of personal disability stories on any of its web outlets, which did not feature customisable template messages (Table 4.2). While at odds with the repertoires of both the other case studies considered in this project, this was consistent with the uncertainty that has traditionally surrounded the use of personal stories in campaign messages for the disabled people's movement. Feminist disability scholars have long called for disability activism to "give voice" to disabled people's personal experiences (Morris, 1992) and expose the political nature of seemingly "private" everyday oppression (Fawcett, 2000). However, activists have tended to be wary of projecting individual narratives for fear that these could be interpreted or re-elaborated in ways that promote disabled people's victimisation instead of empowerment. Indeed, this has always been a framing issue with pity-inducing and impairment-focused accounts rather than a blanket "ban" on personal stories *per se*. Nevertheless, owing to established practices in disability self-advocacy, DPAC decided to take a safe route by avoiding customisable campaign resources that would encourage disabled supporters to contribute personal stories in their own words. This choice confirmed that digital campaigning can be shaped by pre-existing principles just as much as online communications promise to change activism. That said, individual accounts of disabled people's poverty and discrimination linked to austerity measures started to appear on DPAC's blog pages in the spring of 2013[11]. Although this is not the place for an in-depth examination of these stories, it is useful to note how their inclusion on a "managed" online space such as an official campaign blog enabled campaigners to be in control of the frames used to describe disabled people's experiences. This is an important point that will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Six.

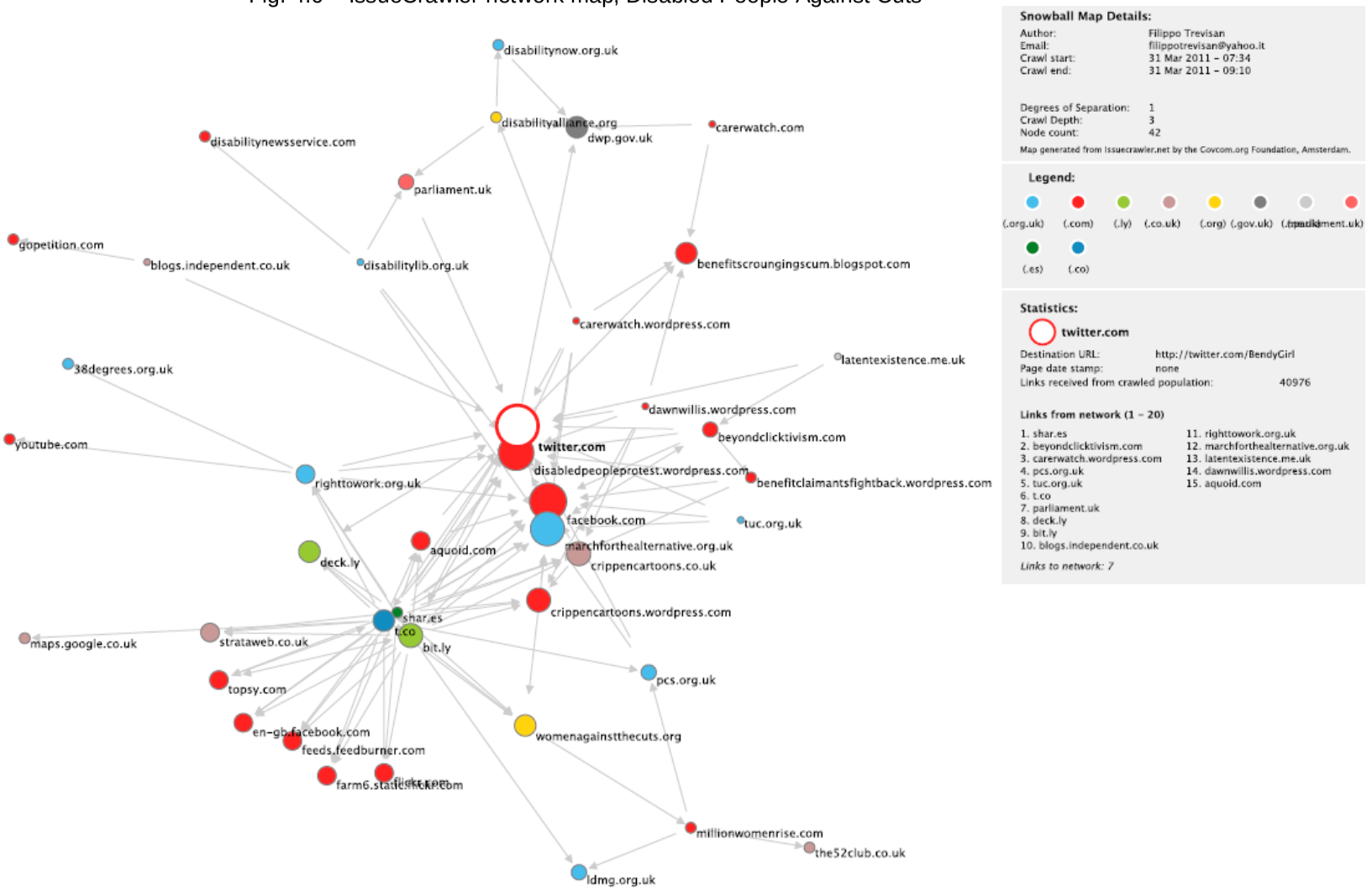
[11] In March 2013, DPAC launched a campaign against the closure of the Independent Living Fund (ILF). This involved the publication of several stories of ILF recipients on their website and sister blog (www.campaigndpac.wordpress.com), marking a major development in this group's tactics that future research should investigate further. Intuitively, this choice could be interpreted as the result of two different but not necessarily opposed forces at play. First, DPAC may have been influenced by the rampant personalisation that characterises e-activism (Bennett and Segerberg, 2011). Second, this could be seen as a response to the feminist arguments listed above. Either way, the use of personal storied was centrally coordinated. Thus, it would be useful to investigate whether these accounts were copy-edited to promote a frame of *oppression* as opposed to one of *tragedy*, as well as collective over individual identity.

A key indication of this group's firm commitment to promoting an action repertoire capable of boosting disabled people's agency was the use of "virtual protest" pages and "protest maps" in conjunction with several of DPAC's frequent street demonstrations (e.g. protests against ATOS Origin, the private firm in charge of the Work Capability Assessment process) as well as other events they endorsed, such as the Trades Union Congress (TUC) march against the cuts in London on the 26th of March 2011. These tools allowed users unable to attend in person to post messages and pin their location as alternative ways to take part in the protests. While arguably unsophisticated, virtual protest pages provided additional opportunities for disabled users to voice their opposition to welfare changes and, more generally, feel part of a collective movement. Furthermore, they were consistent with the belief among DPAC's founders that:

> *"participation online and in person are of equal value, […] in fact it may even be more important to participate online as the coverage of the 26th of March [TUC] march did not even show disabled people."*
> (DPAC founder, June 2011)

In addition, the results of snowball link analysis with IssueCrawler (Fig. 4.6) also corroborated the impression of this group as "digitised" successors to the original spirit of DPOs. First, DPAC's website was connected to the online outlets of several other anti-cuts groups. Among these were the Trade Unions, online platforms such as Beyond Clicktivism and 38Degrees, as well as more traditional grassroots collectives such as Women Against the Cuts, Right to Work and Benefits Claimants Fightback. While some of these links were secondary (chiefly routed through the website of the TUC march – www.marchforthealternative.co.uk), they nonetheless showed that DPAC was surrounded by a fairly homogeneous network where a majority of "organisational" nodes were inspired by progressive ideals and sought to promote solidarity among social groups facing reductions in public services and welfare payments. This was important, as in the past British disability groups often overlooked potentially useful opportunities to connect with other under-represented social groups despite there being scope for joint campaigning (Priestley, 2002). Furthermore, this was also in contrast with the network discussed above in relation to formal disability organisations, which did not connect to other components of the anti-cuts movement.

Fig. 4.6 – IssueCrawler network map, Disabled People Against Cuts



Second, none of the websites of established disability organisations featured in DPAC's network except for those maintained by specialised disability news providers such as www.disabilitynow.org.uk and www.disabilitynewsservice.com. This was in keeping with both this group's opposition to The Hardest Hit campaign and its overarching criticism of disability charities. More broadly, and again in stark contrast with the online environment surrounding formal disability organisations, the web outlets of state actors were entirely marginal in DPAC's network. Only two such websites featured in this map (www.dwp.gov.uk; www.parliament.uk), neither of which was directly connected to DPAC's pages. These findings were extremely relevant as they identified a clear separation between DPAC on one side and established disability pressure groups as well as representative institutions on the other. This not only confirmed the breakdown in communications between DPAC activists and "professional" disability advocates that had been anticipated by the refusal of the former to endorse The Hardest Hit coalition in March 2011, but also suggested a sceptical attitude towards representative institutions and policy-making routine more generally. For these reasons, DPAC were part of a wider activist community that exhibited some typical traits of a dissent network. In particular, most interconnected anti-cuts groups strongly preferred a contentious action repertoire to lobbying channels such as consultations and briefings with policy-makers, which entailed negotiation with institutional actors that they regarded as "oppressive" towards disabled people and other disadvantaged social groups more generally.

That said, it is also important to discuss the prominent position occupied in this network by social media platforms. Twitter was the website that received the highest number of in-links out of all those retrieved in this snowball crawl, with Facebook coming third behind only DPAC's own blog (www.disabledpeopleprotest.wordpress.com). This reflected this group's intention to stretch its web presence onto multiple online spaces simultaneously, as discussed above. In addition, it was interesting to note that links to Twitter focused specifically on a profile (www.twitter.com/BendyGirl) that belonged to one of the founders of the next campaigning group discussed in this chapter. This was a disabled blogger who used Web 2.0 tools to spread her views on the welfare system, often making direct references to her personal experiences. Although hyperlinks do not necessarily express endorsement, the volume of connections registered for this profile certainly indicated a high level of interest for this other campaigner's profile in this network. At the same time, this also showed that DPAC, despite being opposed to formal disability organisations, was not isolated from the broader context of disability activism, and instead entertained relationships with emerging actors in this area.

In light of these considerations, DPAC came closest among the case studies analysed in this study to Tilly's (1999) "classic" definition of a social movement group, which:

> *"consists of a sustained challenge to power holders in the name of a population living under the jurisdiction of those power holders by means of repeated public displays of that population's worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment"* (p. 257).

In particular, DPAC's use of online media to support mass-mobilisation, as well as its founding principles and strained relationship with "household" disability charities, were reminiscent of some of the key historical features of the British disabled people's movement. Similarly, the determination of this group to avoid personalised online campaigning also echoed the tendency of "movement activists to present themselves […] as an integrated group, preferably a group with a long history and with coherent existence outside the world of public claim-making" (Tilly, 1999: 263). This did not keep DPAC away from online campaigning and social media, as shown by its simultaneous engagement with Facebook, Twitter, and Flickr. However, it was also clear that its approach to such tools was influenced by the previous campaign experience of its founders, which granted protest tactics a primary role in their action repertoire. While, digital protest pages provided alternative channels for disabled internet users to express dissent, at the same time they also raised the issue of whether this group intended social media as places for extending consolidated practices rather than developing truly new forms of action. Indeed, DPAC's approach to online media had the potential to boost the number of those involved in their initiatives. Yet, this did not necessarily imply that it could also promote a qualitative shift in contemporary disability activism by challenging established paradigms of contentious action. At this stage, there were simply not sufficient elements to draw a conclusion on this issue, which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Six through the analysis of user-generated content drawn from DPAC's Facebook wall.

4.3.3 – Digital action networks: The Broken of Britain

The Broken of Britain (www.thebrokenofbritain.org – Fig. 4.7) was a campaign network set up by five young disabled bloggers who found out about each other online and, after

blogging individually on disability issues for several years, decided to join forces in the wake of the welfare reform controversy[12].

Fig. 4.7 – The Broken of Britain's homepage, October 2011

In other words, it could be argued that The Broken of Britain's founders represented a new generation of disabled activists, originating from that enthusiastic avant-garde of early technology-adopters among disabled people who had first been detected by Sheldon nearly a decade ago (2004) and had now matured sufficient skills and determination to embark on high-profile political campaigning. Although this group occasionally endorsed offline initiatives promoted by others (for example The Hardest Hit's events, as discussed more in detail below), their own campaign actions were conducted exclusively online. Thus, not only The Broken of Britain made extensive use of digital platforms, but they were also the group among those under scrutiny that came closest to constituting "digital native" activism. As one of this network's founders put it:

> *"it was all down to social media: most of us have never met and when this [the campaign] started off nobody had met in person."*
> (The Broken of Britain founder, July 2011)

In addition, this group displayed an innovatively pragmatic approach to both new media and disability activism. The inspirational value of this group was even highlighted in some

[12] Another disabled bloggers' network opposed to the welfare reform was "Where Is the Benefit?" (www.whereisthebenefit.blogspot.co.uk), to which some of The Broken of Britain's founders also contributed but that never accrued the same type of visibility and number of followers.

of the interviews carried out with representatives of formal disability organisations, who reckoned that:

> *"groups like this one [The Broken of Britain] are leading the way in terms of online campaigning,"*
> (Campaigns officer, UK charity, Sept. 2011)

while at the same time drawing a distinction between themselves and spontaneous, user-initiated initiatives for which:

> *"there is definitely a place for as many organisations campaigning on issue but at the same time our place [that of disability charities] is still quite cemented by that credibility that we have and have invested in developing with decision-makers."*
> (Campaigns officer, UK charity, Sept. 2011)

Crucially, The Broken of Britain's founders were a progressive-minded set of individuals who, under different circumstances, may have wound up in a group such as DPAC. Yet, in this instance they chose to set up a separate campaign, capitalising on their direct experience of blogging about disability, personal life and the welfare system. As such, this group maintained a strict focus on disability welfare throughout all their initiatives. While

> *"the most time-consuming part of all this is keeping everyone together and allowing for all sorts of different opinions, […] the Comprehensive Spending Review brought everyone together […] if they [the government] hadn't gone this far the reaction wouldn't have been there but people immediately realised that this, over-dramatic though it seems, is fighting to carry on existing because the more support is taken away the more of us will find it impossible to carry on. David Cameron makes a lot of his Big Society and pulling everyone together and the reality is that he's done an amazing job at pulling everyone together, absolutely amazing, we're united against him!"*
> (The Broken of Britain founder, July 2011)

In addition, participants from The Broken of Britain also emphasised that:

> *"five years ago disabled people didn't have the ability to communicate this freely - if you wanted to meet other disabled people you had to go to a day centre whereas with the internet and social media we can reach out to each other in other ways […] no-one sees it [an internet connection] as a luxury payment, it's a lifeline, literally a lifeline. […] We've all felt that the charities have let us down, they are still not doing their jobs properly and it was about time that a new generation came forward and took charge."*
> (The Broken of Britain founder, July 2011)

Thus, The Broken of Britain sought neither to expand into a more organic movement, nor to constrain their supporters in a formal "governance" structure. This approach was consistent not only with a general tendency for contemporary activism to be increasingly issue-driven, as discussed in the introductory chapters, but also with Earl and Kimpert's idea of "lone-wolf organisers" (2011: 205), for which digital media have curbed the importance of common identity and strong ideological commitment as pre-requisites for grassroots campaigning. Furthermore, The Broken of Britain's founders also demonstrated profound awareness of accessibility issues and a clear determination to help fellow disabled users to overcome barriers. As pointed out on the campaign's website, which incidentally was also set up as a blog, the aim of this approach was to cater for the diverse needs of disabled users by providing multiple online options for the latter to voice their concerns.

In addition to keeping both their website and Facebook page open to contributions from any user, The Broken of Britain also took advantage of social media to promote participatory lobbying tactics in which supporters were asked to co-create the campaign message by sharing stories and opinions. While customisable template messages similar to the ones used by The Hardest Hit were indeed part of this strategy (see Table 4.2 above), The Broken of Britain's online repertoire stretched far beyond those to provide greater choice, personalisation and accessibility in online campaigning. Typical examples of innovative campaigning techniques included a "blogswarm" launched to coincide with the conclusion of the public consultation on DLA reform in February 2011, which asked users to "broadcast" their experiences of the welfare system, as well as the use of specific Twitter hashtags (e.g. #TwitterStories; #ProjectV) to target decision-makers and journalists with user-generated messages on key dates throughout the welfare reform legislative

process. Furthermore, the exclusion of virtual protest pages from this group's online repertoire corroborated the impression that they were less restricted than other campaigners by the influence of pre-existing practices of disability activism.

In light of these observations, The Broken of Britain emerged as arguably the most innovative group in this study. Not only did its online action repertoire demonstrate creativity and a profound awareness of the internet's potential to develop new forms of campaigning, but it also revealed a lack of qualms in breaking with some traditional aspects of disability activism. In particular, The Broken of Britain was less preoccupied than DPAC with the nature of the personal narratives posted by its supporters on blogs, Twitter and customisable template messages. This was a controversial approach, which could lead some to argue that, while DPAC was perhaps excessively cautious with regard to the use of individual stories, The Broken of Britain was in fact not cautious enough. That said, this approach ultimately generated new mobilisation channels for users who may otherwise have felt uncomfortable with contentious action while at the same time being sceptical of mainstream disability organisations. This suggested that The Broken of Britain operated in an intermediate space between social movement groups on one side and "professionalised" campaigning on the other, which afforded them opportunities to capture and engage new "audiences."

Thus, by promoting digital alternatives to traditional protest politics and simultaneously advocating in favour of disabled people's self-representation, The Broken of Britain sought to cast itself as both a legitimate stakeholder and "responsible" interlocutor in the policy-making process. This stance was explicitly reiterated in Facebook discussions between this group's core-organisers and its online supporters, as explained in detail in Chapter Six. In addition, it could also be argued that such efforts to appear as a moderate, no-nonsense self-advocacy group played well with traditional news outlets (i.e. The Guardian, The Independent and the BBC's website), which run feature articles about The Broken of Britain in late 2010 and early 2011. This demonstrated the ability of this group to take advantage of their novelty within British disability activism in order to appeal to established news media, which continue to command great influence in the policy-making process, especially in conjunction with particularly controversial issues (Koch-Baumgartner and Voltmer, 2010: 223), while groups like DPAC only acquired media visibility at a much later stage. Overall, this made for a pragmatic and original use of online media that had the potential to channel outrage and dissent into initiatives aimed at strengthening this group's standing and bargaining power *vis-à-vis* public decision-makers (Burnstein, Einwohner, and Hollander, 1995).

While crawling for a detailed map of the online network(s) surrounding The Broken of Britain was prevented by its website's anti-bots policy, anecdotal observation suggested that its relationships with other disability groups were also characterised by pragmatism. In particular, The Broken of Britain officially endorsed The Hardest Hit's London march that took place on the 11th of May 2011. True to its ethos as an online-only initiative, The Broken of Britain did not participate directly in the organisation of the march. Instead, it helped publicising the event through its online outlets and across its network of supporters. Despite the dissatisfaction with disability charities expressed in interviews with this group's founders as reported above, this arrangement demonstrated a lack of prejudice towards other disability groups, suggesting that The Broken of Britain was instead likely to assess any initiatives on a case-by-case basis by considering their potential contribution to a common cause. However, the decision to lend "external" support to The Hardest Hit and at the same time carefully avoid direct involvement or association with a street demonstration also signalled this group's intention to preserve its independence and protect its reputation as a "responsible" campaign and credible interlocutor in policy debates.

It could therefore be argued that The Broken of Britain's founders built on on their familiarity with digital media to launch a new "genre" in British disability activism. While this incorporated elements of both social movement groups and "professionalised" lobbying strategies, it represented more than a mere "hybrid" between those two. This is because it provided choice and flexibility in online campaigning in a similar fashion to the online media repertoires that were recently found to promote "entrepreneurial engagement" among the supporters of other, more established campaigning organisations, both digital-native and non- (Bimber, Stohl, and Flanagin, 2012: 92). Thus, The Broken of Britain was self-advocacy, but not as we have known it so far. Rather, this group's online initiatives were underpinned by a pragmatic attitude that encouraged disabled campaigners to disregard some established "customs" of disability activism in order to exploit the full potential of online media against what was seen as an extraordinary, long-term threat to the livelihoods and fundamental rights of disabled Britons.

Nonetheless, this raised the question of whether such innovative approach effectively empowered ordinary users as "participants" in the policy process or rather contributed to the creation of what Schudson (1999/2011) defined as "monitorial" citizens, i.e. those who have the drive and resources to "keep an eye on the scene" and, possibly, discuss it with others, yet at the same time also regard the political "game" as the prerogative of "experts" (Schudson, 2006), in this case core campaigners. As such, it was particularly interesting to note that, for example, access to The Broken of Britain's forum

was restricted to authorised members only (Table 4.2). This was a notable exception in what otherwise constituted a participatory online repertoire, suggesting that core campaigners felt the need to limit and control user-input to specific discussions. While the idea of monitorial citizenship *per se* does not have disempowering connotations, providing instead a pragmatic interpretation of the role of ordinary citizens in the contemporary representative system, such a deliberate attempt to restrict the influence of ordinary supporters within this digital action network was at odds with intra-group participation and, more broadly, the ethos of inclusive citizenship as defined in Chapter One. This called for a deeper investigation of the relationship between The Broken of Britain's core campaigners and their "ordinary" online supporters, which was carried out through the analysis of Facebook conversations discussed in Chapter Six.

4.4 – Conclusions

Overall, digital disability activism in the wake of the welfare reform was characterised by great vitality. The combination of acute policy crisis with internet use proved to be a source of renewal in British disability politics. In particular, online media favoured the formation of an *ad hoc* coalition between charities and disabled people's organisations by providing a platform for temporary unity, helped experienced activists mobilise others and supported the emergence of a new generation of disabled activists characterised by a rather pragmatic outlook on campaigning. Broadly speaking, the web presence of all these groups stretched across the same platforms, including Facebook and Twitter in particular. This signalled a general tendency among disability rights campaigners to move away from websites and custom-built forums in order to embrace readily available social media platforms, thus lowering the costs of digital activism and reaching a greater "audience." At the same time, however, subtle but important differences separated the case studies discussed in this chapter, generating three specific e-campaigning styles in the context of a high-intensity policy crisis (see Fig. 4.8 for a summary of online features unique to each group/network). Such an array of platforms, tools and tactics bestowed additional pluralism over online initiatives opposing changes to the disability welfare system. In particular, it enhanced the amount of choice available to users, who were presented with multiple ways to take part, some fairly demanding, others more straightforward, yet virtually never restricted to simply "pushing a button."

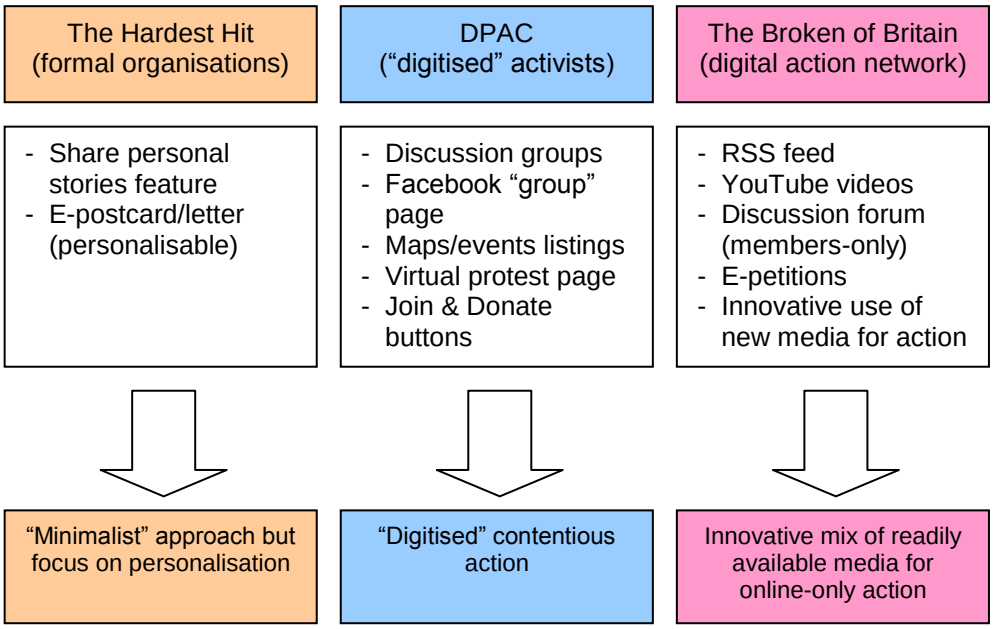


Fig. 4.8 – Online features unique to each UK group/network

While additional group types and online media repertoires may indeed emerge as technology evolves and new issues take centre stage in the policy debate, such digitally-enabled renewal in disability activism raised some important questions. Most crucially, did these groups effectively deliver on their potential for interactivity and user-participation? Just as internet usage *per se* is not a straightforward predictor of online civic engagement (Nisbett, Stoychef, and Pearce, 2012; Norris, 2001), the provision of participatory tools does not necessarily mean that users were ultimately empowered through them. These were complex issues that called for an in-depth analysis of social media use. As such, user-generated content drawn from the Facebook walls of each of the groups under scrutiny was investigated with a view to better understanding the relationship between ordinary users and campaign leaders, as well as to assess the connection between online discussion and political action (or lack thereof).

Given the relative novelty of this type of analysis, this turned out to be a process of trial and error. As such, the next chapter will discuss the lessons learnt along the way and point out their methodological implications. The analysis of Facebook conversations opened a direct window onto naturally occurring exchanges between campaign organisers and online supporters. This generated invaluable insights into the nature of each of these groups and the capability of their online repertoires to effectively engage and empower "ordinary" users. While some of the expectations formulated on the basis of the considerations expressed in this chapter were confirmed, others were thrown by empirical results. Most notably, digital activism was revealed as an unlikely candidate for mass-empowerment among disabled users. Yet, a number of details emerged from the analysis,

which invited a deeper reflection as to whether assessing digital disability activism against utopian ideals of direct participation in democratic processes is in fact a useful way of approaching this issue. Rather, a need emerged for more nuanced frameworks capable of fully capturing and adequately interpreting the constellation of groups that used online media to oppose changes to disability welfare between 2010 and 2012.

Chapter 5 – Learning by Doing: The Labours of Facebook Conversation Analysis

The analysis of user-generated online content provides unprecedented opportunities for capturing and interpreting emerging socio-political trends as they arise. However, navigating these unchartered waters presents a number of complex challenges that require careful reflection and innovative solutions. This project was no exception to this general trend. As such, this chapter reflects on the main lessons that were learnt while developing and testing the tools used to analyse Facebook conversation threads in this study. The aim of this chapter is therefore two-fold. First, it examines the processes of research design, data collection and coding frame testing with a view to providing useful additional context to the discussion of content analysis findings, which will take place in Chapter Six. In doing so, it also shares key methodological information with other researchers wishing to develop these investigation techniques further.

After clarifying the intended objectives of content analysis, this chapter explains the rationale for concentrating on Facebook conversation threads despite the fact that these posed greater methodological challenges than other types of user-generated content available for examination. Thus, the issues involved in selecting and archiving an appropriate sample of Facebook content for in-depth analysis are discussed. Thereafter, this chapter reflects on the coding scheme that was developed for this study. In particular, the potential benefits of employing computer software for carrying out the analysis of user-generated content automatically are weighed against both practical issues and the complexity of the variables under examination, concluding that manual coding of a purposively selected sample was the most suitable option given the seminal nature of this study. More broadly, the need for social scientists to develop effective strategies for analysing Facebook content is discussed. Undoubtedly, Facebook analysis presents researchers with especially complex hurdles. However, this should not discourage social scientists from engaging with a medium that accounts for a substantial proportion of what users do online. Although experimenting with different tools and techniques is unlikely to be an error-free process, the results obtained in this study showed that "diving" into this type of work is in fact the only way to promote truly useful methodological progress in this area while at the same time yielding substantial findings.

5.1 - Objectives of content analysis

Having carried out a general assessment of each group's online media repertoire in the previous chapter, the next step was to ask whether these platforms effectively helped ordinary users to take part in political discussion and, possibly, action. On paper, this may seem as a fairly straightforward task, aided by the semi-public character of social media, which facilitates access to user-generated content. Nevertheless, the sheer quantity and very nature of that content also greatly complicate matters. While traditional focus group research (Krueger and Casey, 2000) and the analysis of deliberative exchanges (Black et al., 2011) can provide some methodological inspiration to scholars dealing with fairly unstructured online conversations involving multiple participants, the study of online user-generated content presents researchers with new and conspicuous challenges. As the material hosted on the interactive platforms maintained by the groups examined in this study was entirely beyond the control of the researcher, a great deal of preparatory work was required in order to avoid being overwhelmed by the great amount of information available and ensure that the analysis focused on data that was both manageable and meaningful at the same time. Thus, crucial choices had to be taken with regard to the type of user-generated content on to which the analysis should focus, the sampling strategy and, most importantly, the development of a coding instrument sufficiently flexible to also be relevant to other work in the area of disadvantaged social groups and online political participation.

To facilitate this process, it was essential to re-connect to the overarching aims of this project outlined in Chapter Three. In particular, the in-depth analysis of user-generated online content aimed at exploring three key themes relating to online interaction. These included:

1) The relationship between core campaigners and "ordinary" online supporters (issues of power, mobilisation and organisation);
2) The way in which discussants structured their contributions and "made sense" of complex policy issues; and,
3) The relationship between online *talk* and political *action*.

As discussed in the introductory chapters, each of these issues bears great influence on the propensity of a given group to effectively challenge traditional notions of political participation, promote inclusive models and ultimately empower ordinary internet users. In turn, publicly accessible online conversations between campaign organisers and supporters

afford a look inside activist groups by virtue of the fact that interaction that would otherwise have taken place in person or been altogether impossible due to physical distance now unfolds in front of the researcher's eyes. In light of these considerations and with a view to expanding the questions put forward in Chapter Three, the themes listed above were operationalised through a series of specific queries. These included:

1) The relationship between core campaigners and "ordinary" users:

   - Who was talking?
   - Who set the discussion topic(s)?
   - To what extent, if at all, did core campaigners join in the conversation?

2) The way in which discussants structured their contributions:

   - Did participants talk politics, policy, both, or neither?
   - Were personal stories mentioned and, if so, in conjunction with what types of issues?
   - How did users frame their arguments?
   - What other topics, if any, were discussed?

3) The relationship between online *talk* and political *action*:

   - Did core organisers use online media to encourage political action among supporters, whether online or offline?
   - How often, if at all, did users discuss political action?
   - Did they use these channels to self-organise or coordinate their participation in initiatives launched by core organisers?
   - Did they show propensity towards direct action or rather leave it to core organisers to act on their behalf?

As discussed in a dedicated section below, these questions facilitated the development of an exhaustive yet also manageable and reliable coding scheme in which each variable was closely connected to one or more of the points raised above. The first key challenge, however, was to identify and archive the online material that held the greatest potential to shade light onto the three themes listed above. The next two sections discuss how these

issues were addressed, focusing respectively on the rationale for analysing Facebook conversations and the sampling process.

5.2 - Why Facebook?

As revealed by the online media inventory discussed in the previous chapter, each of the groups considered in this study had engaged in multiple interactive platforms. These included blogs, forums, social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as picture- and video-sharing sites such as Flickr and YouTube. Although the online repertoires of the groups under scrutiny differed slightly from one another (for a complete overview, see Table 4.2, p. 109), each of these platforms represented a potential communication channel between core campaigners and their online supporters, as well as a tool for information-sharing and discussion among the latter. Given the space and resource constraints of this project, it was not possible to carry out a detailed examination of the interaction occurring on each one of these media. More importantly, such a wide-range investigation would also have made for an inappropriate way of addressing the questions formulated above. This is mainly because different interactive platforms lend themselves to the pursuit of different communicative outcomes. For example, Twitter is often viewed as a popular and powerful "broadcast" medium for influencing political and media elites rather than engaging in detailed dialogical exchanges (Marwick and boyd, 2011). Conversely, discussion forums with regulated access can be seen as more "private" spaces where information is shared with a certain degree of confidentiality, which may in turn foster a sense of community and belonging. Activists are alert to these differences and increasingly skilled in combining the use of multiple online media in order to reach different "audiences" and generate complex outcomes (Lievrouw, 2011; Carty, 2011). This tendency provides a testimony to the complementariness of different interactive platforms in the context of political campaigning.

This invited a reflection on the function(s) fulfilled by different platforms within the web presence of the groups under scrutiny with a view to identifying the one that was most likely to afford a look behind the curtains of digital disability activism, clarifying the extent to which it was actually possible for ordinary online supporters to co-create each campaign and contribute as equal participants. In addition, it was also essential to concentrate on the online medium that was most suited to encouraging users to engage in conversations about politically relevant issues from the comfort of their "private" sphere, whether consciously or unawares, as discussed in Chapter Two. Indeed, focusing on a single platform meant that interactive dynamics could be analysed only partially,

restricting opportunities for generalising some of the findings of content analysis. Nevertheless, such a specific focus also ensured that this crucial stage of the project could be carried out with the attention it required, providing sufficient space for an exhaustive discussion of nuanced findings and avoiding to bundle together platforms that in fact fulfilled different functions.

In light of these considerations, studying conversation threads hosted on Facebook represented the most useful way of clarifying the relationship between core campaigners and their online supporters, as well as the role played by the latter in each group. This was thanks to the nature of Facebook as a space for dialogic exchanges stemming from personal connections and free from pre-determined constraints with regard to the volume and type of content that each user can include in their posts. As Chadwick (2012a) noted in a recent paper on the technological context of contemporary e-democracy, in Facebook "politics […] aligns itself with broader repertoires of self-expression and lifestyle values. Politics in Facebook goes to where people are, not where we would like them to be" (p. 59). This makes for a flexible platform capable of accommodating the preferences of different types of users by blurring the distinction between private and public, lowering the participation threshold, providing a semi-public forum whose boundaries are (seemingly) set by the user and offering a variety of options for taking part in online activities, from less demanding forms of "clicktivism" (e.g. "liking" someone else's post) to more personalised and articulated contributions (e.g. participating in ongoing conversations). Similarly, recent work on the use of Facebook as a deliberative space to "democratise" policy-making at the local level also showed that this platform's "affordances seem biased towards a more dialogic, open-ended mode of discourse" (Bendor, Haas Lyons, and Robinson, 2012: 82), while its "support of conversation threads seems to especially promote less purposive and more rhizomatic forms of conversation" (*ibid.*).

All the groups involved in this study had arranged for their respective Facebook pages to enable any user to post original content directly onto their "walls"[13], thus potentially initiating a conversation thread without the need for approval from core campaigners. In addition, Facebook's reputation as a global internet "brand," its position as the most popular social networking site both in the UK and worldwide[14], as well as the way in which its news feed system enables users to "stumble" upon information without the need to search for it made it a particularly useful channel for attracting those who

[13] Online discussion threads were retrieved, archived and analysed before Facebook switched to its current "Timeline" interface.

[14] According to online traffic monitor Alexa.com, as of 20th Jan 2013 Facebook.com was the most popular social networking site in the UK and the second most popular website overall after Google.co.uk; other social networking sites ranked as follows: YouTube (4th); Twitter (11th); Linkedin (12th); and Flickr (44th).

would otherwise be disengaged from politics. As such, the Facebook pages of the groups under scrutiny offered users opportunities not only to participate in discussions relevant to their campaigns, but also to set the very topics of such conversations. This was consistent with the views expressed by representatives of all three groups interviewed for this project, who generally agreed that:

> *"Facebook is there to let people comment and have a conversation, to build a community,"*
> (Campaigns officer, UK Disability charity, Sept. 2011)

while instead:

> *"Twitter was used to broadcast, update people with simple messages to keep them up to date with what is happening [in the campaign], especially people who can't be there."*
> (Communications officer, UK Disability charity, July 2011)

As such, analysing conversation threads drawn from Facebook pages provided a useful way of assessing whether core campaigners effectively practiced what they preached when it came to engaging in meaningful conversations with "ordinary" users.

Furthermore, Facebook stood out among other interactive online platforms for three additional reasons. First, unlike the blogs and forums associated with the groups examined in this study, Facebook walls provided a relatively high volume of online discussion, which ultimately made for a richer and more complete sample, as discussed in the next section. Second, Facebook's asynchronous nature and the lack of limitations in terms of message length made for a less volatile discussion board than, for example, Twitter, as well as one capable of better accommodating the needs of users who may find it difficult to take part in "real time" discussions or condense their thoughts into very short sentences. Third, core campaigners explained in the interviews carried out for this project that their approach was to not moderate Facebook discussion threads unless these contained profanity or attacks to specific individuals who were not normally in the public eye. Moderating was generally seen as "poor social media practice" that was likely to arise suspicion among online supporters and ultimately damage the online reputation of these groups. As such, analysing un-filtered Facebook conversations afforded an unprecedented view into intra-group dynamics that may otherwise have been impossible to capture.

Nevertheless, besides these crucial advantages, there were also specific challenges. Given the innovative nature of this type of investigation, researchers should be alert to the fact that it may not be possible to anticipate all potential issues at the outset of a project, and that unexpected problems may arise at later stages of the analysis. In particular, Facebook tends to raise more issues than other interactive online media when it comes to retrieving, archiving, and automatically coding user-generated content. While this issue is discussed in detail the next section, it partly explains why to date little empirical research has focused specifically on this platform in comparison to, for example, studies of online interaction on Twitter, blogs, and forums, which are all somewhat more accessible to automated archiving and analysis tools.

Furthermore, an issue that was particularly poignant in the context of this project was the fact that Facebook can be especially difficult to access independently for blind and visually impaired people. This is mainly because Facebook combines different types of content and employs software and templates that often do not work well with computer screen readers. This example demonstrates how researchers of disability and new media can find themselves trapped between the rock of inaccessible online applications and the hard place of needing to assess the relevance of those platforms for disabled users. Although the majority of online platforms are bound to feature one or more accessibility issues as a result of the socially constructed nature of technology (see Chapter One), this should not discourage scholars from engaging with this type of research. Rather, responsible researchers in both disability studies and communication should approach this issue as an opportunity to reflect on the importance of including the lived experiences of disabled users in their analyses of new media and disability (Ellis and Kent, 2011: 93). The most useful solution is therefore to carry on with the empirical investigation in order to expand our understanding of the relationship between disabled users and specific online applications while at the same time clearly acknowledging the limitations that derive from focusing on platforms that are not fully accessible to users with certain impairments.

5.3 - Looking in the right places: Sampling, archiving and analysing Facebook content

Having identified Facebook as the focus of the analysis, a second challenge was to select an appropriate sample of material for in-depth examination. The seminal nature of this project suggested purposive sampling to be the most useful strategy. As such, the analysis of user-generated content concentrated on a limited time period characterised by a particularly intense sequence of potential participation boosters. Indeed, it could be argued

that this practice equated to "cherry-picking," i.e. deliberately restricting the investigation to a set of extreme data that was all but representative of general trends. Yet, despite the limitations discussed below, this approach was entirely in line with the overall aim of this part of the study, which was to acquire a detailed qualitative understanding of online interaction and user-participation in the groups under scrutiny rather than to carry out a representative investigation by means of a large quantitative sample. In particular, this approach was consistent with the principle for which online talk that revolves around specific policy issues, much like its offline counterpart, is unlikely to flow in a steady stream. Rather, an irregular wave pattern in which fluctuations in the volume of user-contributions tend to be connected to catalyst events provides a more realistic representation of such online discussions (Aday et al., 2011; Oates, 2008a; Fossato, Lloyd, and Verkhovsky, 2007). Following in the footsteps of traditional political communication scholarship, which has often focused on election periods as key catalysts of democratic participation, this sampling strategy acknowledged that some moments in the life of campaigning organisations are inevitably more significant than others and therefore deserve greater attention. That said, some of the results obtained for this study could also provide the foundations for a future quantitative project by informing the development of automated content and sentiment analysis, as discussed in the next section.

Specific timeframes for analysis were identified by taking into consideration both search patterns for disability-related topics as expressed in Google Trends as well as the timeline of welfare reform events. In light of these considerations, the three-month period comprised between mid-February and mid-May 2011 was chosen. This was characterised by considerable levels of user-interest in disability issues throughout (see Fig. 4.1 on page 103 for details), while at the same time featuring several catalyst events in a relatively short amount of time (see Table 4.1, p. 99). In addition, concentrating on this period also ensured that sufficient time had passed from the foundation of the groups under scrutiny in order for them to have reached levels of visibility and a critical mass of supporters capable of sustaining a fair amount of discussion on Facebook. In particular, Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC) and The Broken of Britain were created in October 2010, while The Hardest Hit coalition was operational from February 2011 (but did not embark on Facebook until March). Among other catalyst events, this period was marked by a series of key initiatives that defined the campaigning style and online repertoire of each group, including the first major lobbying initiative run by The Broken of Britain in February 2011 ("One Month Before Hearthbreak"), the TUC march against the cuts supported by DPAC on the 26th of March, and The Hardest Hit demonstration held in London on the 11th of May.

A first issue tackled in the analysis was that of the relationship between offline events and online discussion trends. Were the latter also connected to the welfare reform timeline in a similar fashion to the one for which disability-related keyword searches increased in conjunction with specific events? In other words, did users limit themselves to looking up information online or were they also more likely to engage in discussions on social networking sites on day(s) of particular significance in the welfare reform process? In order to answer these questions, fluctuations in the volume of user-generated content between mid-February and mid-May 2011 were captured by registering the number of contributions posted each day on the Facebook walls under scrutiny and distinguishing for:

a) "starters," i.e. contributions from which a discussion thread had originated;
b) "comments" attached to the above; and, finally,
c) "orphans," i.e. those "wanna-be-starter" posts that for whatever reason had failed to attract at least one comment from another user.

A handful of short threads (i.e. two/three posts in total) had been authored entirely by the same user. While this occurred only very rarely, each of those was ultimately accounted as a single "orphan" because it had failed to attract contributions from other users and thus generate a discussion.

Moving from the considerations made in the previous chapter on the ethos, structure and relationship with technology that characterised each case study, as well as from anecdotal observations carried out during data collection, a series of reasonable expectations were formulated with regard to online discussion trends. First, a discussion spike was expected for all the groups under scrutiny around budget day (23rd March 2011). Second, specific discussion surges were anticipated for days of particular significance to each group, including the period between the 14-18th of February for The Broken of Britain, the 26th of March for DPAC, and the 11th of May for The Hardest Hit. Third, it was also envisaged that The Broken of Britain, as an online-only campaign that relied exclusively on Web 2.0 technology to keep up momentum and expand its reach (Hwang, 2010), would be characterised by an especially high amount of "starters" posted by core organisers throughout the entire period, while supporters would be more likely to comment around days marked by specific events. Finally, a slight decline in The Broken of Britain's Facebook activity was also expected for the month of May due to access problems experienced by their page administrator, as explained by one of the core organisers in private correspondence with the author.

From a methodological point of view, it is nevertheless important to acknowledge the limitations inherent in this approach. In particular, the number of observations carried out for this study prevented from drawing statistical inferences on the relationship between catalyst events and the volume of discussion on Facebook. Furthermore, although the posts-per-day ratio constituted a rather straightforward measure of user-engagement on Facebook, its simplicity also restricted the amount of detailed information that could be drawn from it. In particular, this first part of the analysis did not account for pluralism in online discussion, or lack thereof. This meant that, for example, on the basis of this data it was not possible to detect whether a moment of particularly intense discussion was connected to an increase in the number of unique users contributing to the online conversation or merely fuelled by an activity surge among a relatively small group of particularly talkative "regulars." A useful way to resolve this problem could have been to account for fluctuations in the number of unique users contributing to the pages under scrutiny throughout the entire three-month period. However, for the purpose of this study that was deemed to be an excessively time-consuming exercise in return for a comparatively small amount of useful information. Overall, fluctuations for the total volume of content revealed a series of important findings, some of which were not entirely in line with preliminary expectations and provided crucial opportunities to reflect on the distinct organisational dynamics and approaches to social media that characterised each one of the groups examined in this study.

Following this preliminary step in the examination of online discussion, a further sample was then identified and analysed in much greater detail through the coding frame discussed below. As such, in-depth analysis focused on the Facebook conversations that took place in the days surrounding the original deadline for submissions to the DLA government consultation (14th February 2011), the introduction of the Welfare Reform Bill to the House of Commons (16th February 2011), the TUC march against cuts to public services (26th March 2011), and the Hardest Hit London march (11th May 2011). Overall, three weeks of Facebook content were selected (12th-19th February; 23rd-29th March; 8th-14th May) in order to accommodate for both build-up and wind-down periods around each event (i.e. three days before and three after) in a context where the enhanced speed of communication can create a discussion-hype very rapidly but also make conversation vanish just as quickly. As such, a total of 2,126 Facebook posts were retrieved and archived. Among these were 602 "orphans" that were ultimately excluded from the sample in order for the analysis to focus solely on online interaction between two or more users as opposed to examining content "broadcast" by a single user. This generated a final sample of 1,524 Facebook posts (Table 5.1).

This sample was divided unevenly among case studies, with The Broken of Britain accounting for a disproportionately greater share of Facebook content than the other two groups.

Table 5.1 – Overview of Facebook content sample

Group	Number of Facebook posts (both starters & comments)			
	12-18 Feb.	**23-29 Mar.**	**8-14 May**	**Total**
DPAC	72	50	31	**153**
The Broken of Britain	392	654	124	**1,170**
The Hardest Hit	--	68	133	**201**
			TOTAL	**1,524**

As discussed in detail in the next chapter, this reflected a strong disparity between the overall volume of content hosted on The Broken of Britain's Facebook wall on one side and that which featured on the pages maintained by the other two groups on the other. At the same time, this was also a consequence of the sampling strategy's purposive nature, which aimed at capturing and making sense of online conversations exactly as seen by users on days of particular relevance to each group, without interfering with the natural flow of discussion. Furthermore, concentrating on a relatively limited time period also had two additional advantages. First, it provided scope for complementing the analysis of online data with additional information drawn from the offline context in a fashion that would not have been possible with a representative random sample. Second, it mitigated the issues arising from the lack of a suitable application programming interface (API) for sampling and archiving Facebook content automatically and reliably[15].

Given the relatively limited amount of content involved in this project, the most useful option was to archive it manually in Microsoft Word. Although this proved time-consuming, it also enabled the creation of a very complete archive in which the unity of multimedia content could be retained and discussion threads displayed as closely as possible to the way in which they appeared on Facebook itself. In addition to facilitating

[15] Before proceeding with manual archiving, the possibility of using an API for retrieving, archiving and coding Facebook content automatically was explored in an effort to save time and minimise error. Yet, most existing applications were deemed unsuitable because they either generated a static "picture" of Facebook content that could not be edited in order to eliminate, for example, orphan posts (e.g. Zotero, Scrapbook), or were altogether unable to access Facebook content (e.g. ContextMiner). One application that stood out as potentially useful was online-based textual analysis platform Discovertext.com. This was because its Facebook Graph API was the only tool capable of extracting and archiving Facebook content in a format that could then be amended and automatically coded. Nevertheless, a closer look revealed three important limitations associated with this software, leading to it also being discarded. First, this API's archiving capabilities extended only up to three months into the past. Second, its storage system was not capable of distinguishing between "starter" posts and comments. Finally, its archive interface privileged text over other types of content. This meant that, while contextual information such as pictures and videos could also be archived, these were stored separately from textual communication and users wishing to retrieve them needed to click on a series of additional links. Such separation between text and other forms of content was not only impractical but also potentially misleading as it may encourage researchers to over-emphasise the relevance of text as opposed to considering the multi-faceted nature of communication in multimedia networking platforms like Facebook.

the distinction among "starter" posts, "comments" and "orphans," this also meant that pictures as well as hyperlinks could be permanently stored and consulted at a later stage in case clarifications or further contextual information were needed. Indeed, many of the variables included in the coding scheme developed for this study were primarily concerned with verbal communication. However, given the centrality of multimedia content to interaction on social networking platforms such as Facebook (boyd and Ellison, 2008), it would have been distortive for the analysis to ignore the context that surrounded written messages. Rather, manual archiving, if rudimental and laborious, enabled multimedia contributions to be accounted for in their entirety. Furthermore, preserving the unity of conversation threads meant it was possible for the researcher to familiarise with entire exchanges before coding individual posts. This was crucial in order to achieve a correct understanding of individual contributions given that in online discussion, much as in traditional focus groups and conversation more generally, meaning is determined through interaction.

5.3.1 – Sample unitisation

A final stage in the preparation of user-generated content for analysis was that of its organisation into coding units. The nature of Facebook pages as asynchronous communication spaces and the lack of restrictions on the amount of content that users are allowed to include in any given post make for a great variation in posts length. This poses some significant challenges to researchers wishing to analyse this type of discussion. Certain posts may simply be too short to be at all meaningful and therefore even worth coding. Conversely, very long posts are highly unlikely to fit neatly into mutually exclusive categories. Finding a solution to this issue required both trading off nuanced categories for more generic and reliable ones, as well as taking important decisions as to how Facebook conversations should be divided into manageable coding units.

Scholars of deliberation and dialogical interaction have formulated two main approaches to the issue of unitising content. On the one hand, some have advocated in favour of identifying coding units with naturally occurring discursive "utterances" (i.e. posts, messages). Overall, this makes for a very straightforward and reliable approach that adopts each individual message as a coding unit in its entirety and therefore preserves discussion blocks as intended by their author(s). However, this can be problematic when dealing with especially long utterances containing multiple messages that are not necessarily coherent with one another. In order to address this issue, some have proposed dividing utterances into "thoughts" according to a long-established practice that originated

in psychological research (see for example: Auld and White, 1956) and has more recently spread to work on deliberative talk (see for example: Meyers, Brashers, and Hanners, 2000). As such, long contributions are divided into "unique ideas signalled by orienting talk from the speaker" (Stromer-Galley and Muhlberger, 2009: 181). Nevertheless, although there is consensus among specialist scholars that "the thought unit is superior to the utterance" (Hatfield and Weider-Hatfield, 1978: 47), social scientists should also be aware that this method could severely undermine the reliability of results as the process of dividing utterances into individual thoughts is likely to require a fair amount of interpretation before actual coding has even started.

For these reasons, a working compromise was reached in this project between the desire to maximise the amount of detailed information obtained through coding and the need to avoid excessive manipulation of Facebook content, preserving reliability. In order to achieve these aims, two different coding units were adopted in conjunction with specific sections of the coding scheme. A first set of variables relied on entire conversation threads as individual coding units with a view to obtaining basic information about the nature of online discussions and assessing whether any particular types of topics were more likely than others to spark extended exchanges. Thereafter, a second set of variables adopted individual Facebook posts as coding units. The main objective of this second part of the coding scheme was to acquire detailed knowledge of how users had articulated their arguments and interacted with others, be those campaign leaders or ordinary supporters. Multi-coding was enabled for a handful of especially complex variables, which, particularly in conjunction with very long posts, were likely to be characterised by the co-occurrence of two or more different categories.

In addition to making for a less arbitrary unitising strategy, adopting both entire conversation threads and individual posts as coding units enabled the collection of separate but complementary datasets, which offered scope for overall observations on the nature of online discussion in each group as well as specific considerations on intra-group dynamics. Indeed, this is by no means the only option available to researchers seeking to come to terms with increasingly complex and unpredictable forms of user-generated content. However, it made for a useful reminder that, in internet research, seemingly straightforward choices can have fundamental implications on both the quality of data and the conclusions that can be drawn from it. The next section discusses in detail the rationale that drove the development of the coding scheme and the way in which this was piloted and finalised.

5.4 - Coding frame development

Developing, piloting and finalising a coding instrument to analyse Facebook conversation threads (see Appendix D) was hardly a straightforward process, and possibly constituted the single biggest methodological challenge in this project. As briefly anticipated in Chapter Three, methodological literature in the area of online deliberation has flourished in recent years (see for example: Black et al., 2011; Graham, 2008; Stromer-Galley and Muhlberger, 2009; Stromer-Galley and Martinson, 2009; Stromer-Galley, 2007). These works deal very elegantly with the need to adapt traditional content analysis techniques to the unique challenges presented by online discussion. Indeed, these studies provided a wealth of inspiration for formulating the scheme utilised in this study. However, the focus of this project was also crucially different from the one of deliberation scholars. Rather than assessing the "quality" of discussion by testing for normative criteria of deliberation (Mansbridge, 1999: 221-7), this study was intended to detect interaction between campaigners and ordinary users, as well as to understand the implications of these conversations for the campaigns that hosted them on their Facebook pages. In addition, deliberation research has also benefited from opportunities to be carried out in controlled, quasi-experimental settings (see for example: Stromer-Galley and Muhlberger, 2009), while this project focused on naturally occurring conversations.

Thus, while inspiration was drawn from several matrixes developed in the field of deliberative analysis, a number of substantial changes had to be made in order to adapt those variables to the investigation of Facebook content. In particular, it became apparent during piloting that strict adherence to the questions outlined above was instrumental to generate a truly useful and comprehensive coding scheme. In addition, the complexity of the issues involved, as well as the relative novelty of digital disability activism and seminal nature of this project, suggested that manual coding would be better suited to examining what was expected to be rather dense content. This is consistent with previous work focusing on online interaction dynamics (Qin et al., 2007) and discussing the challenges involved in analysing varied and unpredictable content in which "personal" and "political" tend to be inextricably interwoven (Vergeer and Hermans, 2008: 42 and 46). While manual coding is an iterative process that allows for variables to be modified as researchers become more familiar with the content under investigation, automated processing is limited by categories determined *a priori*. Due to such rigidity, computer-aided coding does not lend itself well to the analysis of online conversations in uncharted territories (Stromer-Galley and Muhlberger, 2009), including those occurring within online disability rights groups.

This, however, was not to rule out the possibility of developing computer-aided investigation of a larger representative Facebook sample as part of follow-up research in the area of online disability rights campaigns. In recent years, several scholars have developed increasingly refined tools for coding online content automatically (see for example: Hopkins and King, 2010; Abbasi and Chen, 2007). Although automated coding has the great benefit of minimising subjectivity once variables and associated parameters have been set, this can only be achieved through appropriate preparatory work aimed at identifying key themes and generating relevant categories (Muhlberger and Stromer-Galley, 2009). In this context, the detailed qualitative insights obtained for this project could be seen as fundamental preliminary data capable of informing automated content analysis by providing solid bases on which to define variables and parameters for the computer-aided detection of discursive frames (Konig, 2004). More straightforwardly, the work carried out for this study could also support the creation of "dictionaries" for the automated categorisation and sentiment analysis of extensive samples of user-generated content (Hopkins and King, 2010) as part of a follow-up project on the evolution of digital disability activism in the longer term.

In light of these considerations, three subsequent iterations of the coding scheme were developed and tested on content drawn from the Facebook walls of the groups under scrutiny, including a sample of 277 posts elaborated as a scoping case study on The Broken of Britain. Following this process of refinement, a fourth and final version was prepared together with a detailed coding manual (see Appendices D and E). Inter-coder reliability for this was assessed by comparing the coding results for 104 posts obtained by two independent coders, one of whom was the author and the other another researcher who also specialises in the study of online activism. Thereafter, minor adjustments were made in order to improve reliability scores (for individual reliability scores, see Appendix D) and multi-coding was eventually introduced for some of the most complex variables due to the impossibility of fitting multi-faceted posts into just one mutually exclusive category. In particular, this last solution was in line with a longstanding practice in media studies, where researchers have dealt very frequently with the inclusion of multiple, even oppositional frames within the same messages (Iyengar, 1990: 17-8). The rest of this section provides a brief account of this process, presents all variables and discusses in detail those that posed specific issues yet at the same time also generated some of the most intriguing results.

5.4.1 – Politics, policy, both, or neither?

The first part of the coding frame adopted each entire discussion thread as both coding and analysis unit. The main aim of this first level of analysis was to complement and expand the considerations made above about the relationship between fluctuations in the volume of online discussion and offline catalysts. In particular, a series of basic elements were registered, including the sponsor/owner of the thread, start and end dates, the total number of posts (thread length), as well as the number of unique contributors to each thread. While these variables and the associated categories drew on objective elements and therefore did not present reliability issues, it is important to reflect on the value of the total number of unique contributors to each thread as a measure of internal pluralism. It could in fact be argued that pluralism is determined not only by how many people take part in a conversation, but also, and perhaps more importantly, by how much each participant "talks," who they are, what they say and what effect that has on others. Nevertheless, most of these elements were accounted for in the second part of the coding frame, which adopted each individual post as coding unit (see below for details). As such, the contributors-per-thread ratio was intended only as a straightforward, albeit limited, way of comparing conversations occurring within different groups, and a basic guideline for formulating hypotheses with regard to internal pluralism that were subsequently verified and complemented through the analysis of other data.

Two more variables included in this part of the coding frame that require specific attention are the ones concerned respectively with the "structural focus" and "structural topic" of each discussion thread. Both these variables addressed the need for distinguishing between "everyday" online talk that contained politically relevant elements and what instead was solely mundane chat. In the original iteration of the coding scheme, this task was assigned to a single variable accounting for a given thread's "political relevance," where political discussion was defined as occurring "when a participant draws attention to something that he or she thinks the public should discuss collectively" (Graham, 2008: 22). However, although this definition resonated with an established tradition in deliberative talk analysis (Mansbridge, 1999: 214), piloting almost immediately revealed it to be excessively loose and therefore extremely difficult to operationalise reliably. Furthermore, operating a clear-cut distinction between "personal" and "political" talk was often impossible as these frequently coexisted in the same post or even the same sentence, emphasising social media's role as public arenas in which users can become involved from their "private" sphere through personal narratives (Papacharissi, 2010). As such, trying to separate the personal from the political was not only unhelpful but would also have

replicated the same error made by others who previously sought to apply out-dated frameworks to what was in fact a new way of "talking politics."

For these reasons, a different strategy was adopted, leading to the creation of the two variables mentioned above. While the first one concentrated on the distinction between politics and policy discussions, the second one focused on the adherence of each thread's starter post to the primary topic at the heart of the groups involved in this study, i.e. the welfare reform. In doing so, most categories associated with these variables were generated inductively by familiarising with the content under scrutiny. This gradually revealed that in fact most conversations tended to start with an explicit reference to either specific institutional actors or current policy issues. Overall, this made for clearer categories, affording two crucial advantages over attempting a differentiation between "public" and "private" talk. First, threads that made generic references to political actors, events, or ideologies could be distinguished from those that instead drew on specific policy matters or on other issues not explicitly connected to politics and policy (for a series of examples, see the coding manual in Appendix E). Second, it was also possible to assess whether a given thread had in fact been initiated with the specific intent of discussing disability welfare changes. The "structural topic" variable was strongly inspired by Stromer-Galley and Martinson's work on internal coherence in online discussions (2009). Nevertheless, the scheme developed for this project omitted another variable proposed by the same authors to identify "interactional topics," i.e. those additional themes introduced by participants throughout the discussion that drift off the original focus. This was because this project was not specifically concerned with measuring the internal coherence of online discussion and adding that aspect would therefore have generated unnecessary complications.

5.4.2 – Who is talking, and what are they saying?

The second section of the coding frame adopted individual post as coding units. As the previous one, this also included both fairly straightforward variables as well as more complex ones that required a careful process of refinement before coding could begin. In particular, it was possible to code for date, time, function (conversation starter vs. secondary comment), length (number of words) and type(s) of media used in each post, together with user ID and user type (page owner, admin/central blogger, individual user, other organisation, or other) on the basis of mutually exclusive categories that did not necessitate substantial amendments throughout piloting. The only slight exception to this pattern was the variable accounting for the type(s) of media employed in each post, for which multi-coding was ultimately enabled. As anticipated above, this was because of the

varied array of media that can be included in Facebook posts, for which an exhaustive list could only be developed inductively from piloting and will need to be carefully updated to keep up with technological evolution should this scheme be adopted in future work (Baym, 2010: 13). As such, creating a complete record of all the media used in a given post represented a less arbitrary option than trying to identify which one, if any, "dominated" a particular contribution. In addition, two other variables were also developed in order to account for the "content of post" and "political action mentions" respectively. While some of the categories for these were generated *a priori* on the basis of reasonable assumptions, others were indeed developed inductively through piloting. Both these variables allowed multi-coding in order to ensure that all references to action would be registered as well as all to cater for posts spanning more than one discussion topic.

On the contrary, the remaining variables in this part of the coding scheme went through several amendments during piloting, which is useful to discuss in more detail. Such variables were most prominently concerned with exploring the way in which discussants structured their contributions and therefore involved a level of interpretation that emphasised the subjective nature of this part of the analysis. While it would have been naïve to think it possible to manually code for these issues in an objective fashion, this process nevertheless generated invaluable qualitative insights into the arguments chosen by contributors to support their points of view and justify their claims. More broadly, this also represented an essential preparatory step towards the development of automated coding techniques, as mentioned above. Thus, the next paragraphs focus on the inductive process that led to the finalisation of the variables accounting for "personal stories of disability" and "argument framing" respectively.

5.4.3 - Personal stories of disability

The tendency for discussants to rely on personal stories in order to overcome certain barriers to participation and become engaged in public debate has been extensively documented in empirical deliberation studies (Black et al., 2011; Ryfe, 2007). In the case of disability activism, assessing the role of personal stories as facilitators of online political talk assumed especially great relevance. This was due to the tendency among British disability self-advocates to condemn the use of disempowering stereotypes by charitable organisations and their simultaneous reluctance to include individual accounts in their campaign repertoires for fear that poorly crafted messages may promote disabled people's victimisation and disempowerment (Barnett and Hammond, 1999). Crucially, such reluctance clashed with comments made by representatives from both The Broken of

Britain and The Hardest Hit sponsor groups interviewed for this study, who stressed that in their opinion personalised messages made for effective, if potentially controversial, campaign tools. In addition, participants also hinted at the fact that in the stressful climate created by the welfare reform many disabled people "craved" opportunities to share their experiences with others, including peers as well as politicians in charge of benefits policy (for more on these issues see Chapters Six and Seven). Given the exploratory nature of this study, a simple binary variable accounting for the presence/absence of personal stories was included in the final version of the coding frame. Furthermore, another issue that was useful to investigate at this stage was that of the authorship of personal disability narratives: were disabled users telling their own stories, or was someone else talking on their behalf? In other words, to what extent, if at all, were these un-mediated disability accounts?

While detecting personal stories was a fairly straightforward affair, identifying their authors was less so. Users did not always specify whether they were reporting their own experiences or someone else's and, in the second case, sometimes did not clarify the nature of their relationship with the disabled person(s) to whom they were referring. As such, balancing the need for authorship information with that to avoid basing data collection on mere assumptions was particularly challenging. For these reasons, authorship of personal stories was recorded only when those who had posted such narratives had also explicitly clarified whether they were speaking for themselves or referring to someone else (e.g. a friend or family member, a client or patient, etc.). Although this entailed a reduction in the amount of data that was eventually gathered, it also ensured the achievement of strong reliability by minimising the amount of interpretation required. Furthermore, this decision was also facilitated by piloting, which suggested that most users had specified whose story they were telling.

As with any piece of social science research based on personal information gathered directly from participants, online as well as offline, authenticity had to be assumed. That said, it is useful to note that social media users generally tend to emphasise certain aspects of their identity over others (Sessions, 2009) in function of the network(s) they interact with (Pearson, 2009). In this framework, recent work has shown that online media, due to the lack of face-to-face interaction and, even more so, their role in the creation of peer-networks, encourage users to share personal narratives typically associated with stigma, which otherwise would remain untold (Page, 2012: 64-5). Thus, as long as researchers remain alert to these dynamics, social media content can offer invaluable elements to explore the links between personal experiences and sensitive socio-political issues. Future research focusing in greater detail on the use of personal stories in online

disability rights campaigning should also examine the character of the story and style of narration to better understand how disabled users "frame" their experiences in online conversations with others and whether that corresponds to the portrayals of disability used in campaign messages.

5.4.4 - Framing variables

A second set of variables that is particularly useful to discuss in detail is the one that aimed at detecting the discursive "frames" adopted by users to construct and present their arguments. While frame analysis can require a considerable amount of interpretation and therefore generate potentially controversial results, an extensive body of literature exists that demonstrates this to be a crucial strategy for exposing the internal dynamics, action patterns and repertoire choices of campaigning collectives and social movement groups (Tarrow, 2011: 142-6). In particular, "frames […] provide the interpretive medium through which collective actors associated with different movements within a cycle assign blame for the problem they are attempting to ameliorate" (Snow and Benford, 1992: 139). This can have great implications on both a group's agency and its chances to successfully influence public decision-makers (Benford and Snow, 2000), which instead could be severely limited by individualistic frames that present potential policy issues as isolated "personal" problems that should be addressed outside the public arena (Cooper, 2004). As such, a binary variable was developed accounting for whether substantive posts framed core discussion topics as either "collective" or "individual" (Zhongdang, and Kosicki, 2003: 39-40**;** Baldez, 2003: 256-7). In other words, this variable aimed at understanding whether the issues that users felt the need to discuss on Facebook were primarily perceived as either "group" or "personal" problems. When coding for this variable, useful hints were often provided by syntactic structures (e.g. the use of the first plural person in particular). However, it was also important to avoid the automatic identification of certain rhetorical strategies with either category and, rather, pay great attention to both the context in which potentially revelatory expressions were inscribed before making a final decision.

A second variable dealing with discursive frames was developed to expose the rationale underpinning posts that focused explicitly on the welfare reform and related issues. In essence, the aim of this variable was to capture the perspective from which users viewed these problems and identify the reasons with which they possibly supported alternative policy solution(s) (Zhongdang, and Kosicki, 2003: 39; Entman, 1993). Categories for this variable were inspired by key elements drawn from citizenship theory discussed in Chapter One. Thus, the final version included three options reflecting the key

components of inclusive citizenship (Fraser, 2003), namely: socio-economic rights; political rights; and civil/human rights. Other categories that became prominent throughout piloting and were therefore added to this list as per standard practice in framing analysis (Konig, 2004) were those of "moral panic", "personal tragedy," "irony" and "media propaganda." In particular, the "moral panic" frame was included to account for all those instances in which users had ascribed the disability welfare reform, as well as discrimination and disadvantage issues more generally to a profound lack of moral principles in contemporary society, especially among public decision-makers.

Despite amendments were made after each iteration of the coding frame to reflect the results of piloting and specific examples were added to the coding manual to make the meaning of each category as clear as possible (see Appendix E), the final version of this variable still required coders to apply a fairly high amount of interpretation. As a partial solution to this issue, coders were invited to register multiple categories if in doubt, accounting for overlapping frames (Chong and Druckman, 2011: 251; Iyengar, 1990: 17-8). Inevitably, this had a negative impact on inter-coder reliability for this variable, which was lower than average and would benefit from further refinement in follow-up work. In addition, renouncing mutual exclusivity meant that results were more complex than originally expected if a dominant frame was not evident. However, this also ensured that coding would reflect more closely the composite character of user-generated content, which at times simply does not fit into a single category. As mentioned above, a further step towards boosting reliability for this part of the analysis would be to develop a way to code for these variables automatically. This could rely on semantic word "pools" derived from the preparatory work carried out for this study.

Another issue that could have been investigated with regard to the way in which users construct their arguments was that of political ideology and party alignment. This would have been particularly interesting for two reasons. First, the vast majority of comments explored through pilot coding appeared to be rooted in progressive ideology. As such, it would have been useful to assess whether the groups under scrutiny behaved inclusively towards differently-minded users. Second, the Labour party, which arguably enjoys the reputation of disabled people's parliamentary "ally," remained particularly quiet in response to proposed sweeping changes to disability welfare, at least during the first few months of the legislative process. This was in striking contradiction with established assumptions in social movement and contentious action theory, for which when a progressive political party is in opposition it tends to become closer to the agenda of movement collectives (Maguire, 1995: 202). These circumstances emphasised the need for disability advocates to self-organise in response to the lack of support from the

parliamentary opposition, determining a necessity for collective action (Tarrow, 2011: 160-1). However, accounting specifically for these issues would have meant adding a substantial number of variables to an already fairly complex matrix. As such, the analysis concentrated more simply on whether political institutions were at all mentioned in the Facebook conversations under scrutiny. Thus, an exhaustive list of political institutions at both national and local level was included in the matrix and results analysed in combination with those for the framing variables described above.

5.5 – Conclusions

Overall, the experience of designing and carrying out in-depth content analysis of Facebook conversations in the area of digital disability activism constituted a crucial reminder of the potential of rigorous qualitative research to tackle complex questions and facilitate the appropriate contextualisation of online data. In a similar fashion to the one for which Wright (2012a) has warned scholars to "not get obsessed with the latest innovation […] as people don't discuss politics in one place or using one technology" (p. 254), the main methodological conclusion that emerged from the reflections above was that researchers should be wary of disengaging entirely from traditional inquiry strategies in the wake of the hype that surrounds innovative online-based techniques. While "digital" methods are indeed expanding the scope of social science research into unchartered territory, it would nonetheless be short-sighted to consider these as more effective replacements for established investigation tools. Rather, it is more useful to interpret these two methodological trends as complementary. In particular, whereas "big data" quantitative research is becoming increasingly popular as a vehicle for pursuing generalisable outcomes and uncovering emerging socio-political trends in "real time," this study showed that the analysis of smaller, time-limited samples of user-generated content can be especially useful for capturing the most nuanced aspects of online group interaction.

In other words, the challenges posed by the lack of adequate software for retrieving, archiving and coding Facebook content automatically were ultimately turned into an opportunity for exploring the specific affordances of manual content analysis in the online context. While in fact techniques such as computer-aided natural language processing can be especially helpful in connection with "monologue-type" content (Muhlberger and Zhang, 2008), manual coding provided the flexibility required for assessing digitally-enabled dialogic exchanges. As such, the process discussed in this chapter constituted more than a mere intermediate step towards the development of automated Facebook analysis. Most crucially, it implicitly acknowledged that not all user-generated content is equally

relevant but rather that the impact of a given contribution is likely to be determined by who posted it and, in particular, when it was posted. This is especially the case in relation to issue-focused online politics, which is by definition time-sensitive. In turn, the choice of a specific timeframe for in-depth analysis assumes additional importance in this type of investigation as it is bound to influence the results of content analysis directly. For these reasons, combining Google Trends data with the welfare reform timeline made for a useful example of how the selection of a purposive sample of user-generated content ought to be informed by both online and offline indicators connected with the issue(s) under scrutiny.

Undoubtedly, several limitations were associated with this process, including the need to compromise on reliability for some of the most complex variables in the coding scheme discussed above. Nevertheless, this experience also showed that, as long as scholars provide a clear account of the process that enabled the analysis of user-generated online content, experimenting with manual coding can crucially contribute to methodological refinement in this field while at the same time also yielding substantial findings. In particular, analysing Facebook content can provide an unprecedented perspective on how users interact with one another at times of crisis and political turmoil. While solutions to the logistical issues that have so far inhibited the automated investigation of this medium are being sought, in-depth qualitative analysis still has much to offer provided that it is firmly anchored to a list of realistic objectives and grounded in the discipline(s) to which it is trying to contribute – in this case political communication and disability studies. The next chapter discusses content analysis results in detail, focusing both on general trends that spanned all three case studies as well as specific findings that related to each one of the groups under scrutiny.

Chapter 6 – Easier Said Than Done: Online Discussion and Political Action on Facebook

This chapter discusses the results of content analysis carried out on conversation threads drawn from the Facebook pages of the three UK case studies examined in this study. Its primary aim is to provide a detailed understanding of the role of discussion hosted on social networking pages in the context of contemporary British disability activism. As discussed in Chapter Four, a diverse range of disability advocacy groups tuned into social media as part of their efforts to oppose government plans for a radical reform of welfare provision between 2010 and 2012. Yet, did interaction on these platforms stimulate mass participation among those otherwise excluded from the policy debate? Did social media usher new activists and truly innovative repertoires into disability politics? And, most crucially, were "ordinary" users in any way empowered as a result of their contribution to these conversations? In order to answer these questions, the analysis of Facebook content draws on key aspects of the relationship between campaign organisers and "ordinary" users, the ways in which participants had structured their contributions and the relationship between online *talk* and political *action*.

Three main factors were found to be jointly responsible for the tendency of a given group's Facebook page to (not) host a high volume of conversation. Such key trends, which delineated some sort of unofficial "rules" of online engagement, are discussed in the first part of this chapter. They included: the link between offline catalyst events and online discussion peaks; the role of core campaigners in building momentum around specific issues; and the centrality of seemingly non-political discussion topics as well as personal stories in enabling ordinary users to articulate complex policy issues in "everyday" terms, thus encouraging them to participate in politically relevant debates.

Having identified the main drivers behind discussion on Facebook, each case study is then brought into the spotlight individually to clarify the extent to which it adhered to such "norms." This part of the investigation, which combines the results of content analysis with those of semi-structured interviews with leading campaigners from the groups under scrutiny, exposes crucial differences among such groups with regard to their internal structure and perspective on social media. As such, three distinct approaches to online discussion are delineated and their implications for British disability activism as a whole discussed. In particular, the limits of "tactical" success, represented primarily by the ability to generate a high volume of conversation on Facebook, are explored to illustrate how the amount of posts *per se* did not necessarily signal meaningful participation nor

mark the empowerment of "ordinary" users. More broadly, this also provides the opportunity to discuss whether online discussion had in fact shaped group interaction or it merely reproduced power relationships that were primarily negotiated elsewhere. The chapter then concludes by reflecting on the specific combinations of ideological ethos and strategic planning that led each group to champion a different approach to discussion on Facebook. As such, an attempt is made to sketch a summary overview of the multiple purposes served by social media in the emerging realm of digital disability activism. Overall, the result was one of tentative innovation in which change in the ecology of British disability activism was coupled with some potential for micro-empowerment at the individual level, yet online political *talk*, rather than *action*, represented the norm.

6.1 – Offline catalysts and online discussion

Some initial considerations can be drawn by comparing the longitudinal distribution of Facebook content on each of the walls under scrutiny. As discussed in the previous chapter, this part of the analysis focussed on the three-month period between mid-February and mid-May 2011, which constituted a time of particular significance for all the groups examined in this study.

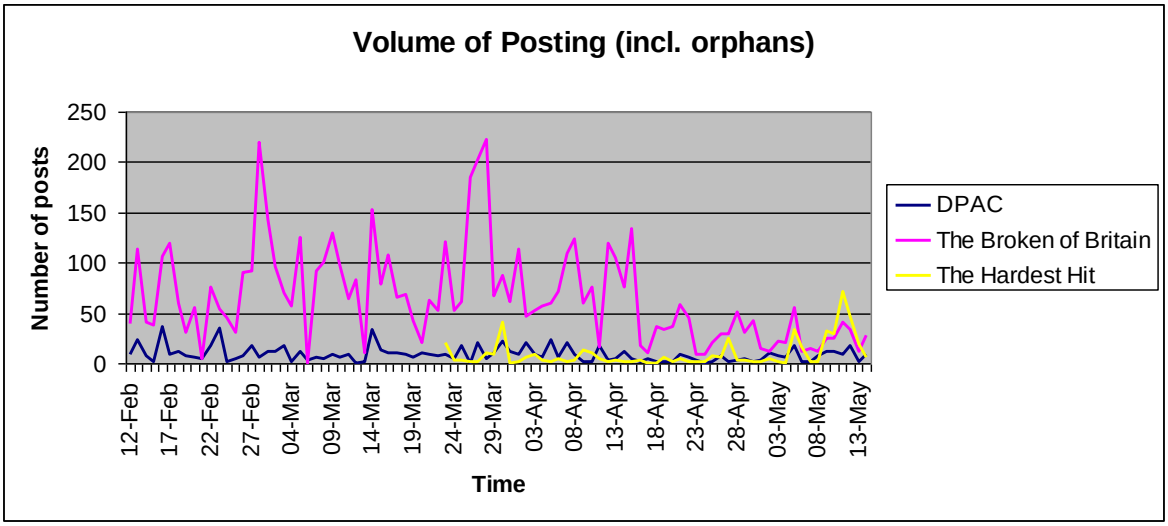


Fig. 6.1 – Fluctuations in the total number of Facebook posts per day

Coding for the total number of "starter," "comment," and "orphan" posts[16] exposed two fundamental findings. First, as anticipated, online talk did not flow in a steady stream but was rather characterised by irregular, and at times extreme, fluctuations throughout the

[16] As defined in Chapter Five, "starters" were those posts from which a discussion thread had originated, "comments" were the posts that followed, while "orphans" were potential starters that had failed to attract at least one comment from another user.

entire period (Fig. 6.1). Second, Facebook content was also distributed in a strikingly asymmetrical fashion among the groups under scrutiny. On an average day, The Broken of Britain's wall hosted a much greater amount of posts than both the other groups taken together, positioning itself as a leading space for online talk on disability welfare issues (Table 6.1). The first step was therefore to assess whether either of these trends could be ascribed, entirely or in part, to the influence of offline catalyst events.

Table 6.1 – Average number of Facebook posts per day (including orphans)

Group	Posts-per-day ratio (mean)	Posts-per-day ratio (median)	Range
DPAC	8.75	7	0-37
The Broken of Britain	65.06	56	0-223
The Hardest Hit	9.28	3	0-71

Overall, results for the longitudinal distribution of Facebook content were generally in line with the expectations outlined in the previous chapter. Most discussion "peaks" tended to concentrate on or around dates marked by specific offline catalysts. Therefore, fluctuations in the volume of conversation were connected to "real world" events in a similar fashion to the one in which the latter influenced overall levels of online interest in disability-related issues as shown by Google Trends data in Chapter Four. Furthermore, the location of discussion peaks did not change if "orphans" were excluded from the analysis (Fig. 6.2). This indicated that peaks in the volume of Facebook content identified genuine discussion patterns as opposed to artificial spikes determined by a high quantity of failed conversation starters. Catalysts associated with discussion surges on Facebook could be divided into two broad categories, namely "external" and "internal." External catalysts were major events ignited by third party actors and cutting equally across all case studies. Typical examples included policy announcements and parliamentary votes. Internal catalysts were instead campaign-specific events of which only the supporters of a given group were likely to be aware.

The connection between online discussion peaks and "external" catalysts was documented by a series of examples scattered across the entire three-month period. For instance, the first week (12th-18th Feb.) was marked by a significant double-peak for both The Broken of Britain and DPAC, with substantial surges of Facebook discussion on the day preceding the original deadline for submissions to the government consultation on DLA reform (13th Feb.), and on the day on which the Welfare Reform Bill was first introduced to the House of Commons (16th Feb.).

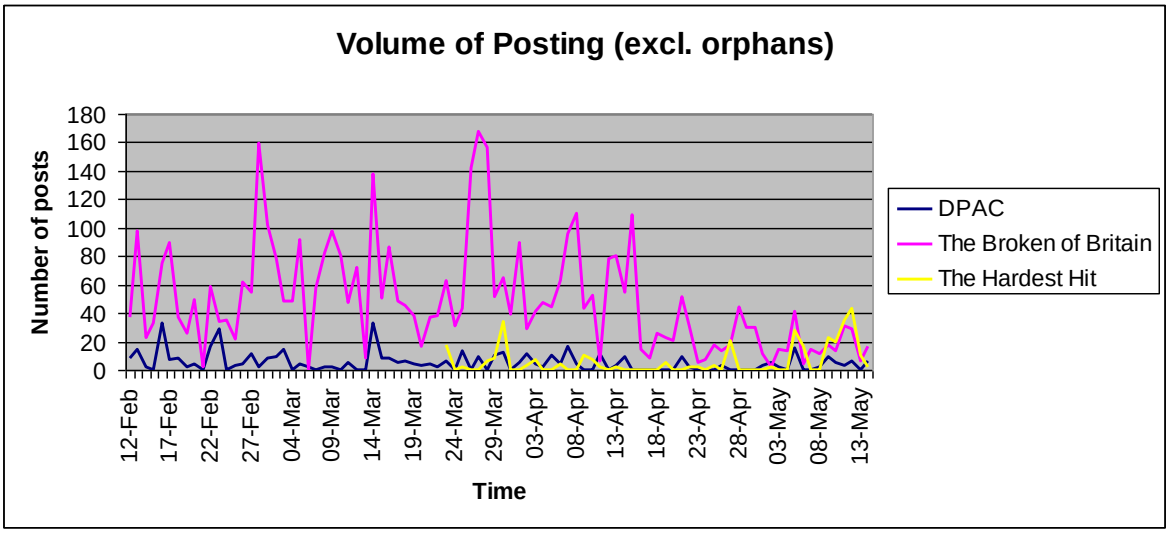


Fig. 6.2 – Fluctuations in the number of Facebook posts per day (excluding "orphan" posts)

Another date on which discussion peaks coincided with a major external catalyst was the 23rd of March, when the government presented their budget to Parliament. Furthermore, the 26th of March, which was marked by the Trade Unions Congress (TUC) demonstration against the cuts in Westminster, as well as the two following days, constituted an extremely interesting period. While in fact these three days registered the biggest discussion "outburst" for the entire three months under scrutiny, including 466 posts between "starters" and "comments" on The Broken of Britain's wall alone, DPAC's page remained completely "silent" on the day of the protest itself and generated only a handful of posts in the following days. Although a spike had indeed been anticipated for The Broken of Britain at that point, its magnitude was nevertheless noteworthy, especially in consideration of the fact that this group had not officially endorsed nor publicised the TUC demonstration. Conversely, it was surprising to find that DPAC, which officially took part in the event, hosted markedly less discussion over those days than in other periods.

These results invited a reflection on the reasons for which the same event coincided simultaneously with opposite levels of Facebook discussion for groups that were different but nonetheless geared towards similar policy objectives. One possible explanation could be that each group understood online discussion as having a specific function in these circumstances and therefore approached social networking platforms with a different purpose. While for The Broken of Britain the TUC march represented an opportunity for extensive online discussion, DPAC might have steered off of Facebook on that very day in order to concentrate on participating in the event itself. As the analysis progressed, this impression was crucially strengthened by the results of in-depth content examination. Thus, the idea that each group had carved a distinct role for online discussion on public networking sites in order to fit its overall campaigning strategy emerged as a key

overarching finding. This issue will gain centre stage below in the sections dedicated specifically to each case study.

With regard to the relationship between discussion peaks and "internal" catalysts, two cases are especially worth mentioning. First, The Broken of Britain's wall registered a remarkable spike between the 8th and the 10th of March. This came immediately after the launch of its second round of major campaign initiatives, which took place on the 7th of March and was dubbed "Left Out in the Cold." Second, The Hardest Hit's wall experienced a substantial discussion surge around the 11th of May, which was the date this issue-focussed coalition of charities and member-led advocacy groups had selected for their first London march against disability welfare cuts. While the last observation prompted important reflections on The Hardest Hit's approach to social media in a dedicated section below, both these examples demonstrated the importance of "internal" catalysts for clarifying the origin of discussion spikes that would otherwise have remained seemingly unconnected to offline events. Nevertheless, some Facebook content surges did remain unexplained by either "external" or "internal" catalysts. These included remarkable peaks that occurred towards the end of February and in April. Furthermore, as most external catalysts were equally relevant to all of the groups under scrutiny, they did not justify the striking disparity among groups in terms of overall Facebook content. Similarly, these factors also failed to clarify why The Broken of Britain's position as the leading discussion space among those examined for this project appeared to become compromised in May, when in fact this group had several events to look forward to. What else, then, lay behind high rates of conversation on Facebook? The next section addresses this question by focusing on the three-week period that was examined in detail by applying the coding scheme discussed in the previous chapter.

6.2 – Turning supporters into discussants

Moving from the observations above, a first step in the quest for additional determinants of Facebook "success" was to examine the data concerned with content authorship. In particular, it was useful to focus on starter posts as they strongly influenced the topic(s) of discussion and set the overall pace at which conversations took place. As such, while "ordinary" supporters were the most likely user-type to kick-start a conversation on both DPAC and The Hardest Hit's walls, nearly 90% of starter posts on The Broken of Britain's Facebook page had instead been generated by the account administrator (Table 6.2).

Table 6.2 – Facebook posts authorship

Group	Post function	Author			
		Facebook admin	Core organiser (personal screen name)	Supporter (Individual user)	Other organisation
DPAC	Starter	--	38.46%	58.97%	2.56%
	Comment	--	50.00%	48.25%	1.75%
The Broken of Britain	Starter	86.64%	1.84%	11.52%	--
	Comment	21.03%	--	78.97%	--
The Hardest Hit	Starter	39.40%	12.12%	45.45%	3.03%
	Comment	3.09%	2.47%	93.21%	1.23%

At the same time, records also showed that, in spite of substantial fluctuations in the total amount of content hosted on The Broken of Britain's page over time (see Fig. 6.1 and 6.2 above), the respective share of "starter," "comment" and "orphan" posts on this wall had remained virtually constant throughout the entire period (Fig. 6.3). In other words, the number of comments – posted mainly by ordinary users – had increased or decreased in a similar measure to that of variations in the levels of conversation starters, almost nine out of ten of which had been created by the account's administrator.

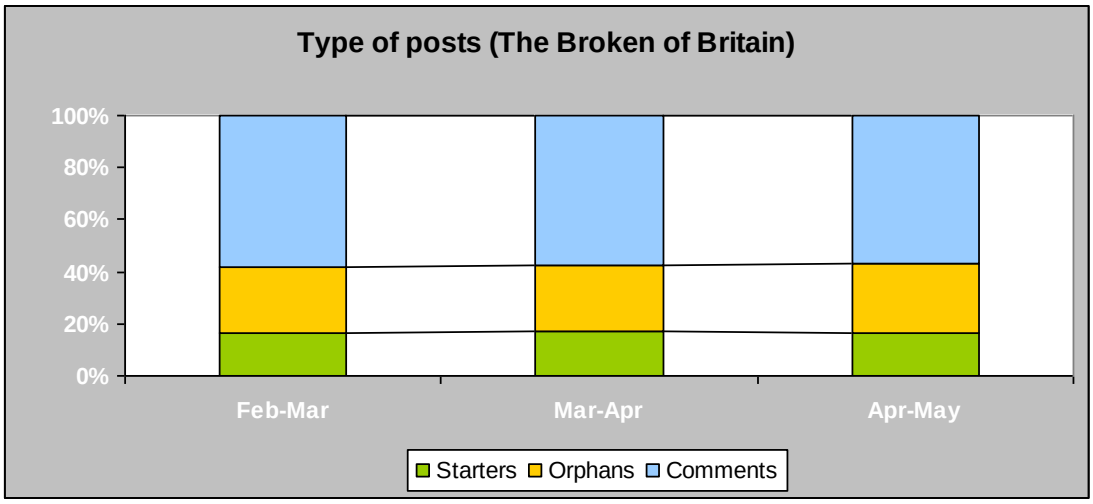


Fig 6.3 – Ratio of starter, comment, and orphan posts over time (The Broken of Britain)

Although the purposive nature of the sample selected for this study prevented from drawing statistically significant inferences, these results still enabled two further observations with regard to the mechanisms that regulated online conversation. First, core organisers of both DPAC and The Hardest Hit favoured a relatively less proactive approach to their Facebook walls, often leaving it up to ordinary users to initiate new discussion threads. Arguably, this pattern could be seen as a way for campaigners to avoid monopolising online talk and encourage pluralism. Yet, in both these cases, this tendency was also coupled with consistently low levels of online conversation throughout the entire period under examination. This was a testimony to the fact that users, despite the

motivation and sense of urgency determined by the welfare reform crisis, did not simply "flock" to whatever social networking page had been set up by campaigners. As such, these data confirmed the assumption that the mere availability of interactive channels would not necessarily imply that users were actually engaging with them, let along being empowered.

On the contrary, the data collected for The Broken of Britain proved that a considerable, if irregular, discussion flow can in fact be achieved on Facebook when lead organisers take a more "hands-on" approach. The content posted by this group's core campaigners, as well as the frequency with which that was updated were crucial for persuading ordinary users to "join in" the discussion. Thus, it could be argued that attracting potential supporters is only the first step in a sophisticated process of engagement in which online followers are more likely to become discussants if central campaigners deploy a consistent effort to stir the conversation. Such "activation" pattern was also supported by the data registering the total number of unique contributors to each wall. Although The Broken of Britain had the smallest cohort of Facebook "fans" among the groups examined in this study (Table 6.4), its page was the only one that hosted a substantial amount of content from "regular" contributors, i.e. those who had posted on it more than five times during the three-week period under scrutiny (Table 6.4). More broadly, over one in ten of all The Broken of Britain's Facebook supporters had posted on its wall at least once within the same timeframe. Instead, DPAC and The Hardest Hit counted markedly lower proportions of "active" fans.

Table 6.3 – Level of Facebook activity among supporters

	Number of posts	**Number of unique users**		
		The Broken of Britain	**DPAC**	**The Hardest Hit**
	1	81	22	71
	2-5	71	10	29
	6-10	12	5	2
	11-20	13	--	--
	21+	4	--	--
Total "active" Facebook fans		181	37	102
Overall number of Facebook fans (as of 31st May 2011)		1,357	1,761	3,086

Overall, these results were consistent with previous work that highlighted how only a minority of the "followers" of a given social media account typically interact with one another (Huberman, Romero and Wu, 2009). That said, the much greater volume of comments and larger proportion of "regular" contributors on The Broken of Britain's Facebook wall represented a testament to the centrality of lead campaigners to the

achievement of "tactical" success on interactive platforms (Karpf, 2010c). Thus, results obtained for this study were in line with work that showed how online discussion in political forums does not drive itself, but it rather relies on constant stirring from a "core" group to reach "peripheral" supporters who otherwise tend to limit themselves to being mere observers (Lilleker, 2011; Anstead, 2009). Indeed, a closer look at The Broken of Britain's wall showed that on it less than 40% of potential "starters" had actually generated discussion threads. Yet, this lack of efficiency did not detract from the overall effectiveness of this group's "hands-on" approach, which ultimately led their Facebook page to becoming the most popular discussion space among those examined for this project. In addition, it could also be hypothesised that The Broken of Britain had attracted supporters who were inherently more inclined towards interaction. While verifying this assumption would have reached beyond the scope of this study and could indeed provide inspiration for further research, it was useful to note that only a handful of users – none of whom was a "regular" – had posted on multiple walls. This went some way towards confirming that each group interacted with a separate set of Facebook supporters.

Several reasons can be advanced as to why different groups of core campaigners interpreted their role in seemingly opposite ways. These include issues connected to the nature, structure, overarching objectives, underlying ethos and perspective on social media characterising each of the groups under scrutiny. As such, they are dealt with in detail in the sections dedicated to each case study below. Furthermore, the responsibility held by Facebook account administrators in this context also raised important questions with regard to the internal pluralism of these groups as well as their resilience and long-term sustainability. These issues were strongly linked to the power dynamics regulating the relationship between core organisers and ordinary users, which assumed particular relevance in The Broken of Britain's case, as discussed below in a dedicated section.

In addition to this, the analysis revealed also that conversation starters featuring links to mass media websites were connected to particularly high volumes of discussion. On The Broken of Britain's page, over a quarter of starter posts conveyed their message by linking to traditional media content (Table 6.4). Further to that, another 10.1% of starters linked to emergent and activist media sites, raising the share of opening contributions that relied on "news" content to over a third of the total of starter posts featured on the busiest wall under scrutiny. Threads originating from a post containing a link to a news item tended to be slightly longer than their counterparts deriving from plain text posts, scoring on average 5.05 and 4.89 posts respectively. Conversely, starter posts on the walls of both the other groups included only plain text almost twice as often as in The Broken of Britain's case,

with the combined volume for traditional and emergent/activist media content barely reaching beyond 10% of the total in either case.

Table 6.4 – Media used in Facebook starter posts

Medium of starter post	DPAC	The Broken of Britain	The Hardest Hit
Text only	46.2%	26.3%	50.00%
Photo	5.1%	1.8%	15.6%
Video	--	2.3%	6.3%
Traditional mass media	10.3%	26.7%	12.5%
Emergent/activist media	2.6/%	10.1%	--
Sponsor's website	7.7%	1.8%	--
Official blog	--	1.8%	--
Other blog	2.6%	9.2%	--
Other disability org.	10.3%	6.9%	12.5%
Other	15.4%	12.4%	3.1%
n/c	--	0.5%	--

It remained unclear whether the high number of links to mass media sites included in The Broken of Britain's starter posts was strategically devised by core campaigners as a way to engineer discussion on their Facebook wall. Nevertheless, these data outlined the existence of a connection between this type of content and "tactical success" on Facebook. Furthermore, these results also strengthened the assumption made in recent work on social media use during crises[17] that under such circumstances users are more likely to respond to and share mass media coverage than other types of content. This trend was at odds with the high levels of cynicism and anger that supporters of all groups consistently showed towards traditional media outlets, except possibly The Guardian and Channel 4. Distrust of journalists and mass media conglomerates was so widespread in the conversations examined for this study that it required the creation of an additional "media propaganda" framing option during coding. In particular, users demonstrated great awareness of the:

> *"prevalent attitudes amongst the media that we [disabled people] are all either 'full time useless' drains on society or lead-swinging fraudsters;"*
>
> (Facebook, The Hardest Hit supporter, 12 May 2011)

and that:

[17] See the "Reading the Riots" Guardian/LSE project: www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/dec/07/twitter-riots-how-news-spread (accessed: 21st Feb. 2013)

> *"the media, like the 'caring' general public don't care, to them we [disabled people] are all just benefit scroungers living a life of luxury at their expense."*
> (Facebook, The Hardest Hit supporter, 24 March 2011)

Recent work examining the coverage of disability issues in the British press found these particular stereotypes to be pervasive, especially in tabloid newspapers, and exert great influence over the views of the readership on disabled people (Briant et al., 2011). Thus, although at first the role of mass media content in boosting online discussion volume could appear paradoxical, the very level of controversy that surrounded it may in fact help explaining its role as a conversation driver.

Overall, results for basic content analysis variables confirmed that, in addition to fluctuating irregularly, online discussion on these platforms did not flourish spontaneously either. Instead, it required constant stimulation from core campaigners and was especially encouraged by references to news coverage of relevant issues and events. In turn, this also provided a clear warning against the popular assumption that social media are inherently oriented towards the promotion of horizontal, self-supporting networks (Scholz, 2010). Rather, different network participants should be expected to fulfil different functions, with those at the heart of information and communication flows likely to constitute a *de facto* leadership (Hands, 2011: 110-11; Gerbaudo, 2012: 135). These are crucial issues that will be examined in greater detail both in the rest of this chapter and in the overall conclusions to this thesis. Moving from these observations, the next part of the analysis focussed on the actual content of online discussions. Were people talking politics, policy, both, or neither? Did they share their personal experiences? And, if so, with what kinds of issues were such narratives associated? The next section addresses these questions while also identifying additional elements that regulated fluxes of online conversation in the emerging realm of digital disability activism.

6.3 – "Big p-," "small p-," or "no p-" politics?

Before examining specific content features, it is useful to briefly dwell upon the general nature of discussion to understand whether this was also connected to a given group's propensity to attract and retain high volumes of conversation. A particularly relevant set of results in this context was that which captured the "structural focus" of discussion threads

by accounting for explicit connections to either "political" or "policy" issues[18] in starter posts. Overall, it was hardly surprising to find that the majority of discussion threads in each case study set off with an explicit reference to either institutionalised politics or a specific policy measure/area (Table 6.5). This was expected of conversations hosted on the social networking pages of groups whose most immediate goal was to block disability welfare changes and that therefore did not represent online "third" spaces as defined by Wright (2012b).

Table 6.5 – Structural focus of Facebook discussion threads

Structural Focus	DPAC	The Broken of Britain	The Hardest Hit
Politics	58.3%	39%	45.5%
Policy	16.7%	26.3%	33.8%
Both politics and policy	8.3%	7.5%	3.9%
"Other" issues	8.3%	23.9%	11.7%
n/c	8.3%	3.3%	5.2%

That said, more subtle and revelatory differences lay beyond this common trend. While nearly 60% of DPAC's threads focussed on "big P" politics, conversations hosted on the other two walls were less intensely dominated by broad political themes and drew more often on specific policy issues (Table 6.5). Overall, these results fitted the overarching nature of each group as discussed in Chapter Four, for which DPAC was aspiring to:

> *"build a sustainable, democratic structure with an elected committee,"*
>
> (Interview, DPAC founder, July 2011)

while both The Broken of Britain and The Hardest Hit took a more pragmatic issue-focussed approach, meaning that although they were:

> *"quite passionate about wider disability rights as a civil rights movement, the cuts are [were] so damaging and are [were] being brought in so urgently that we have [they had] to concentrate on that."*
>
> (Interview, The Broken of Britain founder, July 2011)

[18] For a detailed discussion of these concepts and the way in which they were operationalised in the coding process see Chapter Five, pp. 143-5 and the coding book in Appendix E.

In addition, the direct involvement of many of DPAC's core organisers in the early 1990s disabled people's movement, their commitment to social model and independent living principles, as well as their familiarity with direct action repertoires also underpinned the high concentration of explicitly "political" talk on this group's wall.

Crucially, crossing-checking these data with those for the total volume of user-generated content on each page revealed that the walls on which policy and "other," non-political issues were comparatively more popular (i.e. the The Hardest Hit's page and, even more so, that maintained by The Broken of Britain) also tended to attract a considerably greater number of comments. As such, privileging an issue-based approach to discussion and avoiding explicitly ideological, institutional, or party political topics constituted a further determinant of Facebook "success." Although politics *per se* still constituted the single biggest conversation theme for each case study, the key to this situation lay in the relative imbalance between "politics" and "policy" talk. In other words, DPAC trailed behind the other groups in terms of online conversation volume not simply because the majority of its online discussions drew explicitly on political content, but rather because on its wall quintessentially political content outweighed other types of talk too decisively.

This resonated with the unsuitability of "big P" politics to reach those who are unfamiliar with the public arena and are only just discovering political discussion through social media. Furthermore, it also highlighted the limits of a campaign founded on strong ideological principles and requiring users to "speak the same language" in order to be able to participate in online discussions. In other words, it is reasonable to assume that such a strong focus on "big P" politics acted as a deterrent for users not already versed in political conversations in the same fashion as government-sponsored forums have typically marginalised minority voices (Vedel, 2006; Albrecht, 2006). By emphasising the overtly political nature of discussion, DPAC's Facebook page somewhat offset a major benefit of online discussion, which is to lower participation threshold by removing the distinction between private and public talk (Bimber, Flanagin, and Stohl, 2005).

Furthermore, results for The Broken of Britain revealed that conversations focusing explicitly on issues other than institutionalised politics or specific policy measures may also have been at the root of high-intensity Facebook campaigning. It was interesting to note that over a quarter of the threads hosted on the busiest page among those under scrutiny were set up to discuss "other" topics, including seemingly trivial ones such as music and sports (see Table 6.5 above). These, in turn, tended to generate a greater number of posts than the average conversation thread on this page (Table 6.6).

Table 6.6 – Average length of Facebook discussion thread (The Broken of Britain)

Thread structural focus	Average length (Nr of posts - mean)	Average length (Nr of posts - median)	Range
"Other" issues	5.41	4	2-43
Overall average	4.40	3	2-43

These findings were consistent with trends uncovered in recent work that explored the deliberative potential of online discussions in "a-political" spaces (Graham, 2012), stressing the importance of refining tools and techniques for assessing the political relevance of "non-political" discussion threads. Moreover, these patterns also connected to a statement of purpose posted on The Broken of Britain's Twitter account in March 2011, which explained that:

> *"Ppl w/Disabilities [People with disabilities] are more than their conditions & are not defined by them. Hence varied posts and tweets. We have many related concerns."*
> (The Broken of Britain's Twitter, 15th March 2011)

Testing for the existence of a user "flow" from threads discussing "other" issues towards those explicitly focussed on political or policy matters was not possible in this study. Yet, it is realistic to assume that Facebook fans of The Broken of Britain would have inevitably stumbled upon politically relevant content in their personal newsfeeds and when browsing the campaign's wall. Therefore, "other" issues could be regarded as some sort conversation "magnet," attracting and stimulating users who may otherwise have remained disconnected and disenfranchised.

6.3.1 – Personal stories as filters to understand policy

More generally, these results also reflected a tendency for social media to make boundaries between private and public increasingly permeable (Papacharissi, 2010). As such, it is important to note that all the walls under scrutiny contained a sizeable amount of posts referring explicitly to personal stories of disability (Table 6.7).

Table 6.7 – Proportion of Facebook posts containing personal stories of disability

Campaign/Group	Posts including personal stories
DPAC	7.8%
The Broken of Britain	9.6%
The Hardest Hit	26.2%

The mere presence of personal stories was particularly relevant *vis-à-vis* the controversy that has traditionally surrounded individual representations of disability among disabled activists and in disability studies more generally, as already mentioned in Chapters Four and Five (Corbett and Ralph, 1995; Pointon, 1999). On the basis of the different ethos and histories characterising the groups under scrutiny, it was reasonable to assume that each group approached the practice of sharing personal stories on social media from a different perspective, adopting more or less critical angles. Crucially, interviews with organisers demonstrated awareness of the controversial aspects of using individual narratives for campaigning purposes. As a participant from The Broken of Britain explained:

> *"we shouldn't have to do this [publicising personal stories], but unfortunately the situation is so serious that the only way that we can move away from this established round of rhetoric is to use real people's stories […] pitiful stories […] it is not to degrade or use people in any way, we felt the most powerful tool we had as individuals was our own voices."*
> (Interview, The Broken of Britain founder, July 2011)

While this prompted additional considerations in the sections dedicated to each case study below, complementing these data with the results for other variables also revealed important trends that cut across groups and highlighted the centrality of personal stories as both "enablers" and "enhancers" of political discussion in these discussion spaces. In particular, two elements were especially relevant. These included: authorship patterns; and the type of topics connected to personal narratives.

First, it was crucial to note that the vast majority of personal stories on each wall under scrutiny had been expressed directly by users claiming to be disabled who wrote in the first person (Fig. 6.4). Despite the usual limitations attached to social science information provided directly by participants, as discussed in the previous chapter, these results still cast personal narratives as the un-mediated online "voices" of disabled users. Furthermore, this assumption was also strengthened by the fact that, in the interviews carried out for this study, all groups stated that they did not edit or moderate user-contributions on their Facebook pages. This trend marked a clear departure from the findings of the pilot study carried out by the author only two years earlier, which showed individual stories to be either centrally edited or entirely missing from the portals of both disability charities and member-led advocacy groups (Trevisan, 2012a).

Fig. 6.4 – Authorship of personal stories

Therefore, the results obtained for this project signalled an important change in the relationship between disability rights campaigners and social media. Several elements may have underpinned this development, ranging from a process of mere "domestication" of technology (Baym, 2010: 45-9) to a growing awareness of the benefits of surrendering control to users in online campaigning. The most relevant among these are discussed in the specific sections below together with the nuances that characterised each group's approach to social media. Overall, these findings also resonated with the expectation that, during a crisis, ordinary users would be looking for opportunities to vent their frustration and voice their anger by means of personal narratives in an attempt to share their concerns and, possibly, build a "community" based on common experiences and interests (Rainie and Wellman, 2012: 218).

A second and perhaps even more important finding was that personal stories of disability were often associated with contributions drawing specifically on policy issues. Most notably, this included posts addressing the disability welfare reform as well as other issues with the benefits system. In other words, personal stories came to the fore when specific policy measures were being discussed, while they moved out of the limelight when conversations centred on other topics. This tendency was particularly strong on the Facebook pages maintained by both The Broken of Britain and The Hardest Hit (Table 6.8). This suggested that personal experiences provided disabled users with a lens to interpret

the effects of policy issues, facilitating their comprehension of complex "technicalities" and encouraging user-participation in relevant online conversations.

Table 6.8 – Topics of Facebook posts containing personal stories

Topic of posts containing personal stories of disability	The Broken of Britain	The Hardest Hit
Welfare reform and expenditure cuts	20.7%	17.65%
Other issue with benefits system	19.54%	62.75%
Other government policy	4.49%	--
Sponsor organisation's own initiative	4.4%	11.76%
Other organisation's initiative	3.26%	--
Institutionalised politics	1.08%	--
Politicians attitudes to disability/inequality	5.343%	1.96%
Other barriers and discrimination	15.21%	--
Media representations of disability	10.86%	1.96%
Other	8.6%	--
n/c	6.43%	3.92%

In addition, the longitudinal distribution of personal stories on both The Hardest Hit and The Broken of Britain's walls also indicated that their online supporters tended to share their experiences more frequently in the initial stages of a crisis, moving away from this type of narrative as they became increasingly mobilised and geared up towards a particular campaign event. As such, most personal stories on The Broken of Britain's wall concentrated in February, to then become increasingly infrequent in March and May, which were both marked by major protest events as outlined above (Table 6.9). Similarly, this type of accounts characterised a staggering proportion of posts on The Hardest Hit's wall when this was launched in March, to then be replaced by other content in May as the London march against disability cuts was approaching.

Table 6.9 – Longitudinal distribution of personal stories

	Percentage of posts including personal disability stories		
	Feb	Mar	May
The Broken of Britain	14.5%	6.2%	4.03%
The Hardest Hit	--	49.23%	14.73%

In light of these findings, it can be argued that talking about personal circumstances on social media represented more than just an opportunity for disabled users to vent their frustration at a time of crisis. Rather, it provided a filter capable of enhancing the relevance of policy issues for ordinary people, enabling them to articulate the impact of controversial policy measures in a way that made such complex topics more accessible to others in a similar situation and potentially drew disengaged users into politically relevant debates (Bimber, 2005). This was a testimony to the fact that welfare policy, while a seemingly dry,

"technical" topic, had touched a special chord with disabled internet users. For these reasons, British disability activism appeared to have become involved in what Bennett and Segerberg have described as the ever expanding "personalisation of collective action" (2011), for which the centrality of interactive media to participation and the lack of a clear distinction between private and public are pushing single-issue and lifestyle politics to unprecedented levels.

Due to its apparent lack of ideological commitment and to the loose ties it promoted, it could be tempting to dismiss this turn in online mobilisation as just a "fashionable" and ephemeral trend or, worse, a dangerous slope towards irreversible individualism and fragmentation. In particular, this could be especially relevant in the area of disability, where an excessive emphasis on personal experiences could lead to an exacerbation of divisions along impairment lines, which would compromise opportunities for collective action and endanger the overall strength of advocacy groups (Tilly, 2004). Yet, while in principle these concerns are more than justified and need not overlooked, in this case the impression was that disability activists were not just "jumping on the bandwagon" of the latest campaign innovation. This is because, despite the prominence of personal stories in policy talk, the majority of contributions on each wall still framed the problems it discussed as "collective" rather than "individual" (Fig. 6.5).

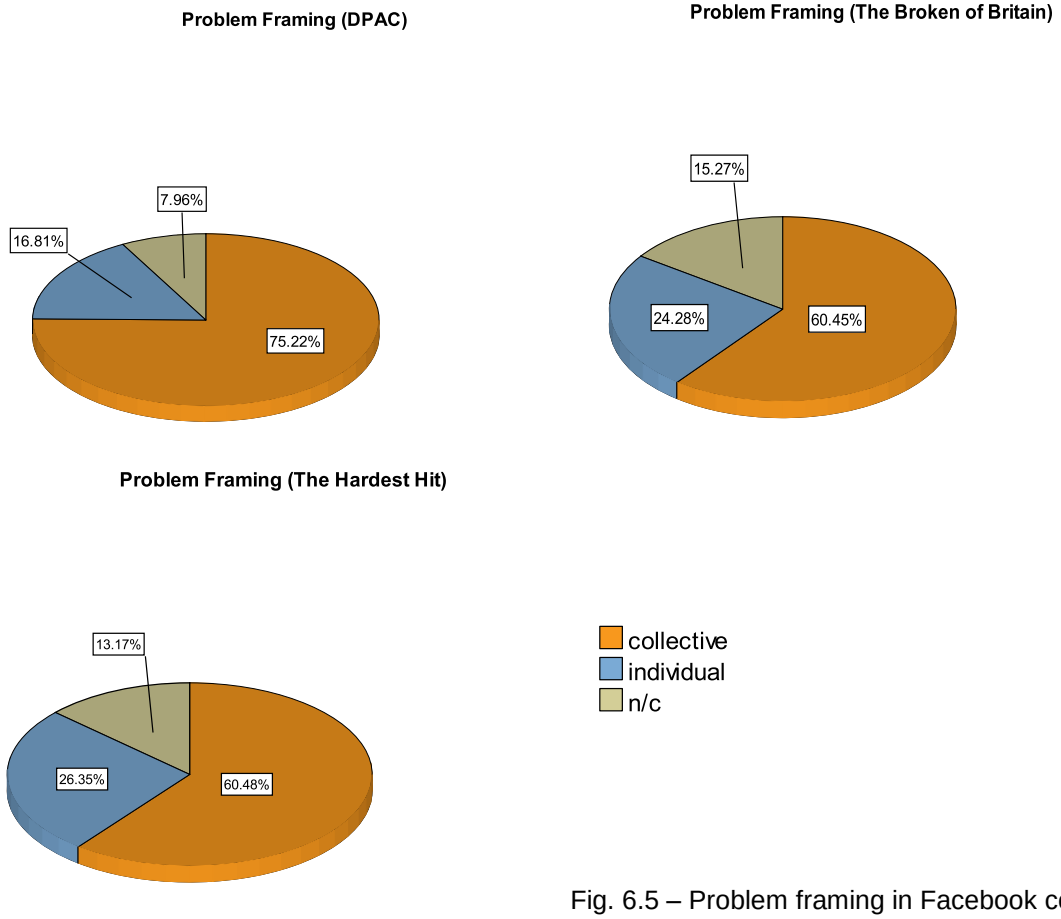


Fig. 6.5 – Problem framing in Facebook content

Table 6.10 – Arguments used to frame Facebook posts

Frame (valid results only)	DPAC	The Broken of Britain	The Hardest Hit
Socio-economic rights	9%	9.5%	16.7%
Political rights	57. 7%	29.6%	29.6%
Civil/Human rights	9%	5.7%	2.5%
Moral Panic	8.1%	23%	24.1%
Tragedy	1.8%	3.6%	4.3%
Media Propaganda	--	10.4%	6.2%
Irony	4.5%	6.9%	4.3%
Other	2.7%	0.3%	1.2%
n/c	7.2%	10.9%	11.1%

Moreover, "political citizenship" also constituted the primary frame around which arguments were construed in all case studies (Table 6.10).

Although coding for both framing variables[19] proved complicated and only around three-quarters of the total sample could eventually be included in this part of the analysis, these results indicated that online supporters of all groups were deeply aware of the collective nature of the issues they discussed and believed in the need to make a political stance in order for those to be resolved. In this context, the negative potential of "personalised" participation was somewhat mitigated, or possibly even offset, by an overarching sense of commonality that effectively bound together individual feelings and experiences. As such, this demonstrated that sharing personal stories of disability on social media sites should not be classed *a priori* as a stigmatising and disempowering process. Depending on circumstances, its outcome can in fact be quite the opposite. In this instance, the majority of personal stories provided a channel for disabled users to counter feelings of isolation and powerlessness, ushering a better understanding of complex policy issues and thus providing the common ground that is an essential pre-requisite for collective action (Benford and Snow, 2000). More broadly, this practice also echoed the arguments put forward by feminist disability writers who for a long time have highlighted the "political" nature of seemingly "private" experiences (Morris, 1992; Crow, 1996; Fawcett, 2000) and strengthened the claims of scholars who have argued in favour of the need to re-evaluate personal experiences of impairment to better conceptualise disability (Shakespeare, 2006; Thomas and Corker, 2002; Corker, 1999).

While telling personal stories in individual Facebook status updates tends to be influenced by the desire to avoid sensitive and stigmatised topics (Page, 2012: 91), discussion hosted on dedicated group pages such as the ones examined in this study can instead encourage disclosure, experience-sharing and conversation among peers. This echoes the arguments put forward by some disability theorists who emphasised that,

[19] For a complete definition and discussion of each "framing" option see Chapter Five as well as the coding book in Appendix E.

although the inclusion of stereotypical stories in charity promotions should be opposed as a victimising and oppressive practice, sharing such experiences with peers remains fundamental to the formation of group identity and, therefore, the enhancement of disabled people's political citizenship (Watson, 1998). Nevertheless, the semi-public nature of media such as Facebook creates an unresolved dilemma as it affords disabled users opportunities for sharing personal content with supportive "audiences" while at the same time potentially exposing them to the risk of victimisation by unsympathetic users who also access these forums.

Having discussed the key trends regulating Facebook conversation, the rest of this chapter focuses on the strategies adopted by each group within this context. Why did The Broken of Britain conform to these "norms" more frequently than others? Conversely, why did The Hardest Hit and DPAC set up Facebook pages but refuse to commit to an approach that would encourage a high volume of online discussion? Content analysis and interviews with leading campaigners from these groups revealed that a mix of ideological and strategic motives lay behind their different approaches to social media, shedding more light on Facebook's role in the emerging "ecology" of digital disability activism. In particular, three main issues came to the fore in this part of the analysis. These included the structure and internal power dynamics of each group, their outlook on the wider political system and specific views on social media's purpose in campaigning contexts.

Table 6.11 – Factors influencing Facbook's role in contemporary British disability activism

	Structure/Power dynamics	Outlook on institutional ecology/system	Intended purpose of Facebook and social media
The Broken of Britain (Digital Action Networks)	Strong core group: new, technology-savvy activist generation.	Representative system legitimate, but politicians morally corrupted. Direct representation essential but avoid contentious tactics.	▪ Space for peers and supporters to talk and vent frustration ▪ Provide new activist generation with legitimacy/validation
DPAC (Digitised Disabled Activists)	Social movement-style group.	Representative institutions are inherently exclusionary. Contentious collective action as preferred participation mode.	▪ Support offline mobilisation (street protests) ▪ Facilitate remote participation in contentious action (online protests)
The Hardest Hit (Coalition of Formal Organisations)	Formal leadership (bureaucratised).	Representative system legitimate, but salience of issue at stake calls for "extraordinary" measures (rallies) in addition to mediated representation.	▪ Replicate mediated participation ▪ Multiply endorsements ▪ Support specific events ▪ Micro-empowerment/ Crowd-sourcing (e.g. inspire further initiatives)

Table 6.11 summarises the position of each case study *vis-à-vis* these issues, which are discussed in detail in the dedicated sections that follow.

6.4 – The Broken of Britain: Modern campaigning with old problems

The Broken of Britain could be regarded as "trend-setters" in digital disability activism. Discussion levels on their Facebook wall during the first half of 2011 were unmatched by those of the other groups examined in this study. Yet, was this "tactical" success ultimately linked to meaningful user-participation? In other words, did quantity also bring quality to the conversations hosted on this group's page? To answer these questions, this section examines in detail three crucial issues that were briefly anticipated above. These include: the motives at the root of this group's decision to engage in online campaigning as a moderate and more "modern" alternative to traditional forms of dissent; its internal structure's implications for pluralism and long-term sustainability; and, finally, the relationship between online *talk* and political *action*. The picture that emerged from this analysis was one that diverged in various ways from the idea of a horizontal network promoting online dialogue with ordinary users.

6.4.1 – Digital campaigning as a "third way" between corrupted and contentious politics

While a widespread sense of wariness and suspicion towards politicians emerged from all the Facebook pages examined in this study, these feelings were especially apparent on the one maintained by The Broken of Britain. First, those who had contributed to these threads felt not only distrustful towards elected officials but also "abandoned" by traditional mass media, wider society and even by other anti-cuts activists. For example, during the TUC march against the cuts this group's supporters wrote that:

> *"the old "Invisible me" thing is going on! […] Heartening to see us [disabled people] there, but saddened by the lack of Public & Union Support;"*
> (Facebook, The Broken of Britain supporter, 26 March 2011)

and that:

"like most other people, they [the march organisers] thought we would go away and have nothing to say. Just how wrong can they be?"
(Facebook, The Broken of Britain supporter, 26 March 2011)

In addition, references to politicians, whether specific members of government, parliamentarians, or local representatives, were invariably charged with emotional language and profanity in a greater measure than on the walls sponsored by the other groups. This was interesting as the use of expressives – with the exception of humour – has been shown to have a negative impact on the quality of online political talk (Graham, 2010b). Nevertheless, a detailed analysis of these rhetorical patterns would reach beyond the scope of this study. Instead, it ought to be noted that this type of posts were equally applied to politicians of any persuasion with the sole exception of the Green party[20]. This included Labour, whom conventional wisdom would indicate as "guardians" of the welfare state and therefore "natural" allies of disabled people against benefits reduction. In particular, in interviews with The Broken of Britain's founders Labour were condemned as:

"Rats fighting on a sinking ship: all they care about is themselves and getting back into power."
(Interview, The Broken of Britain founder, July 2011)

Furthermore, in Facebook conversations supporters of The Broken of Britain consistently assimilated Labour politicians to the government, observing that:

"They [Labour] are letting political alliance cloud their judgement. No better than the Coalition!"
(Facebook, The Broken of Britain supporter, 26 March 2011)

and that:

"allowing the protest [TUC march] to be hijacked by [Ed] Miliband was a failure of purpose."
(Facebook, The Broken of Britain supporter, 26 March 2011)

[20] The Greens were mentioned in a total of four posts, all of which included overwhelmingly positive remarks on their leadership and policy.

In fact, Labour was the most frequently mentioned political party on The Broken of Britain's wall, scoring higher than the Conservatives themselves (Table 6.12). Furthermore, their leader Ed Miliband was the second most talked about politician, preceded only by David Cameron.

Growing distrust of politicians and strong criticism of party politics are well-documented in Western democracies (Franklin et al., 2004). Traditionally, these trends are seen as co-determinants of a widespread decline in public participation. However, it is crucial to note that in this case the negative rhetoric applied to politicians did not transfer onto democratic institutions themselves, which instead were regarded as legitimate decision-making forums.

Table 6.12 – Proportion of Facebook posts mentioning politicians and institutions

Institution	DPAC	The Broken of Britain	The Hardest Hit
David Cameron (Prime Minister)	3.3%	9.5%	3.3%
Ed Miliband (Leader of the opposition)	--	6.6%	--
Maria Miller (Minister for Disabled People)	--	1.9%	17.8%
George Osborne (Chancellor of the Exchequer)	--	2.7%	--
Iain Duncan Smith (Work and Pensions Secretary)	--	1.2%	--
Other Ministers	--	5.6%	2.2%
Conservative Party	3.3%	5.8%	4.4%
Lib-Dem Party	3.3%	2.7%	2.2%
Labour Party	3.3%	6.4%	--
Government	13.3%	9.9%	22.2%
Parliament	16.7%	5.8%	6.7%
DWP	10.0%	4.5%	7.8%
NHS	--	2.3%	1.1%
DWP/NHS contractors	10.0%	5.0%	6.7%
Traditional mass media (e.g. BBC, Guardian, etc.)	3.3%	11.4%	4.4%

Discussions on Facebook showed The Broken of Britain's founders to be keen on joining institutionalised participation channels, with online supporters approving of this type of approach. In practice, this was substantiated by events such as this group's:

> *"meeting at the [House of] Commons on Monday [28th of March 2011] ... achieved without having to throw anything beyond well-researched, intelligently written and substantiated arguments,"*
> (Facebook, The Broken of Britain page administrator, 27 March 2011)

as well as its participation to the Labour Party Conference in September 2011. Such willingness to engage with formal political arenas set this group apart from other emerging examples of networked activism, which have found it difficult to influence public decision-making when rejecting the legitimacy of elected representatives and democratic processes

as we know them (Castells, 2012: 235-6). Furthermore, this was also connected to the popularity of "political rights" arguments on The Broken of Britain's Facebook page, as outlined above (see Table 6.10). As such, while the supporters of this group referred to politicians through the "moral panic" lens, "political citizenship" still emerged as the most prominent frame on this wall, showing the determination of contributors to pursue a solution to the current crisis by exerting their political rights.

In this context, the scorn poured over "evil" politicians could be seen as a perverse consequence of the general tendency for British politics to become increasingly personalised and mediated in recent decades (Langer, 2011; 2010). Yet, contrary to what could be reasonably expected, in this case personal attacks did not end up discrediting representative democracy itself, or at least not as much as one may be inclined to presume. In other words, the blame for the ongoing crisis was placed on morally "corrupted" individuals rather than on the institutions they represented or on the constitutional arrangement *per se*. In The Broken of Britain's own words, these circumstances led them to the realisation that, since:

> *"there doesn't seem to be anyone fighting our [disabled people's] corner these days,"*
> (Facebook, The Broken of Britain supporter, 27 March 2011)

> *"we [they] need[ed] to fight our [their] own corner and not give up!"*
> (Facebook, The Broken of Britain page administrator, 27 March 2011)

This, in turn, raised the issue of what repertoire should be employed in order to ensure the efficacy of representation for disabled people. This issue was particularly poignant for The Broken of Britain, who were openly opposed to contentious tactics and believed that:

> *"Shouting/screaming doesn't work. […] There's real desire to understand out there, but fear to ask. […] Explaining the reality of our lives calmly & rationally does [work]."*
> (Twitter, The Broken of Britain founder, June 2011)

In this context, digital campaigning was cast as a viable and more effective form of participation than traditional offline protest, with the added benefit of reaching out to and possibly engaging other disabled users who also felt uncomfortable about contentious

action. When Labour's reluctance to taking a strong stance against the welfare reform created a "representation void" for disabled people, The Broken of Britain turned to digital campaigning to fill that gap while at the same time respecting the institutional system. That said, this group's core organisers were not naïve or utopian about the dynamics of institutionalised politics. Rather, their approach derived from the awareness that:

> *"The digital age has completely changed the nature of activism. […] Older methods like demos work but to reach a lot of people in a short time you need the web."*
> (Twitter, The Broken of Britain founder, June 2011)

Overall, this showed that online media can add to the existing repertoire of disability activism, especially in times of crisis. The picture emerging from these considerations was therefore consistent with the expectation formulated in Chapter Four that The Broken of Britain would be using social media to provide politically isolated disabled users with a "moderate" option for direct participation where previously there would not have been one. In other words, this confirmed the impression of this group as one that sought to reach out to new online "audiences" by positioning itself as the promoter of a different advocacy repertoire for those disenchanted with the practices of formal disability organisations yet at the same time also reluctant to take part in street protest, sit-ins, or occupations. One issue that needed clarification at this stage was that of the internal structure of this group. Was The Broken of Britain's innovative, moderate repertoire effectively promoting internal democracy, pluralism and equal power distribution between core organisers and ordinary users?

6.4.2 – Nothing about us without (the five of) us

As discussed above, core organisers fulfilled an essential role in building momentum and stimulating online discussion around specific catalysts. In particular, the approach taken by the administrator of The Broken of Britain's Facebook account was instrumental in generating a record volume of conversation on this group's wall. However, a closer look at the content of their online exchanges revealed this network to be also affected by a series of important limitations. First, the importance of core organisers did not occur casually. Instead, it derived from the deliberate efforts of this group's founders to establish a clear structure and carve out a strong leadership position that allowed them to control key decisions centrally. In particular, a series of contributions posted by the page administrator

while discussing events associated with the TUC demonstration on the 26th of March were especially illuminating. With these, lead campaigners explicitly invited supporters to:

> *"not do anything in #TBofB 's [The Broken of Britain's] name w/o [without] consulting us [the core team] first, however well-intentioned it might be."*
> (Facebook, The Broken of Britain page administrator, 26 March 2011)

In addition, they also clarified that supporters should only publicise the campaign:

> *"as long as no-one outside of the core TBofB [The Broken of Britain] team of 5 does something in an official capacity…and without clearing it with us beforehand. Particularly anything to do with our branding and photos."*
> (Facebook, The Broken of Britain page administrator, 26 March 2011)

Although in these posts The Broken of Britain's core "team" were unusually transparent about a desire for centralisation that activists generally try to hide from supporters (della Porta and Diani, 2006; della Porta, 2005), these exchanges revealed them to be aware of the importance of promoting a coherent message and capable of imparting clear instructions to those wishing to exercise their "brand."

Thus, from a broader point of view, remarks like the ones quoted above stressed the inherent tension existing between the communicative nature of Facebook on one side and natural organisational impulses on the other. As such, organisers may feel forced to curb some of the spontaneity of their followers in order for their campaign strategy to play out effectively. This was consistent with a trend highlighted in previous work on other online activist groups such as some strands of the peace movement (Olsson, 2008), and certainly addressed some of the key weaknesses of digital networks, including the potential lack of a clear leadership (Bennett, 2003b). However, this also introduced to The Broken of Britain some of the typical drawbacks of more established lobbying organisations, including structural rigidity and the inability to adapt to changing circumstances (Taylor and Burt, 2005). Put more simply, this not only cast doubts over this group's levels of pluralism and internal democracy, but it also had the potential to seriously compromise its resilience in the long run.

These very limits became apparent on several occasions, both during the weeks examined in this chapter as well as later in 2011. Days on which The Broken of Britain's

account administrator was not particularly active were characterised by virtual "silence" on their page. This happened on the 21st of February and again on the 6th as well as the 13th of March (see Fig. 6.2 above). Moreover, the data for May also identified a similar, albeit more gradual, pattern. As confirmed in correspondence with the author, in May the administrator of this group's Facebook page encountered connection problems. As posts from core campaigners became less frequent supporters withdrew from conversations in considerable numbers. Finally, discussion came to a sudden halt in November 2011, when organisers posted a notice on their blog to inform supporters that they were going to "take a break" (Fig. 6.6). Ever since, contributions on this group's Facebook page have shrunk to just a handful per day and the campaign as a whole rapidly lost momentum without ever returning to its previous activity levels.

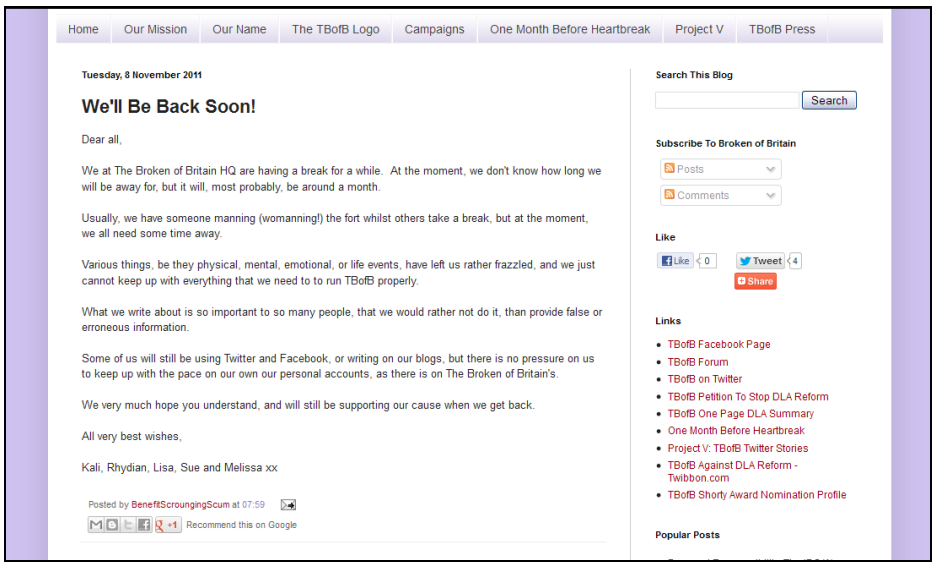


Fig. 6.6 – The Broken of Britain announce a "temporary" campaign break (8th Nov. 2011)

Whatever the reasons for this sudden stop, this episode alarmingly pointed to the potential inability of this campaign to stabilise its supporter-base and set itself up for the long term. Indeed, it may be argued that a few months are not enough time to build the high levels of trust that allow control to be transferred over to users and responsibilities to be shifted around with confidence. Yet, this was also at odds with the fact that The Broken of Britain was the only case study to have successfully created a "community" of regular contributors among those considered for this project (see Table 6.3 above).

As such, it was particularly interesting to note that in early 2012 some of The Broken of Britain's core organisers founded a new group called "We Are Spartacus" (www.wearespartacus.org.uk). At the time of writing (July 2013), We Are Spartacus continued to campaign against welfare changes as well as national and local government

cuts targeting disabled people. Although this is not the place for an in-depth analysis of this new group's structure and initiatives, its emergence suggested that digital disability action networks may in fact be more than a one-off unconventional lobbying effort confined to the welfare reform crisis. In particular, this sequence of events evoked the idea of "sedimentary networks" (Chadwick, 2007; Flanagin, Stohl, and Bimber, 2006), for which issue- or event-related participation can leave behind ties that facilitate further organising. The "sedimentary" model was pioneered by "permanent campaign" organisations such as MoveOn.org in the U.S. (Carty, 2011; Karpf, 2012), which showed how online-based activist entities can flourish in the long term by campaigning on a variety of issues and shifting among different repertoires in order to constantly renew their supporter-base. Indeed, the "niche" character of disability politics somewhat restricts the space for manoeuvre for emerging activist groups such as The Broken of Britain and We Are Spartacus. Yet, further research will tell whether they have succeeded in laying the foundations of lasting change in British disability activism by introducing new organisational paradigms that others may wish to develop. That said, The Broken of Britain's own long term sustainability – and hence its "branding" – was nevertheless threatened by their particularly rigid leadership structure.

Overall, a fitting description for this group would therefore be that of an online hybrid between new and old, a modern network affected by some of the long-standing issues of "activism as usual." This clashed with the conventional wisdom about social media, which sees them as promoters of horizontal networks as opposed to hierarchical structures. In addition, it also raised a question with regard to the intended purpose of online talk for this group: why pursue a high volume of online exchanges with ordinary users while at the same time trying to contain and control their spontaneousness? In order to untangle this apparent contradiction, it was useful to focus on the relationship between Facebook *talk* and political *action*.

6.4.3 – The true value of online talk

Overall, coding for explicit mentions of political action returned scores higher than expected for all groups (Table 6.13).

Table 6.13 – Proportion of Facebook posts explicitly mentioning political action

Group	Posts mentioning action	Posts not mentioning action
The Broken of Britain	19.4%	80.6%
DPAC	49%	51%
The Hardest Hit	39%	61%

Yet, it is also important to stress that the percentage of posts openly discussing action on The Broken of Britain's wall was substantially lower than that for either of the other case studies. In addition to that, the same data also revealed that the frequency with which specific types of action were discussed was strikingly similar among the three groups. In particular, collective offline initiatives (i.e. rallies and street protests) were the most prominent action type for all case studies, followed at a considerable distance by invitations to "spread the word" by contacting other online locations (Table 6.14). On The Broken of Britain's wall itself, 69% of references to offline action focussed specifically on the TUC march, which, had it been included in the coding frame as a separate category, would have accounted for 6.8% of all the content analysed for this group.

Table 6.14 – Types of political action mentioned in Facebook content

References to action by type	As percentage of posts containing action		
	The Hardest Hit	The Broken of Britain	DPAC
Individual online/offline	9.2%	8.9%	5.3%
Collective online	5.3%	6.9%	8.0%
Collective offline	51.3%	45.5%	57.3%
Contact other online locations	13.2%	14.9%	13.3%
Contact mass media	3.9%	2.0%	2.7%
Oust politicians at elections	1.3%	3.5%	2.7%
Mandate core organisers to represent supporters	--	8.9%	--
Unspecified action	1.3%	9.4%	10.7%

These patterns were widely expected for both DPAC and The Hardest Hit due to the importance ascribed to demonstrations in their respective campaign strategies, as discussed in greater detail in the next two sections. Yet, finding that references to action on The Broken of Britain's wall focussed primarily on offline initiatives sponsored by other organisations was rather surprising.

At first, such a strong focus on offline events may seem somewhat paradoxical for a group that was fully committed to digital campaigning. However, it was also interesting to note that these conversations consisted entirely of event commentary. Users almost never posted or asked for logistical details of the protest or for ways to participate online. The page administrator posted links to The Broken of Britain's own digital initiatives numerous times in the period under scrutiny, but only a very small percentage of such posts attracted any comments (see results for "collective online action" in Table 6.14)[21]. Posts focussing

[21] While coding, the author had the opportunity to read all posts for the period under examination, including orphans that were eventually excluded from content analysis.

on the TUC march could therefore be divided into two broad categories, namely: contributions reporting the events almost in real-time; and threads discussing the episodes of vandalism that surrounded the march itself. In particular, the discussion of politically motivated violence was exclusive to The Broken of Britain, as this topic failed to generate extended threads on the pages of the other groups.

While a detailed examination of the content of these conversations is beyond the scope of this study, it is crucial to note that their mere commentary nature fitted entirely with Facebook's purpose as perceived by The Broken of Britain's core campaigners. As explained in an interview, this group's founders believed that:

> *"It [Facebook] is a hub for people to go and get information from, […] which is what it is designed and set up for and that's why people go to it. […] People are angry and disenfranchised and frightened […]; what they need is a space to air those fears and a group of people who can put it together in some sort of coherent narrative that they can then support."*
> (Interview, The Broken of Britain founder, July 2011)

As such, Facebook was designated as a space for *talk* and not a venue for *action* or a platform for organising mass mobilisation. On Facebook, users enjoyed the:

> *"freedom to come and go, and the freedom to express themselves more clearly."*
> (Interview, The Broken of Britain founder, July 2011)

Yet, key decisions as well as political action remained firmly in the hands of a restricted group whose self-discerned:

> *"job is [was] to go through the information, to find the bits that we [they] can use and put them into a narrative on one side to the public and the media, and on the other side to the politicians."*
> (Interview, The Broken of Britain founder, July 2011)

These views were consistent not only with the centralised structure discussed above, but also with recent work that showed how emerging online-based organisations such as GetUp! (Vromen and Coleman, 2013) necessitate a "leadership" capable of arranging user-

generated information into a coherent and powerful message. These results cemented The Broken of Britain's place among those organisations whose "campaign strategies are built around the Internet" (Karpf, 2012: 156) but at the same time "are far different from the 'organising without organisations' often heralded in public discourse" (*ibid.*).

In conclusion, while some of these findings severely detracted from the initial impression of The Broken of Britain as a horizontal network promoting mass participation, they also outlined a structure capable of validating a new generation of disabled activists and providing them with a certain authoritativeness in the public arena. The analysis suggested that this group's founders believed in the potential of social media to provide instant credibility in a similar fashion to what previous research has found among the leaders of traditional non-profits (Kenix, 2008a). Conversely, the fast growth of this group's Facebook wall into a leading discussion space in the wake of the welfare reform crisis also showed that the disability community was looking at this "experiment" as an opportunity for:

> *"stirring things in the way we [disabled people] want them to be, not the way that someone without a disability says they should be."*
> (Interview, The Broken of Britain founder, July 2011)

However, The Broken of Britain's preference for a closed leadership model also constituted a potential limit to its ability to introduce sustainable innovation into British disability activism. The limitations determined by this arrangement were two-fold. First, there was a basic resilience problem, for which this group rapidly entered a declining spiral when core campaigners suspended their activity. Second, there was also an issue with the accountability of the organisers, for which it may be tempting to regard this group as a new campaigning "elite" rather than simply a younger generation of disabled activists in tune with the opportunities afforded by online technology. This echoes the conclusions of work such as Hindman's (2009), in which online communities were arguably cast as "winner-takes-all" networks that contribute to the creation of new elites rather than empowering ordinary citizens (p. 51). While this is perhaps an excessively negative perspective to apply directly to The Broken of Britain, the findings discussed in this chapter clearly identified very different roles for core campaigners on one side and supporters on the other. This is a crucial point that will be returned to in the final chapter of this thesis in order to discuss the impact of this arrangement on the citizenship levels of those involved. Meanwhile, the next

section focuses on DPAC in order to provide an assessment of its approach to social media, which, as expected, was rather different from The Broken of Britain's.

6.5 – Disabled People Against Cuts: Contentious politics "as usual"

As noted above, DPAC was the group that generated the smallest amount of discussion on their Facebook wall among those examined in this project. Although it may be tempting to interpret this result as the proof of a resounding social media failure, this would be an imprudent conclusion equating success with "quantity." Instead, scratching beneath the surface revealed that this group in fact had adopted a surprisingly coherent approach to online communications, if one with limited potential for innovation and anchored to an understanding of activism for which offline protest still constitutes the main participation channel. Three main elements contributed to this picture and as such are discussed in this section. These include: the relationship between online talk and offline action; the care that went into setting up a Facebook space that would promote inclusiveness and equality (within the limits set by Facebook templates); and, finally, the limited extent to which personal disability stories featured on DPAC's wall.

First, given the results presented above with regard to the types of political action mentioned on each Facebook page (see Table 6.14 above), it may seem reasonable to assume that on DPAC's wall, just as on The Broken of Britain's, *talk* prevailed over *action*. However, a close examination of the actual content of the posts that mentioned offline collective action showed things to be quite the opposite. More than half of DPAC's content mentioning political action referred to this group's own offline initiatives (chiefly, the 26th of March TUC demonstration in London). Such posts were typically dedicated to arranging practicalities or sharing useful information for those wishing to participate to street protests. Furthermore, in those less frequent occasions in which DPAC's core organisers and their supporters discussed online collective action, this was primarily to promote the virtual protest facilities set up on their website for users unable to attend demonstrations in person. As such, on DPAC's wall talk *about* action was more than just commentary. Instead, it provided a useful channel to mobilise supporters towards a specific goal. These results, in combination with those discussed above for The Broken of Britain, confirmed that higher levels of online activity are not necessarily connected to greater amounts of collective action and vice-versa. In addition, given that many of this group's core organisers were directly involved in the disabled people's movement of the early 1990s, this could be interpreted as further evidence that experienced disability activists have moved some way

towards integrating digital tools into a campaigning repertoire that remained centred primarily around protest.

Furthermore, the primacy of contentious tactics was also signalled by data showing that only one in five DPAC posts mentioned a politician or a democratic institution (Table 6.15). This not only marked a striking difference with both The Broken of Britain and The Hardest Hit, but also corroborated the impression that this group's frame of reference for political participation was not that of institutionalised representation, but rather that of direct action. Similarly, the percentage of content featuring the "moral panic" frame was relatively low compared to that of the other two groups, accounting for only 8.1% of all the posts analysed for DPAC (see Table 6.10 above).

Table 6.15 – Overall proportion of Facebook posts mentioning political institutions

	Posts mentioning institutions	**Posts not mentioning institutions**
DPAC	19.6%	80.4%
The Broken of Britain	44.6%	55.4%
The Hardest Hit	46.2%	53.8%

However, this did not mean that the users contributing to this wall were not angry at politicians for planning a controversial overhaul of disability welfare. Rather, it could be interpreted as a consequence of the fact that this group actively disregarded institutionalised participation paths. Thus, they saw themselves as collateral, or altogether alternative to, the representative system (Tilly, 2008), believing that the most effective way to put their message across was:

> *"to take a stance, 'outside' Parliament, rather than inside."*
> (Facebook, DPAC supporter, 29 March 2011)

In light of these considerations, the traditional repertoire of contention continued to represent the main priority for both this group's core organisers and online supporters. This is not to say that DPAC failed to appreciate the growing centrality of online campaigning in contemporary advocacy. Rather, they were influenced by previous experiences of disability activism that underpinned the use of electronic media as extensions of street protests rather than spaces for the promotion of radically new forms of political action. These findings were consistent not only with the expectations formulated in Chapter Four on the basis of DPAC's online media inventory, but also with the conclusions of previous work on social movement groups and the internet (Lievrouw, 2011: 174-6). What, then, lay at the origin of such a cautious approach to online campaigning?

In interviews with two of DPAC's founders, evidence emerged of clear awareness among core organisers of the ambivalent nature of platforms such as Facebook for disabled internet users. As such, while:

> *"virtual protest at least makes disabled users feel less useless,"*
> (Interview, DPAC founder, June 2011)

there was also real

> *"concern for disabled people without internet access […] and for Facebook's nature as a 'gated community'."*
> (Interview, DPAC founder, June 2011)

This confirmed that DPAC's leading members, who were rooted both personally and ideologically in the history of the British disabled people's movement, were in fact positively inclined towards a "participatory" approach to social media that is respectful of the needs of both disabled users and non-users. Inevitably, this quest for inclusiveness implied a trade-off with some of the digital campaigning tactics employed by others (Lievrouw, 2009), such as for instance the pursuit of high volumes of online discussion. This not only underpinned DPAC's choice to set up a Facebook group with multiple administrators identified by their personal screen-names as opposed to a "fan" page with a single, anonymous profile owner, but also meant that:

> *"we [DPAC's organisers] adopt[ed] a selective approach to posting material on Facebook because many disabled users cannot cope with information overload."*
> (Interview, DPAC founder, June 2011)

Such beliefs were ultimately responsible for the relatively small number of starter contributions posted by DPAC's core organisers and consequently also for the low volume of discussion on their Facebook page. This revealed an entirely different approach from the one adopted by The Broken of Britain. Not only DPAC understood "quantity" and "quality" of online content to be separate from one another, but it also privileged quality over quantity. Furthermore, these findings also resonated with those of previous work by the author (Trevisan, 2012a), which identified concerns with regard to the inclusiveness of

new media as one of the key reasons for the "conservative" views on interactive platforms held by Scottish member-led disability organisations.

Finally, another element that revealed DPAC's commitment to creating an inclusive online environment was the relatively low number of personal stories retrieved on its Facebook page compared to those sponsored by other groups. Indeed, the mere presence of personal narratives on a wall maintained by a group explicitly committed to reinforcing disabled people's communal identity constituted a reminder of the need for disability theorists to re-evaluate the importance of individual lived experiences as discussed above. In particular, future research should investigate how disabled internet users "framed" their experiences in contributions to online conversations about relevant policy issues with a view to assessing the role of impairment in identity formation, which has too often been overlooked due to its historical association with the medical paradigm of disability (Crow, 1996; French, 1993: Shakespeare, 1994). That said, the limited frequency with which individual accounts were posted on this group's Facebook wall was underpinned by a deliberate choice to:

> *"take personality out of DPAC because we are different from personal blogs, we want to be a united voice, and not speak only for one person at a time."*
> (Interview, DPAC founder, June 2011)

Similarly, DPAC regarded discouraging users from posting personal stories as an important step to:

> *"promote intersectionality that reflects the differences that exist among disabled people, and prevent individualism and stigmatisation."*
> (Interview, DPAC founder, July 2011)

These arguments mirrored those previously advanced by the disabled people's movement and social model scholars against the use of individual narratives of impairment for campaigning and fundraising by charitable organisations, as well as longstanding criticism of traditional mass media outlets for relying on pity-inducing stereotypes to portray disability (Barnes, 1992b). At the same time, however, this did not translate into an automatic "blanket ban" on personal stories. Rather, DPAC included individual accounts in some of its more recent endeavours such as the campaign against the closure of the ILF

launched in March 2013 (for details, see p. 121), in which the use of private narratives was centrally coordinated. On the one hand, this confirmed that even a group with a strong commitment to social model principles such as DPAC is not necessarily opposed to the use of personal stories *per se*, but that what truly matters is the way in which these accounts are "framed" and the type of reaction they generate in their target audiences (Barnett and Hammond, 1999; Doddington at al., 1994). On the other hand, this initiative also highlighted a tendency to "manage" the use of personal stories in order to emphasise issues of poverty, discrimination and entitlement in pursuit of specific campaign objectives. Although at first impression this practice may look at odds with the ideals of participatory online activism, it can be reasonably assumed to reflect the determination of self-advocates to prevent the diffusion of disempowering stories focused primarily on impairment.

Overall, DPAC's approach to Facebook was strongly characterised by its commitment to inclusiveness. This led this group to embracing the use of social media as a way to support and expand the "classic" protest repertoire of disability rights activism, with both positive and negative consequences. Undoubtedly, discussions on DPAC's Facebook page reflected a strong sense of collective identity, which in turn reinforced its credibility as a long-term movement in contrast to issue-focussed and time-limited campaigns. Yet, this space was also primarily intended as an electronic extension of traditional protest initiatives, while creativity and experimentation were effectively held back. Despite originating from praiseworthy ideals, such reluctance to engage in more innovative digital campaigning might in fact be detrimental to this group in the long run. This is because it could make it increasingly difficult for experienced self-advocates to keep up with the ever-changing political and technological landscape, thus limiting opportunities for rejuvenating the disabled people's movement as a whole. In particular, a generational gap seems to be looming, with young energies channelled into other forms of participation perceived as more "modern," as demonstrated by The Broken of Britain's rapid ascent. As noted by one of DPAC's founders,

> *"young disabled people don't come to us, not even through electronic media."*
> (Interview, DPAC founder, June 2011)

While better ways to fully conciliate inclusiveness with innovative trends in digital campaigning may indeed emerge as activists become more familiar with political uses of technology, this situation provided a powerful reminder of the potential ambivalence of

social media for disability advocates as both an opportunity for renewal and a source of concern.

The next section focuses on the most salient aspects of The Hardest Hit's social media strategy, which, as revealed by the analysis of Facebook conversation and in interviews with some of its organisers sought to blend new technologies into pre-existing repertoires with some noteworthy results.

6.6 – The Hardest Hit: Traditional repertoires meet micro-empowerment

Although Chapter Seven will examine the relationship between formal disability organisations involved in The Hardest Hit coalition and social media in detail as part of the UK/U.S. comparison, it is useful to reflect here on two key aspects of this collaborative campaign's approach to digital communications at a time of crisis. These include the prominence of personal stories on The Hardest Hit's wall and the tendency for this coalition to focus their online endeavours on specific events. While connections could be established to show that both these trends replicated campaigning tactics long established among disability charities, reaching beyond first impressions revealed that old practices had in fact been adjusted by adding some nuanced but nevertheless substantial twists.

In particular, a close look at the posts that contained personal stories of disability showed that the majority of these – roughly 60% - had been posted in response to explicit requests from Facebook page administrators to:

> *"tell us [The Hardest Hit] what DLA [Disability Living Allowance] means for you and your family."*
> (Facebook, The Hardest Hit page administrator, 23 March 2011)

Undoubtedly, it is possible that publicly sharing these stories on Facebook boosted a sense of community among supporters. Personal narratives were regularly charged with emotion and filled with intimate details, which arguably characterised them as "hyper-personal" computer-mediated communication (Walther, 1996). Yet, the way in which these accounts were invited by organisers also mirrored a longstanding tendency for disability charities to elicit personal stories from supporters in order for those to be included in mediated campaign material (e.g. publicity, consultation documents, position papers, etc.). As such, it could be argued that Facebook supplemented the "Your Stories" section of The Hardest Hit's website (see Chapter Four for details) in an effort to expand a tried and tested offline lobbying tactic. This generated a tension between the voluntary nature of user-

contributions and the way in which personal narratives could in theory be edited for "campaigning as usual." An ambiguous situation was created, for which digital channels could potentially support the emergence of new "voices" as well as pre-existing indirect representation practices at the same time. In other words, the effect of these contributions on the (dis-)empowerment of disabled users was unclear as online stories were simultaneously mediated (on the website and in other campaign material) and un-mediated (on Facebook and in direct "clicktivism plus" massages to policy-makers).

That said, requests for personal stories still generated some of the most popular conversations on this wall, including the longest thread registered for The Hardest Hit, which tallied 32 posts in total. This suggested that prompts like the one quoted above were in fact welcomed by disabled users as opportunities to "tell their story," vent frustration, be listened to and, possibly, find others in a similar situation. Furthermore, it also ought to be noted that most personal stories on this wall were connected to positive frames, in particular being cast as issues of "socio-economic citizenship" (Table 6.16). This detracted, at least partially, from the assumption that charities may simply be trying to gather and exploit "tragic" individual narratives to support their own agendas. As in the case of DPAC, a broader investigation into how disabled supporters had "framed" their stories would provide invaluable detail of how these accounts promoted collective agency. While the limited purpose of this study prevented from engaging in this type of analysis in this particular instance, it would be crucial for future research on online disability activism to focus on it.

Table 6.16 – Arguments used to frame Facebook posts including personal stories (The Hardest Hit)

Arguments used to frame posts containing personal stories of disability	
Socio-economic citizenship	46.94%
Political citizenship	12.24%
Civil/human rights	2.04%
Moral Panic	16.33%
Tragedy	14.28%
Media propaganda	--
Irony	--
Other	--
n/c	8.17%

A second pattern "inherited" from pre-existing campaign repertoires was that for which online interaction was primarily geared towards specific events, and thus clustered around the days of specific initiatives with nearly "silent" intermissions in between. As noted in the first part of this chapter, a clear example of this was provided by the high concentration of content on The Hardest Hit's wall around the date of this group's first

London demonstration (11th of May 2011). That week, The Hardest Hit's Facebook page replaced The Broken of Britain's as busiest online discussion space in terms of user-contributions. While this was in line with the strategies adopted in the past by "conservative" campaigning organisations to re-vitalise their mobilisation processes and reach new audiences (Lusoli and Ward, 2006; Chadwick, 2007; Kenix, 2007), and was expected given the centrality of major events to the very existence of this unusual coalition of disability organisations, it still amounted to "retro-fitting" the web in order to support more traditional methods of engagement. Thus, this approach was not adequately equipped for promoting participation other than on time-sensitive issues. As a participant from one of The Hardest Hit's sponsor organisations stated in an interview:

> *"although one day is not enough, [disability] organisations lack[ed] a strategy to create momentum and sustain engagement in the long term."*
> (Interview, Campaigns officer, UK charity, Sept. 2011)

In some ways, it was underwhelming to find that The Hardest Hit had picked familiar options for their online endeavours. While in fact some of its sponsor organisations were more daring on their own social networking pages, the coalition as a whole stuck to a fairly "safe" repertoire. However, it was crucial to avoid rushed conclusions and label discussions on this Facebook page as little more than "campaigning as usual." After all, the vast majority of such conversations focussed explicitly on political or policy topics (see Table 6.5 above for details). Furthermore, interviews with some of those in charge of The Hardest Hit's Facebook page also revealed that:

> *"messages received through Facebook influenced decision-making, for example the local marches organised for [the 22nd of] October [2011] came out of this."*
> (Interview, Communications officer, UK charity, July 2011)

As such, ordinary users were able to advance suggestions directly to seemingly responsible leaders, who listened and responded to requests for more accessible, de-centralised campaign events. At the same time, this channel also allowed leaders to "harness" the potential of the crowd, capture its mood and interpret its needs. While decisional power remained the prerogative of few, ordinary users had an indirect opportunity to shape the campaign through their comments. Their online response resulted in new events being

added to the campaign calendar, and ultimately contributed to the continuation of the coalition past the first London march. This represented again a form of mediated participation, yet one that was different from the "appropriation" of disabled people's personal stories for campaigning purposes. It was more about co-defining paths to participation as opposed to supporting pre-arranged initiatives.

For these reasons, this process could be described as a form of "micro-empowerment," less about directly participating to decision-making and agenda setting, and more about informing the opinion of representative leaders (Davey, 1999: 38). Overall, this was acknowledged by the organisations involved, which stressed that:

> *"because of changes in people's expectations as their familiarity with technology advances, organisations necessarily have to lessen their input in campaigning."*
> (Interview, Campaigns officer, UK charity, September 2011)

Undoubtedly, this represented only a partial step towards more inclusive and empowering models of online participation, which resonated with the "Web 1.5" strategy adopted by certain political parties to "cherry-pick" selected elements of digitally-enabled interaction (Lilleker and Jackson, 2009; 2011). Yet, for disabled users, this could represent an opportunity to become what Coleman has labelled "directly represented citizens" (2005: 211-2). As such, while direct representation remains an unrealistic and impractical utopia, technology would in fact be reforming the relationship between ordinary supporters and campaign organisers. On balance, this could be seen as evidence of the "normalised revolution" introduced by Web 2.0 (Wright, 2012a), for which established elements of the representative system are updated and enhanced, while also not overturned, by the expansion of the interactive internet and two-way communication. As a severe limit to this system, however, it remains that micro-empowerment for ordinary users depends entirely on the existence of a responsible leadership willing to listen and act accordingly.

6.7 – Conclusions

Overall, Facebook interaction between disability campaigners and their supporters at a time of crisis was governed by three main "rules" of online engagement. In particular:

1. Offline events constituted fundamental drivers of online discussion, performing as powerful catalysts without which conversation tended to fade;

2. Online discussion was not self-sustaining (not even in a crisis), and proactive efforts by core campaigners were essential to build momentum and "lure" otherwise reticent ordinary users into the conversation (Lilleker, 2011); finally,
3. Personal stories, although their use remains controversial, were key to attracting potential supporters as they provided a flexible vehicle for venting frustration while also facilitating the articulation of complex policy changes as "everyday" issues.

Despite these general trends, each case study adopted a different approach to online discussion, delineating distinct purposes for social media in their respective campaign repertoires. As such, the specific role of online talk for each group was strongly connected to internal institutional variables, including the structure and ethos of the organisation, as well as its outlook on the wider political environment (Chadwick, 2011a). While in fact experienced and ideologically committed disabled activists such as DPAC's founders took a somewhat "traditionalist" approach to online discussion, regarding it primarily as a channel for organising and paralleling offline protest, the same medium simultaneously enabled the emergence of a new generation of techno-savvy self-advocates such as The Broken of Britain's core organisers. Importantly, the latter regarded social media as both tools for promoting an innovative action repertoire and platforms for pursuing the validation of their leadership position in discussions with their growing online fan base. Finally, The Hardest Hit coalition was found to be ambivalent towards this platform as it embraced suggestions made by supporters in online conversations as a way of enriching its campaign through "crowdsourcing," yet also translated some of the "trademark" practices of formal disability organisations onto digital media in an effort to cling onto a role of mediator of the disability community's interests in the civic arena. The next chapter will expand on these findings by comparing the e-campaigning practices of British formal disability organisations to those of their American counterparts.

Chapter 7 – One size fits all? Disability Rights e-Campaigning in Britain and America

This chapter compares the use of online media for campaigning purposes by British and American formal disability organisations. The main aim of this final part of the study was to gauge the influence of contextual elements on contemporary forms of digital disability activism. Focusing on a country generally regarded as a "trend-setter" in e-campaigning such as the United States constituted a particularly useful way to put the British experience into perspective. This was especially relevant in light of the centrality assumed by the welfare reform controversy in the "digitalisation" of British disability advocacy, which invited a reflection on the impact of circumstantial factors such as policy "crises" on the genesis and evolution of online activism. Were there any specific differences in the ways in which UK and U.S. disability groups used online media to pursue their policy objectives? Under what circumstances, if any, did formal disability organisations embrace more participatory forms of online campaigning? And, finally, what factors lay at the root of these patterns?

These questions were tackled through online media inventory data as well as interviews with some of the most prominent organisations involved in The Hardest Hit coalition and their American counterparts (for a complete list see Chapter Three, p. 87). Furthermore, web link analysis with IssueCrawler provided additional comparative elements. Following a brief review of the U.S. disability policy agenda in 2011, the rest of this chapter discusses six key differences that separated the British and American case studies. These fell within two broad thematic areas, namely:

a) Tools and tactics of online campaigning, including:
   - online coalition vs. fragmentation;
   - email vs. other online communication channels;
   - the use of personal stories; and

b) Perceptions of online participation, including:
   - the meaning of "membership" in the digital era;
   - the issue of social media control; and
   - the value of online action.

Overall, comparative data revealed a counter-intuitive picture in which British groups emerged as innovators in online participatory campaigning while their U.S. counterparts represented a rather "conservative" exception in an otherwise forward-thinking context. The reasons behind these differences, their implications for user-empowerment and effects on disability activism as a whole are therefore explored. In particular, connections are drawn with relevant elements of the respective institutional set-ups, the character and political contours of the issues at stake in each country, as well as the history of British and American disability movements. In light of these considerations, the chapter concludes by reflecting on the nature of "context." Most crucially, it discusses the need for researchers in both internet and disability studies to broaden their analytical horizon by considering the role of volatile circumstantial factors – especially crisis situations – as fundamental drivers of progress in online campaigning.

7.1 – Policy "crisis" in the United States: Medicaid cuts proposals

While the rationale for concentrating on formal disability organisations in this part of the study was discussed extensively in Chapter Three, it is useful to reflect briefly on the circumstances under which American groups were operating at the time of data collection (spring/summer 2011). In particular, given the centrality of the welfare reform to the British disability debate during the period under scrutiny, it is crucial to consider the policy agenda faced by U.S. organisations in the same months. In 2011, American disability rights groups focused first and foremost on opposing "The Path to Prosperity: Restoring America's Promise," which was an alternative federal budget plan presented by Representative Paul Ryan in April 2011 following the electoral success of Tea Party candidates in the 2010 mid-term elections and the establishment of a Republican House majority. In particular, this "counter-budget" contained measures for a reduction of federal funding to Medicaid[22] alleged to be worth as much as one trillion dollars over a ten-year period starting from 2012. As the vast majority of disabled Americans are heavily reliant on this assistance programme to meet their healthcare costs, this represented a particularly relevant issue for the organisations involved in this study. Intense debate on these proposals ensued both in Congress and on traditional mass media from April 2011 until budget approval in November of the same year. Cuts to Medicaid federal expense were

[22] Medicaid is a means-tested assistance programme aimed primarily at people on low incomes. It is funded jointly by the federal and state governments and managed by the states. It ought not to be confused with Medicare, which is instead a social insurance program funded solely by the federal government and catering primarily for the healthcare needs of older people. "The Path to Prosperity" plan included measures for both a radical reform of Medicare and a change in Medicaid's funding mechanism that would have gradually reduced the share contributed by the federal government as part of an ambitious deficit reduction plan.

eventually scrapped during these negotiations as part of a deal reached in August 2011 to solve the 2011 U.S. debt-ceiling crisis[23].

At first, it may be tempting to draw a direct parallel between this policy debate and the welfare reform "crisis" in the UK. Both these issues erupted on the political agenda fairly suddenly following parliamentary majority changes and were underpinned by conservative "small government" ideology as well as more pragmatic deficit reduction targets. Nevertheless, under these apparent similarities lay a series of discrepancies that characterised these as fundamentally different catalyst issues. In particular, UK organisations were involved in what could be defined as a "double" crisis for which both government members and their policy proposals represented simultaneous and interchangeable targets for criticism and campaign action. Furthermore, as discussed in previous chapters, this battle over the principles regulating benefits provision centred upon issues that have traditionally been integral to disability activism in the UK as well as to the very definition of disability in British public discourse. On the contrary, the emergency situation faced by U.S. groups was somewhat more straightforward as it focused exclusively on the re-distribution of public resources. In doing so, the Medicaid cuts controversy did not insist on a policy area central to the very essence of American disability advocacy, which has traditionally organised around civil rights issues (Barnartt and Scotch, 2001; Vaughn-Switzer, 2003), influencing in that sense the rhetoric of relevant policy measures as well as traditional mass media (Jeon and Haider-Markel, 2001).

Although the debate over U.S. budget plans was intensely politicised, American disability groups could count on the support of a key institutional ally. This is because their views on Medicaid coincided with those of the White House, to which disability groups have looked rather positively throughout the Obama administration. This was in striking contrast to the political isolation experienced by British disability campaigners and likely to influence the lobbying approach of their American counterparts. Finally, despite the complex relationship between U.S. public opinion and federal welfare programs, disability advocates were also able to benefit from the sympathetic frame of "deservedness" that American news media generally apply to stories involving disabled people (Haller, Dorries and Rahn, 2006; Haller, 2010). This is in contrast to the portrayal of other disadvantaged

[23] After months of political stalemate and risking a federal government shutdown in early August 2011, Congress reached a debt-limiting deal for which borrowing could be increased as long as $1.5 trillion savings were found over the following decade. This agreement stated that if no cuts plan had been in place by December 2011 then around $100 billion a year would be cut automatically from the budget starting in January 2013. However, Medicaid and other social security programs were exempted from automatic cuts. At the time of writing (March 2013), a mutually agreed cuts plan has yet to be agreed and arbitrary expenditure reduction has started. For more details see:
http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2013/02/20/the-sequester-absolutely-everything-you-could-possibly-need-to-know-in-one-faq/

groups and minorities – such as African-Americans – who are regularly penalised by negative media coverage in relation to welfare provision (Gilens, 1999; Bell and Entman, 2011). Conversely, in recent years UK disability organisations have been confronted with a wave of negative public opinion fuelled by controversial media representations of disabled people as "benefit scroungers" (Briant et al., 2011). Thus, what at first appeared to be similar issues generated in fact crucially different circumstances, which in turn were expected to affect the technological choices of campaigners and their implications for user-participation and mass mobilisation.

7.2 – Same destination, separate ways: Coalition vs. fragmentation in online disability activism

The first difference to become immediately apparent was that, while British formal disability organisations had responded to welfare reform proposals through a joint campaign (The Hardest Hit, see Chapters Four and Six), nothing similar had been set up by their American counterparts to oppose Medicaid cuts likely to affect disabled citizens. Undoubtedly, this issue was perceived as a top priority by all the U.S. organisations involved in this study, whose representatives repeatedly stated in interviews that:

> *"the budget stuff caused a lot of controversy – Representative Ryan, when he released his budget with a trillion dollar cut to Medicaid got a lot of people very worried and angry."*
> (Chair, U.S. member-led cross-disability group, June 2011)

Nevertheless, in the wake of this controversy these groups had favoured separate and somewhat redundant digital initiatives, ranging from straightforward email appeals to contact legislators to more organic campaigning efforts such as UCP's "Faces of Medicaid" (www.ucp.org/public-policy/faces-of-medicaid). Thus, despite the fact that two-thirds of the American groups under scrutiny were members of the Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities (CCD)[24], a forum of national disability organisations similar to the British Disability Benefits Consortium (DBC) that was behind The Hardest Hit coalition, U.S. disability advocates pursued the same objective in a fragmented and arguably inefficient fashion. Crucially, this constituted a bold reminder of the fact that the internet *per se* does

[24] CCD includes over 100 American national disability groups. It provides a forum for member organisations to discuss a wide variety of topics, from education to health, as well as from transport to technology, with a particular emphasis on civil rights issues. More information can be found at: www.c-c-d.org.

not provide a catalyst for the formation of impromptu coalitions amongst groups with similar interests, even at times of crisis. Potentially, online media can facilitate the emergence of issue-driven collaborative campaigns among different organisations by limiting the investment required from each of them to take part and allowing them to not trade in their individual identities (Chadwick, 2007: 290-1). Yet, the difference outlined between UK and U.S. cases begged the question of under what circumstances such cooperation can effectively flourish.

It emerged from interviews that a combination of multiple offline elements was in fact responsible for the (un-)attractiveness of the internet as a channel for collaborative action during different policy "crises." In particular, the reluctance of American disability organisations to set up a joint online campaign was linked to two main issues. First, the majority of U.S. participants made explicit references to the lack of an issue capable of providing strong enough motivation for them to join forces. Although proposed Medicaid cuts were likely to have a negative impact on the livelihoods of the vast majority of disabled Americans, thus theoretically favouring collaboration as in the case of discrimination and civil rights issues in the late 1980s (Barnartt and Scotch, 2001: 89-90), virtually all of the U.S. organisations interviewed for this study stressed that:

> *"it [Medicaid] never rose to that level, Medicaid was part of the whole, you know, it went into the budget issue and when you get the budget issue you get a lot of other things."*
> (Head of Communications, U.S. non-profit, July 2012)

As another participant from a pan-disability organisation put it,

> *"the passage of the ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act] 20 years ago was really the culmination of a joint effort – I can't really think of any times over the last 20 years where there's been really a need for that kind of grassroots coordination."*
> (Head of Communications, U.S. cross-disability non-profit, June 2011)

In other words, the prospect of Medicaid cuts was seen as a purely financial issue rather than a threat to the very principles underpinning the provision of public resources to meet disabled people's needs. As such, this was interpreted as a problem that fell short of the "emergency" character capable of inspiring collaborative online campaigning.

In fact, Medicaid cuts plans constituted an inherently divisive issue for American disability non-profits. This was because, as a mere problem of resources re-distribution, it was unclear whether such measures would lead to a general drop in healthcare services for disabled people, or rather hit some harder than others depending on personal circumstances, conditions and impairments. This led impairment-specific organisations in particular to assuming that some would have to bear the blunt more than others when budget cuts would eventually be implemented, prompting each group to prioritise the interests of their own "constituents" against those of other disabled people. This situation revealed patterns of inter-group hostility similar to the ones that have long been observed by scholars of race relations and social policy in the U.S., who documented how resource-related issues tend to favour conflict among groups that in principle would benefit from joining forces towards the same objective (Giles and Evans, 1986).

In light of these considerations, proposed Medicaid cuts insisted upon established rifts in American disability activism. Although the issue of organisational fragmentation among U.S. disability groups was addressed only briefly during interviews, it nevertheless constitutes a central thread in the literature on American disability politics. In particular, the U.S. disability community has traditionally been affected not only by controversies between self-advocacy and "professionalised" non-profit groups but also by strong internal disagreement among different components of the independent living movement itself (Vaughn-Switzer, 2003: 76-7; Bagenstos, 2009: 24-5). While this tension was momentarily set aside in the run up to the adoption of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990 (Jaeger and Bowman, 2005: 40), much of it re-surfaced shortly after and has since been boosted by the fact that recent advocacy efforts have tended to focus on services and financial benefits for specific sections of the disability community (Barnartt and Scotch, 2001: 91). The result is a movement that is deeply divided, especially along impairment lines (Bryan, 2006: 37). In this context, a struggle over public money allocations can easily exacerbate traditional rivalries. Indeed, British disability activism has also been characterised by tension, disagreement and sharp criticism, both between charities and member-led organisations, as well as among the latter. However, in the U.S. the combination of pre-existing splits with a contentious budget issue created an environment that was especially adverse to online collaboration.

Importantly, interview participants from American cross-disability organisations such as AAPD and NCIL linked the issue of fragmentation to a loss of efficacy for online action and talked of digital media as potential channels to connect groups traditionally perceived as "silo-ed" (in particular deaf people's organisations) with other part of the disability community. Yet, at the same time they also stressed how:

> *"in the U.S. there's so many groups, so many organisations that are very specific to a disability that a lot of times is very hard to organise around 'disability as a whole' […] people still become very segmented when they're organising online […] if we have a common goal of stopping cuts to Medicaid for example everyone has goals specific to what their disability is […], although working together is how we got things accomplished in the past."*
>
> (Head of communications, U.S. cross-disability non-profit, July 2011)

These remarks echoed the emphasis placed by American disability literature on the strength of divisions among disability campaigners. Thus, in contrast to what had happened in the UK with reference to the welfare reform, opposition to Medicaid cuts did not evoke a shared past for American disability advocacy groups. Under these circumstances, the tendency for online media to reduce the costs associated with campaign activities may therefore have contributed to an exacerbation of the existing rifts, rather than promoting *ad hoc*, issue-based collaboration.

These impressions were corroborated by the results of web link analysis. Connections among the websites of the organisations under scrutiny were retrieved by means of inter-actor mapping on IssueCrawler[25]. While the scope of this exercise was more limited than that of the hyperlink analysis carried out for UK groups in Chapter Four, results were crucially in line with what was hypothesised above. On the one hand, the map obtained for American organisations (Fig. 7.1) was characterised by weak connections and some missing nodes (The Arc, Justice for All, MS Society). As expected, the few existing links confirmed that connections were predominantly distributed along impairment lines and according to organisational ethos. This was especially apparent in the case of groups concerned with intellectual impairments and mental health issues (NMHA, Autism Speaks/Votes, LDAA) and for those with a pan-disability outlook (AAPD, NCIL, NDRN, AccessLiving), which constituted two sub-sets within the U.S. inter-actor network joined to one another only indirectly through their respective links with third, consortium-like organisations (CCD).

[25] Differently from "snowball" and "co-link" crawls used in Chapter Four, "inter-actor" analysis with IssueCrawler focuses solely on the connections among the websites entered as seed URLs.

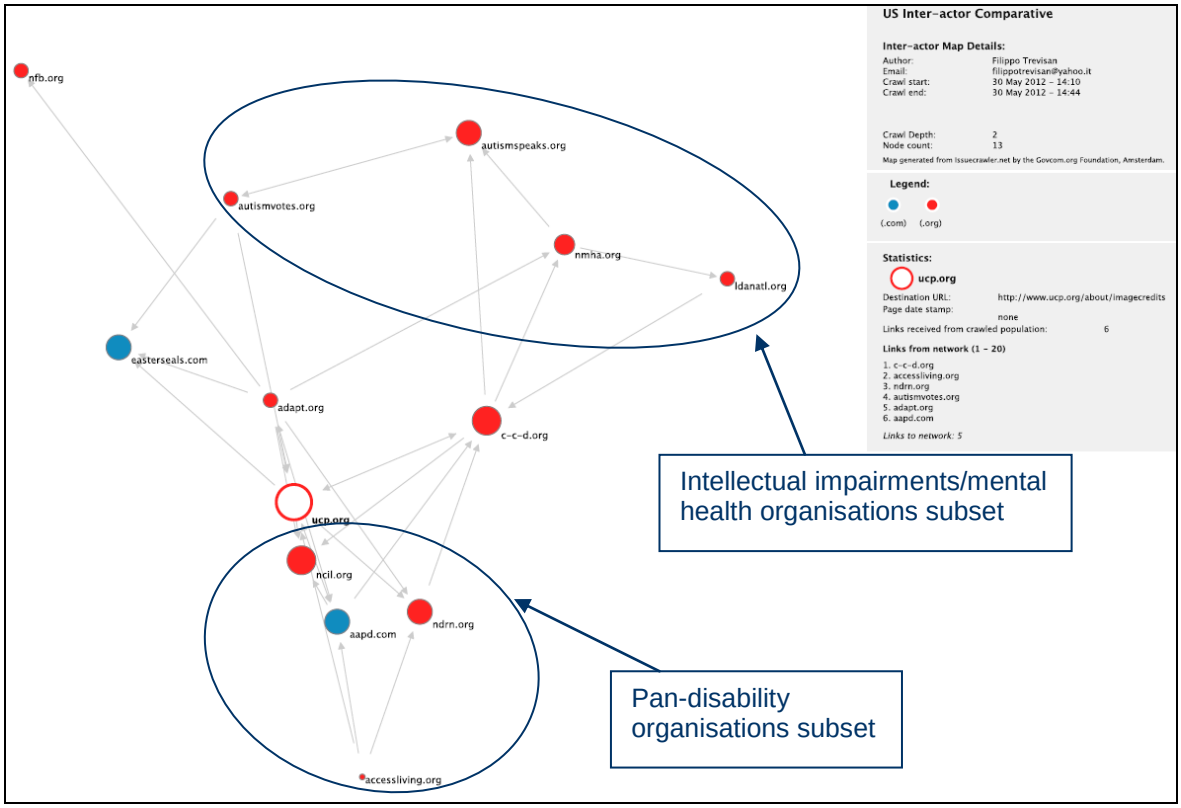


Fig. 7.1 – IssueCrawler inter-actor network map, US formal disability organisations

On the other hand, UK groups were characterised by a relatively greater amount of connections (Fig. 7.2). Indeed, the strength of these links was limited and thus comparable to that of connections among U.S. organisations. Yet, as also discussed in Chapter Four in relation to the wider network surrounding these groups, inter-actor analysis showed that links among British formal disability organisations were distributed more evenly across different types of organisations. Whether this was a by-product of their collaborative campaign against the welfare reform was of secondary importance here. While in fact hyperlinks should not necessarily be considered as signals of endorsement or agreement, their mere existence characterised British organisations as potentially more inclined to dialogue with one another, which provided more fertile ground for collaborative campaigning than in the U.S.

Interestingly, if unsurprisingly, the websites of disability groups consortia constituted focal elements in either case as they were both connected to a high number of other nodes. However, each of these also performed a very different function in their respective networks, crucially influencing its structure. The web pages of Britain's Disability Benefits Consortium (DBC)[26], while well connected, were not pivotal to the very existence of the surrounding network, in which organisations tended to link directly to

[26] DBC web pages were hosted on the Disability Alliance's website (www.disabilityalliance.org).

one another, forming a structure that resembled an "all-channel" network (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 2001: 7-8).

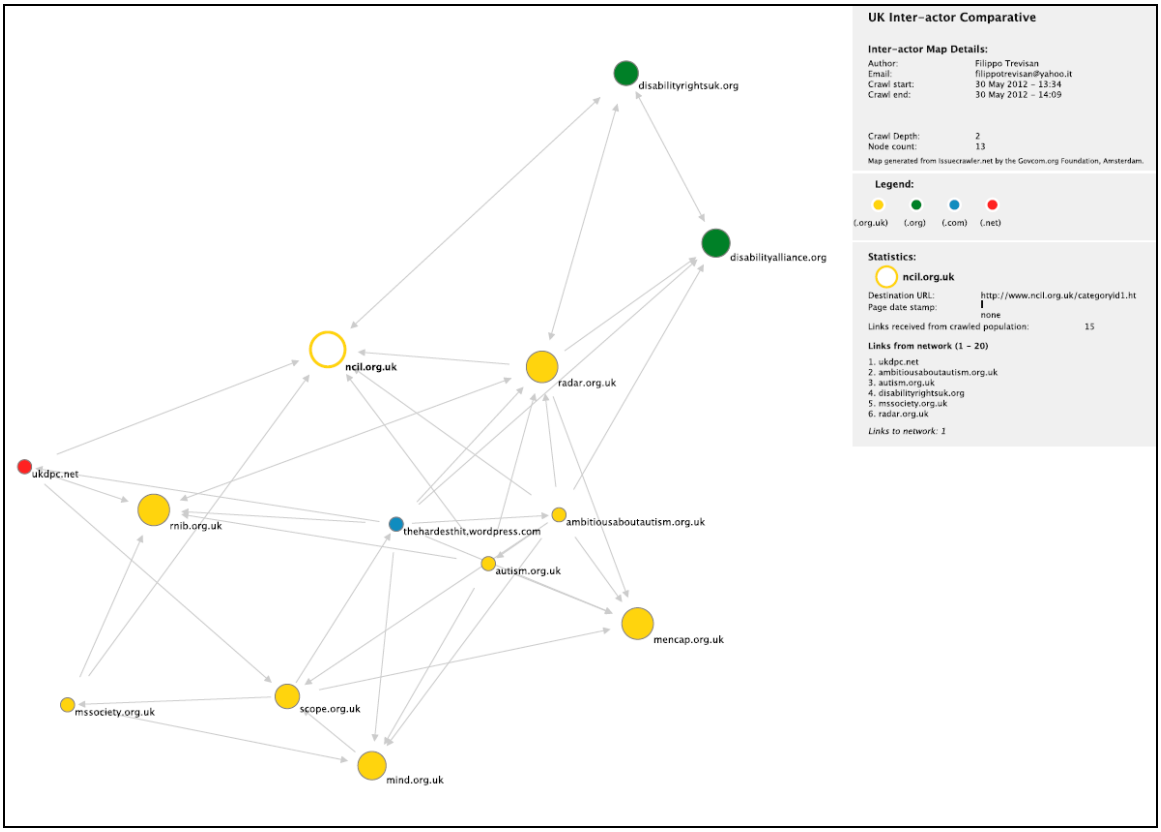


Fig. 7.2 – IssueCrawler inter-actor network map, UK formal disability organisations

Instead, the website of the U.S. Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities (CCD) constituted a sort of "hub" that provided indirect links between otherwise separate nodes. As such, the shape of the U.S. network was closer to that of a "star" supported by a central node performing as a "facilitator" or "broker" of inter-organisational relationships, albeit not necessarily occupying a hierarchically dominant position (Mandell, 2001: 281). Given CCD's very large remit and traditional civil rights focus, it was reasonable to hypothesise that Medicaid cuts did not constitute an issue capable of activating the connections otherwise promoted by that consortium, thus increasing the likelihood of a fragmented response among American disability organisations.

Conversely, all UK organisations stressed that:

> *"partnering with other organisations at this time [in the wake of welfare reform proposals] is [was] absolutely vital and you need[ed] to be quite creative about it."*
>
> (Policy officer, UK member-led group, July 2011)

UK groups acknowledged the struggle over disability welfare reform as a key catalyst for setting differences aside and organising a joint campaign, albeit:

> *"only in the short term, without a specific strategy to push this into the longer term."*
> (Communications officer, UK charity, July 2011)

The magnitude and ideological implications of the UK government's welfare reform agenda went substantially beyond those of a mere reduction in the disability benefits budget, involving some of the basic principles upon which the entitlement to such welfare has rested in recent decades. At the same time, public opinion was being influenced by the aforementioned mass media-hype on "benefit scroungers." Under these circumstances of "total emergency," as some participants dubbed the first half of 2011, the internet allowed a wide range of UK disability groups to establish virtual "headquarters" for their collaborative campaign while also preserving their individual "brands" as discussed in Chapter Four. As such, participants pointed at the fact that joint online campaigning dispelled some of the concerns associated with otherwise burdensome "formal" coalitions, while it also:

> *"showed that if we [they] work together and all the energies are thrown behind social media, then results happen."*
> (Head of communications, UK charity, September 2011)

Overall, this comparison enabled to put the role of the internet in the emergence of a unitary front against the UK welfare reform into perspective. In particular, online media facilitated the formation of a flexible, *ad hoc* coalition of formal organisations in Britain because the issues at stake were ideological and unifying, requiring a response to controversial government plans rather than a proactive effort to push a new issue on the agenda. In other words, the deeply controversial policy context persuaded British groups that there was more to be gained than to be lost in online cooperation. Therefore, The Hardest Hit's digital endeavours could be regarded as somewhat of a "shortcut" to and from collaborative campaigning. That is because they allowed partner organisations to maximise the benefits of working with others while also leaving them free to resume business as usual once the "storm" would eventually be over. Instead, the different nature of the issue at stake in the U.S. inhibited collaboration, online as well as offline, among national disability organisations. Not only did the threat of cuts to Medicaid fail to activate

indirect inter-organisational ties traditionally centred on civil rights issues, but the relatively low cost of e-campaigning also incentivised organisations preoccupied first and foremost with the interests of their own constituent-base to "go it alone." In turn, the occurrence of a unified online response to policy challenges also inevitably influenced the technological preferences of the groups under scrutiny in each country, as discussed in detail in the next section

7.3 – Email is king but not enough for British organisations

A second key finding was that disability organisations in Britain and America displayed different technological preferences when it came to eliciting action from their supporters. Interviews crucially revealed that these basic differences stemmed in fact from profoundly divergent strategic priorities, institutional contexts and cultural norms, all of which lie at the root of how citizens in either country communicate with government and decision-makers more generally. While the approach of the organisations under scrutiny to social networking platforms will be explored in a dedicated section below, at this point it is useful to reflect on the use of "old school," one-to-one and traditionally closed digital communication circuits such as email and "classic" clicktivism tools (e.g. e-postcards, online petitions, template messages, etc.).

First, U.S. organizations were particularly attached to email not only as a way to communicate with supporters, but also as the primary online channel for them to engage in online political action by contacting Congress members directly. Virtually all of the American groups interviewed for this study believed that:

> *"if we didn't have email [action alerts], then a lot of our ability to respond [to unexpected events] would be much more difficult, not impossible but much more difficult, as also making sure that we have our members-input would be much more difficult."*
> (Chair, U.S. member-led cross-disability group, June 2011)

Thus, over two-thirds of the U.S. organisations under scrutiny run "action alert networks" (Table 7.1), which invariably took the form of electronic mailing lists used to distribute policy updates and targeted "action calls" to supporters whenever it was necessary to demonstrate to decision-makers that their position on a given issue was solidly backed by the disability community.

Table 7.1 – Email and clicktivism features (U.S. organisations)

U.S. Organisation	Action Alert Network (Email)	Other email updates (incl. Newsletter)	Find+contact your representative widget	Clicktivism tools (e-petition, e-postcard)	Other activism resources
AAPD (incl. JFA)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
NCIL	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
NDRN	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Access Living	No	Yes	No	No	No
ADAPT	Yes	No	Yes	No	Protest briefings
UCP	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Easter Seals	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
The ARC	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Autism Speaks/Autism Votes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Mental Health America	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
NFB	No	Yes	No	No	No
LDAA	Yes	No	No	No	No
MS Society	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Campaign manual

Typically, action requests were issued on or around days of important Congress votes, asking supporters to get in touch with elected representatives via email or phone. Email messages provided subscribers with a standard set of resources such as contact details for elected officials and relevant federal agencies, a brief on the issue(s) at stake, as well as a template message to use as a starting point for emailing or phoning politicians. Therefore, email constituted an unrivalled e-action channel for U.S. disability rights groups, most of which also had set up permanent "email your representative" widgets on the homepages of their websites (Table 7.1). As one participant noted:

> *"perhaps we [disability organisations] are a little behind compared to other organisations in that we're still primarily using email, but that has to do with the accessibility of technologies like Facebook."*
>
> (Head of communications, U.S. member-led impairment-specific group, May 2011)

At the same time, however, this system severely limited the scope for direct user-input to online political action. While in fact users were generally encouraged to edit and personalise template messages before sending them on to policy-makers (more on this in the next section), the topics, timing and modes of interaction with elected representatives were *de facto* dictated by the organisations, which saw this as part of their duty to "keep an eye on Washington" on behalf of their members. Despite enabling top-down control over both the agenda and the online action repertoire, email alerts paradoxically constituted a

rather un-coordinated and un-controlled way to mobilise supporters towards specific policy goals. The vast majority of U.S. organisations interviewed for this project admitted they were:

> "*not monitoring whether then people do what we asked them for - most alerts we put out to the general membership we have no control over so sometimes we are really surprised by people's responses."*
>
> (Head of communications, U.S. non-profit, June 2011)

In other words, after providing initial input and basic resources, organisations left users to their own devices, often contacting them again only when a new action was required. Although participants justified this *vis-à-vis* the relatively high investment required to cover software and staff costs to track action rates, this still compromised the already frail "collective" character of email action alerts.

This was somewhat in contrast with the technological choices made by British organisations, which showed them to be keener than their American counterparts on using online media – especially social networking platforms – to mobilise, organise and coordinate supporters around more sophisticated campaign activities. Indeed, Email action alerts were still used by half of the UK groups considered in this study (Table 7.2). As a representative from one of these organisations explained, this was mainly because:

> *"for some people [potential supporters] when it comes to engaging in things like Facebook and Twitter there are still some barriers both in terms of accessibility of those tools and people's confidence in using them […] whereas email is something that most people are very comfortable with."*
>
> (Head of digital communications, UK charity, May 2011)

Nevertheless, email action alerts were also consistently complemented by other online initiatives, including in particular "collaborative" tasks ranging from contributing to draft consultation responses to organising "spoke" campaigns at local level, online as well as offline.

Table 7.2 – Email and clicktivism features (UK organisations)

UK Organisation	Action Alert Network (Email)	Other email updates (incl. Newsletter)	Find+contact your representative widget	Clicktivism tools (e-petition, e-postcard)	Other activism resources
UKDPC	No	No	Yes	No	No
Inclusion London	No	No	No	No	No
NCIL	No	No	No	Yes	No
Disability Alliance	No	No	No	No	No
RADAR	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
LCD	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
MENCAP	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Campaign manual
RNIB	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
SCOPE	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Campaign manual Event kit/map
MS Society	No	Yes	No	Yes	Campaign manual
MIND	Yes	Yes	No	No	Campaign manual
Ambitious about Autism	No	Yes	No	No	No
NAS	Yes	Yes	No	No	Campaign briefings
Action for ME	No	Yes	No	No	No

Furthermore, email networks themselves, when in use, were crucially interpreted as a vehicle to:

> *"advertise other initiatives and events, for instance tell people about consultations and encourage them to take part, not necessarily going word for word with the organisation […] in a way for us it's a big cultural shift."*
>
> (Campaigns officer, UK charity, Sept. 2011)

In addition to this, all but one of the British organisations under scrutiny had eliminated "email your MP" widgets from the homepages of their websites (Table 7.2) as part of a shift towards other forms of online action.

This trend was consistent with what Karpf found in his study on the content and purpose of action alert emails sent by major American progressive advocacy groups (2010a; 2010c), which showed these messages to be often used to introduce supporters to more advanced forms of online participation, facilitating their progression on an imaginary "ladder of engagement." In broad terms, this tendency was matched by British disability

organisations. Instead, the same could not be said of their American counterparts, which from this point of view represented a notable exception in the evolving landscape of U.S. digital advocacy. While in fact a detailed examination of the emails sent by disability organisations to their supporters was beyond the scope of this study, in interviews only one of them cast these messages as a "stepping stone" towards more complex forms of action. As such, the approach of UK disability groups to communication technologies, if still not quite "participatory," was somewhat more innovative than that favoured by U.S. organisations. What, then, led British groups to diversify their online mobilisation tactics, and what instead held back their American counterparts?

While it was reasonable to assume that, as hinted at by some participants, the acute controversy over welfare reform left British groups with no options but to venture into unchartered online territory, what came to the fore most strongly in interviews was the role played by the institutional set-up and political culture that characterise each country. Put simply, technological choices were made on the basis of political awareness rather than on the attractiveness of the latest and most fashionable technological innovation. As stated in Chapter Four, interviews provided a distinctive impression that the shift of UK organisations towards more sophisticated forms of user-engagement was accelerated, if not ignited, by the circumstances determined by the coalition government's welfare reform. Instead, in Washington email was perceived as a useful vehicle for influencing elected representatives because in the U.S. party discipline and allegiance tend to be less stringent than in the UK and can be overlooked in response to specific requests from constituents or, more cynically, as a matter of electoral convenience. This last point is particularly relevant with regard to the U.S. House of Representatives, where most discussions on Medicaid cuts took place and whose short two-year terms afford campaigning groups additional electoral leverage on its members (Holtz-Bacha and Kaid, 2011). As a participant from a cross-disability organisation noted:

> *"Congressmen wanna know who's voting, who's gonna 'make a stink' in their district if they don't respond to something […] it's about making sure that legislators know that people with disabilities vote and even at the Presidential level you get 14.7 million people with disabilities voting in 2008, so that's a major constituency and it's a swing vote that's not completely liberal."*
>
> (Policy officer, U.S. member-led cross-disability organisation, June 2011)

Furthermore, the preference accorded by U.S. disability organisations to email was also backed by a broader trend that in recent years has consistently seen email as the second most popular medium employed by Americans to correspond with government after the telephone (Smith, 2010: 13). As Earl and Kimpert (2011) noted in their recent work on online activism, the popularity of email campaigns does not come as a surprise given the long history of letter-writing campaigns in countries such as the U.S. More specifically, the use of direct emails to elected representatives was also in line with the idea of "individualism" that has traditionally driven self-determination and self-advocacy in the American disability rights movement (Carey, 2009: 222-3; Stroman, 2003: 213-25).

Nevertheless, it is also legitimate to ask whether email campaigns constituted anything but a mere technological extension of pre-existing "phone/write to your Congressman" action calls. As such, it could be argued that the attachment of American disability organisations to email as a vehicle for individual, loosely coordinated action truly represented "politics as usual." Formal disability groups remained wary of engaging "ordinary" users beyond a certain threshold for fear of losing control over their message and, even more so, to become redundant structures in an era of organisational fluidity and fragmentation. For disabled users in particular, while email remains the most accessible of online media, such lack of inventiveness and experimentation on the part of organisations prevented an exploration of other potentially viable and more participatory digital tactics.

Conversely, the choice of UK formal disability organisations to move away from action strategies centred primarily on email was based on practical experience with this campaign tactic as well as on considerations on the very nature of the British political system. As such, this trend reflected awareness of the fact that British MPs are generally under great pressure to adhere to their party's line and to stick to manifesto pledges. In addition, the fact that the welfare reform was brought forward in the initial part of a five-year parliamentary term also reduced the potential electoral leverage that constituents might have had on individual politicians. Under these circumstances, private email communications made for a poor channel for influencing controversial policy decisions. As one participant explained:

> *"one of the biggest criticisms we and all other organisations tend to get from MPs is they feel like ignoring the template messages that go into their inbox […] because there is an impression that people are doing this without really caring, which isn't actually the case, but that's how it is perceived."*
> (Campaigns officer, UK charity, Sept. 2011)

Furthermore, participants also confirmed that an increasing number of parliamentarians had recently replied to email campaigns with template messages directing petitioners to standardised responses posted on their personal or their party's website. Importantly, these concerns echoed the conflicting and often inconclusive results of empirical studies on email campaigns, which, somewhat ironically, have focused primarily on U.S. case studies (see for instance: Shulman, 2006; Bergan, 2009).

Amidst these differences there was however one noteworthy similarity between British and American formal disability organisations. That is, traditional clicktivism tools (e.g. e-petitions, electronic postcards, etc.) had fallen out of favour with the groups under scrutiny on both sides of the Atlantic. This was apparent from online media inventory results (see Tables 7.1 and 7.2 above) as well as from interview accounts. Both American and British participants asserted that:

> *"clicktivism is worth less than any other form of participation [online or offline],"*
> (Head of government relations, U.S. non-profit, June 2011)

as

> *"it may be effective in getting big numbers but ultimately decision-makers often don't listen to it."*
> (Head of communications, U.S. non-profit, June 2011).

These remarks resonated with a growing tendency among advocacy professionals, especially in the U.S., to doubt the efficacy of "push-a-button" tactics such as e-petitions in influencing decision-makers (Earl and Kimpert, 2011: 93-7). Furthermore, they were complemented by a widespread acknowledgement of the fact that the expectations of those at either end of the policy-making process – citizens on one side and politicians on the other – had evolved in parallel with their familiarity with technology, so that:

> *"users want to do more, and decision-makers expect much more than just a template message."*
> (Head of public affairs, U.S. non-profit, Aug. 2011)

As one British participant explained:

> *"over time people have got more used to this type of communications and therefore as an organisation you […] start to become more creative, you start almost to lessen your fear of it […] we now try and encourage people to be, to take more initiative in saying it the way they wanna say it"*
> (Campaigns officer, UK charity, Sept. 2011)

As such, participants demonstrated awareness of the growing tendency among potential online supporters to look for genuine "entrepreneurial engagement" channels (Bimber, Flanagin, and Stohl, 2012). In response to these expectations, UK as well as U.S. groups had matured a commitment to avoiding what they described as "slacktivism" to promote instead the personalisation of campaigns, albeit through different practices. The next session discusses this issue in detail.

7.4 – Personal stories as a "trademark" of online campaigning

In both countries, a key way to address expectations for greater user-input was the tendency for digital campaigns to include personal stories of disability. In particular, interview participants from British as well as American organisations repeatedly stressed that such narratives were essential to grab the attention of both decision-makers and established news media. Yet, although all the groups under scrutiny showed clear awareness of the fact that:

> *"the political is often the personal and vice versa,"*
> (Activist network manager, U.S. non-profit, May 2011)

in practice this translated into different ways of including private elements in political messages. As discussed in the previous chapter, personal narratives fulfilled pivotal functions in Facebook discussion among supporters of disability welfare campaigns in the UK. While the increasing personalisation of online activism is by no means unique to disability organisations (Bennett and Segerberg, 2011), the controversial role of disability stories in campaign communication made this an especially crucial part of the comparison. In particular, it was useful to reflect on two issues, namely: the consequences of using different types of online media to communicate private narratives; and the position occupied by personal stories in the history of disability activism in either country.

In Britain, The Hardest Hit coalition actively encouraged disabled users to share their stories on its Facebook page (see Chapter Six). In addition, half of its member organisations considered in this chapter also used their websites to ask supporters to submit personal narratives for inclusion in mediated campaign material (Table 7.3). At the same time, American groups regularly insisted that "action alerts" recipients should refer to their own experiences when emailing policy-makers directly (Table 7.4). In fact, U.S. interview participants placed such emphasis on the importance of this practice that the term "clicktivism plus" was coined to indicate email action calls inviting users to personalise template messages issued by the organisation for contacting members of Congress over specific issues and/or votes (Table 7.4).

Table 7.3 – UK organisations campaign personalisation

UK Organisation	Site customisation	Clicktivism+	"Send us your stories"
UKDPC	No	No	No
Inclusion London	No	No	Yes
NCIL	No	No	Yes
Disability Alliance	No	No	No
RADAR	Yes	No	No
LCD	No	No	Yes
MENCAP	Yes	No	No
RNIB	Yes	Yes	Yes
SCOPE	No	No	Yes
MS Society	Yes	Yes	Yes
MIND	Yes	Yes	Yes
Ambitious about Autism	No	No	No
NAS	Yes	Yes	No
Action for ME	Yes	No	No

Table 7.4 – U.S. organisations campaign personalisation

U.S. Organisation	Site customisation	Clicktivism+	"Send us your stories"
AAPD (incl. JFA)	No	Yes	Yes
NCIL	No	Yes	No
NDRN	No	Yes	No
Access Living	No	No	No
ADAPT	No	Yes	No
UCP	No	Yes	No
Easter Seals	No	Yes	No
The ARC	Yes	Yes	No
Autism Speaks/Autism Votes	No	Yes	No
Mental Health America	No	Yes	No
NFB	Yes	No	No
LDAA	Yes	No	Yes
MS Society	Yes	Yes	Yes

This marked a clear departure from the "obsolete" and dubiously effective practice of forwarding fixed messages to policy-makers (Schlosberg, Zavestoski and Shulman, 2007).

Nevertheless, American organisations did not explicitly promote the sharing of personal stories on their social networking pages. This was part of a broader tendency for the U.S. organisations under scrutiny to refrain from giving "free rein" to supporters on social media, as discussed below in a dedicated section. Although at first these differences may appear to be merely "procedural," they in fact carried substantial implications for disabled users in particular.

As highlighted in the previous chapter, and despite its controversial aspects, posting personal disability stories on social media entailed two key benefits. First, it facilitated a collaborative understanding of complex policy issues among those at the receiving end of disability welfare reforms. Second, it generated potential for community building among users, possibly boosting their chances of achieving group agency. Conversely, emails to policy-makers constitute a closed, one-to-one communication circuit. For this reason, the "clicktivism plus" strategy deployed by American disability organisations was only capable of providing an individual lobbying experience short of the positive aspects of social media conversations. As one participant with previous experience as Congressional staff put it:

> *"personalised communication has a much bigger impact because people relate to it [...] it's somebody speaking up for themselves and putting a human face on an issue - in advocacy that's the most important thing."*
> (Head of communications, U.S. non-profit, July 2011)

Yet, at the same time their preference for email over other online media significantly curtailed the amount of control handed over to online supporters, as well as the opportunity for those to network with one another. The campaign agenda remained firmly in the hands of organisation leaders, favouring a model in which communications tend to flow vertically from top to bottom and users are encouraged to address decision-makers individually. In fact, looking at this from a rather cynical point of view, it could be tempting to conclude that "clicktivism plus" comes closer to boosting pre-determined organisational priorities than to genuinely "participatory" campaigning.

However, this is not to say that the approach of American non-profits to personal stories was characterised solely by negative aspects, nor that the strategy deployed by their British counterparts was inherently superior. As such, it is important to note that U.S. groups encouraged supporters to establish a *de facto* direct communication line with policy-makers and represent their grievances to them in an unmediated fashion. Thus, it

could be argued that this made for a form of lobbying more respectful of individual experiences and therefore potentially more pluralistic. This was implicitly acknowledged by participants from the most advocacy-focussed American organisations – e.g. AAPD, NCIL, and NNDR – who remarked that:

> *"this [supporters contacting policy-makers] is almost beyond our control, because it's out there anyway."*
> (External relations officer, U.S. non-profit, June 2011)

In contrast, the primary objective of British disability organisations that solicited personal stories from online supporters, on social media as well as on their websites, was to acquire compelling narratives to be included in mediated campaign material. In this context, community building and the negotiation of policy meaning among users on platforms such as Facebook represented complementary and possibly inadvertent "side effects" rather than explicit campaign goals. This was consistent with the tendency for UK groups to cast themselves as "transmission belts" between disabled citizens and representative institutions thanks to their reputation and resources, as discussed in Chapter Four.

In addition, it should also be noted that personal stories have long occupied a central position in the advocacy repertoire of the American disability movement. In particular, U.S. disability groups have traditionally pursued the expansion of legislative provisions for disabled people by means of litigation. This is a common, if lengthy and expensive, strategy among U.S. interest groups (Walker, 1991: 181-3). While in fact British disability groups started to see court cases as an effective way to promote policy change only very recently (Vanhala, 2011: 146-7 and 201-2), U.S. organisations have been engaging in legal action for decades, borrowing this strategy from civil rights activists (Zames-Fleischer and Zames, 2001: 73-77; Vaughn-Switzer, 2003: 86-9). Traditionally, individual discrimination cases have also provided a compelling background for the introduction of disability legislation to Congress, the most recent case being Rosa's Law[27], which was mentioned repeatedly in interviews as an example of effective advocacy work. For this reason, the use of personal stories in email campaigns was in line with the American tradition of recurring to individual cases in order to promote the benefit of a whole group. Furthermore, as noted by Barnartt and Scotch in their fascinating history of

[27] Rosa's Law (Public Law 111-256), signed by President Obama in October 2010, provided for the replacement of the wording "mental retardation" with "intellectual disability" in several instances of federal law and other regulations. Inspiration for this piece of legislation came from a campaign mounted by the family of Rosa Marcellino, a child with Down's syndrome whose story had previously underpinned the introduction of similar provisions in Maryland state law.

the U.S. disability movement (2001: 105-6 and 223), advocates have applied a "service provision" frame rather than a "rights-based" one to their campaigns ever since the early 1990s. Personal stories of disability lend themselves particularly well to such campaigns, of which electronic messaging represents a contemporary expansion.

Overall, despite some important differences, these findings confirmed that online activism is fostering the personalisation of disability politics in both Britain and America. In fact, it could be argued that the incorporation of private accounts in communications with policy-makers constituted an equal and opposite trend to the one for which in recent decades politicians have tried to appeal to an increasingly disenfranchised citizenry by boosting personal elements in campaign communication (Langer, 2010; 2011). Organisations and their online supporters in both countries sought to enrich otherwise "bland" messages with personal accounts in order to catch the eye of "inattentive" politicians. Positive and negative elements co-existed within both the forms of this practice examined in this project. Crucially, it could be objected that emotional accounts make for shaky policy foundations, which disability activists would undoubtedly prefer being built around issues of rights and social justice rather than out of pity or compassion. In light of these considerations, it was not clear whether either of the cases discussed above represented a path to empowerment or rather one towards the fortification of stereotypes and further vilification for disabled internet users. In this context, final judgement on the consequences of either of these practices ought to be suspended until additional analysis on the actual content of personal narratives can be carried out.

So far, this chapter has focused on key tactical differences. Moving from these considerations, the remaining sections dwell further into interview and online media inventory data to examine the perceptions and beliefs underpinning the technological preferences of the groups under scrutiny. In particular, attitudes to the idea of online "membership," the function of social media, as well as online political action more generally are brought into the spotlight and discussed *vis-à-vis* social, political and institutional aspects of the respective national contexts.

7.5 – "Membership" in the digital era: A shifting concept?

Despite tactical divergences and financial constraints, all the groups under scrutiny confirmed that they were investing to expand their web presence. This was partly because they claimed to genuinely believe in new media's potential to enhance their campaigning

efforts. In addition, peer-pressure was also a factor. As the chair of a UK member-led group remarked:

> *"everyone's on it [the internet] so we need to be there too."*
> (Chair, UK member-led cross-disability group, August 2011)

What, however, was the value that British and American disability organisations actually attributed to their respective online supporters? While researchers have taken a keen interest in what online participation means for users (e.g. Bimber, Flanagin, and Stohl, 2012; Lusoli and Ward, 2004), less is known about the perspective of formal organisations on this point: are these groups truly as comfortable with the idea of "online membership" as it is assumed in some of the literature? An intuitive way of gauging the importance of online support for a given organisation could be to consider the total number of users who, for instance, have subscribed to its email action alerts or Facebook page. According to such "quantitative" logic, U.S. disability non-profits looked substantially more successful than their UK counterparts at attracting online supporters. For example, at the time of data collection, American organisations counted a disproportionately larger number of Facebook "fans" than British ones[28] (Fig. 7.3). It could therefore be tempting to assume that this occurred because American groups placed greater value on their online "audience," thus investing more in order to develop their digital support base.

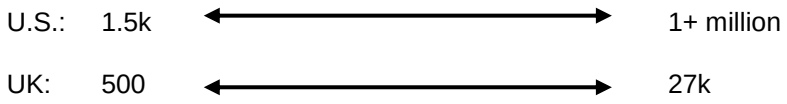


Fig. 7.3 – Range of Facebook "fan" number for groups under scrutiny (as of 31st March 2012)

Yet, this conclusion would rest on at least two fundamentally flawed assumptions. First, that all subscribers participate to the "virtual" life of these groups in an equal fashion. Second, and possibly more importantly, that all organisations prioritise the acquisition of a large number of online supporters over other aspects of their relationship with users. Instead, and although some of the groups under scrutiny certainly regarded a large digital "fan" base as a way to acquire additional legitimacy in the eyes of policy-makers, this does not necessarily imply that they also enabled users to be meaningful contributors to their initiatives. Furthermore, as demonstrated by the data on Facebook activity discussed in the

[28] This is in consideration of the fact that the UK and the U.S. are characterised by similar rates of internet penetration (83.6% and 78.1% of the total population respectively as of 30 June 2012) and Facebook usage (52.3% and 52.9% of the total population respectively as of 30 Sept. 2012). All data from: www.internetworldstats.com.

previous chapter, content contribution rates tend to differ greatly among online supporters, only a small minority of whom are typically very active.

In light of these considerations, interviews were instrumental in exploring what online support actually meant to formal disability organisations in Britain and America. Overall, an unexpected picture emerged, which confirmed "quantity" of virtual endorsements to be a poor indicator of the "quality" of user-support as perceived by organisations in either country. On the one hand, U.S. participants drew a clear distinction between the number of their online supporters and what they saw as their real value. On the other hand, conversations with UK organisations showed these to be warming up to a notion of "extended membership."

In particular, American disability organisations found themselves "trapped" between the formal structure of their:

> *"membership, who pay their dues and in return expect exclusive benefits"*
> (Chair, U.S. member-led cross-disability organisation, June 2011)

on one side and the open nature of social media such as Facebook on the other, which was invariably identified as:

> *"not quite a problem but certainly a challenge […] because there are things like for example discussions on developing a position paper that ought to remain members-only."*
> (Chair, U.S. member-led cross-disability organisation, June 2011)

As one participant put it:

> *"there is no such thing as 'online membership.' Success comes from in-person, active participation."*
> (Senior VP, U.S. member-led impairment-specific group, June 2011)

While this position was particularly uncompromising, it also signalled a widespread tendency to cast online support as an "intermediate" step on the path towards full (i.e. paying) membership, as opposed to a distinct and *per se* worthwhile way of participating in the life of an organisation. This was consistent with a broader trend for U.S. "legacy" organisations to "maintain a distinction between e-mail 'supporters' and dues-paying

'members' " (Karpf, 2012: 37). Indeed, other American disability groups expressed somewhat less rigid views on this point, which in fact was championed more frequently by senior leaders and government relations managers than by those in a communications role. Yet, as a general trend, this echoed the relative limitedness of the virtual action repertoire offered by U.S. disability organisations, introducing the idea of a divide between online and offline participation, as discussed in detail below.

Conversely, UK participants revealed an outlook that was substantially more appreciative of online support. As such, they consistently cast social media followers as something more than simply future member material. Not only did British groups greatly value the contribution made by online "fans" to their campaign work, but some also demonstrated a certain degree of vision in:

> *"providing different interaction options for different people depending on what their interests and their time constraints are – there are different levels of engagement so for example opening an email would be a level one engagement, clicking through an email would be a level two and so on, but physical presence is not any more valuable than online engagement."*
> (Head of digital communications, UK charity, May 2011)

As another participant noted:

> *"there are quite a few people who don't want to be formally associated with a large national charity, especially people who have had bad experiences with a charity before, but social media gives them very much a kind of 'arms reach' contact and opportunities to criticise as well."*
> (Campaigns officer, UK charity, Sept. 2011)

This approach resonated with a general tendency among campaigning organisations to carry out a "reassessment of what it means to be a 'member' or a 'supporter'" for which "new cohorts of 'affiliate' members [now] sit alongside traditional dues-paying members" (Chadwick, 2007: 288). As such, British formal disability organisations focused on the benefits afforded by a flexible understanding of "membership" in the digital era that were first championed by non-conventional activist groups and have since made inroads into the way of thinking of more traditional political organisations (Ward, 2011: 932; Brainard and

Siplon, 2004). In particular, a useful parallel could be drawn with European political parties. In fact, while European parties have historically favoured a regimented form of affiliation, in recent years some of them have also started to attach more value to the idea of "online members," especially as a way to boost participation in election campaigns and to avoid, at least in part, a decline that was otherwise seen as irreversible (Gibson and Römmele, 2007; Lilleker and Jackson, 2011). Likewise, most UK disability organisations examined for this part of the study were in the process of striking a compromise between their existing structure and the changes required by "online membership" in return for the benefits afforded by online organising.

Indeed, the idea that political organisations may rank supporters as more or less valuable according to the perceived strength of their commitment is not particularly new. However, the advent of digital politics has complicated matters, *de facto* forcing campaigning groups to deal with new types of supporters and unconventional modes of engagement. In recent years, this has attracted the attention of political communication scholars, who have hypothesised the existence of a "ladder of political loyalty" (Lilleker, 2012) inspired by key concepts drawn from marketing theory (Christopher et al., 1991). Furthermore, it is also logical that groups operating within different national contexts categorise supporters according to different criteria. Yet, the views of British and American disability organisations on the issue of "online membership" were so distant from one another that it was crucial to understand what led the former to attach considerable value to a group that the latter regarded instead as volatile and unreliable.

It emerged from interviews that the main factor behind this sharp divergence was, yet again, the difference in nature and severity between the policy "crises" surrounding each set of organisations. As such, most British participants made direct references to the welfare reform controversy as the key reason for re-evaluating the importance of online support. This is not to say that this shift would not have happened had the debate over disability benefits not turned into a contentious issue. In the longer run, UK disability groups may certainly have come under pressure to experiment with "online membership" as a way to remedy the decline of traditional member numbers, as already experienced by other campaigning organisations (Bimber, Flanagin, and Stohl 2012; Lusoli and Ward, 2006). Yet, participants suggested that the policy crisis had added a crucial sense of urgency to this situation, requiring their groups to attract new energies quickly and therefore accelerating the shift towards a more "fluid" type of membership. In other words, events pushed British organisations to:

> *"focus on the short term, not thinking of what would happen more than a few months down the line."*
> (Head of digital communications, UK charity, May 2011)

In turn, this ushered in a fresh perspective on the value of online participation, which challenged and arguably changed established organisational "norms."

In contrast, the limited magnitude of Medicaid events did not require American disability organisations to re-consider their preference for formal membership. It could be argued that their views nonetheless represented an out-dated conceptualisation of the relationship between digital media and organisational structures. Yet, it also ought to be noted that this idea is in fact connected to two factors that may make it potentially detrimental for American disability non-profits to fully embrace informal "online membership." First and foremost are financial constraints. Unlike most of their British counterparts, and similarly to other U.S. legacy organisations, American disability non-profits rely exclusively on private donations and generally do not run services capable of generating income to re-invest in advocacy work (Walker, 1991: 107). Therefore, a social media approach grounded on the belief that:

> *"Facebook, Twitter and YouTube will increase [formal] membership,"*
> (Chair, U.S. member-led cross-disability organisation, June 2011)

can be understood *vis-à-vis* the need for private donations under which these groups regularly operate, especially at times of economic crisis. In this context, online media provide a powerful extension for "marketing membership" practices whose ultimate goal is to sign up as many supporters as possible to be "full" paying members (Jordan and Maloney, 1997: 148-65). Second, the main purpose of these organisations remains to build a movement operating over the long term in a specific policy "niche," and as such their preference is clearly oriented towards what they perceive as solidly committed supporters.

It is probably too early to say whether such divergent perspectives on the idea of "online membership" will have a lasting impact on either set of organisations, or indeed if this concept is here to stay. Yet, these observations provided a further confirmation of the fact that digital media *per se* are insufficient to generate meaningful organisational change. Instead, this is more likely to occur if the use of technology is simultaneously underpinned by circumstances that effectively force otherwise reluctant leaders to look for innovative solutions. These results reaffirmed the centrality of external catalysts – in particular acute policy crises – in pushing the boundaries of online activism. Inevitably, key ideas on the

value of online support also resonated with the attitude of these groups to social media and online action more generally, which are discussed in detail in the following sections.

7.6 – Social media: *"Mildly terrifying"* or a *"Force for change"*?

Carrying out an in-depth comparative assessment of the broad use of social media by British and American formal disability organisations was beyond the scope of this study. However, given the increasing centrality of these platforms to online politics, it is useful to briefly reflect on what interviews revealed with regard to the approach of these groups to the likes of Twitter, Google+ and, especially, Facebook.

On balance, a number of important similarities emerged. First, the vast majority of groups in both countries showed awareness of social media's ambivalence for disability activism and in particular of the tension existing between the inherently open nature of the latter and natural control impulses in formal organisations. Furthermore, all but one of the participants spontaneously offered to discuss issues of social media accessibility, demonstrating attention for how these can constitute exclusionary barriers for disabled users depending on their impairment(s) and the platform(s) involved. As such, all participants outlined how their organisations sought to address some of these issues by consistently complementing their social media efforts with more accessible digital channels (chiefly email) and by preserving their print updates and face-to-face "surgeries," primarily for the benefit of older supporters and despite considerable financial cost.

However, at the same time it also became apparent that British and American disability organisations held divergent views on the function of social media within their respective communication ecologies. This led to some important, if not consistently clear-cut, revelations. While in fact the vast majority of participants in either country interpreted social media's bottom-up nature as a potential challenge to the consolidated position held by their respective organisations in disability activism, British groups tended to emphasise this as a positive chance for "renewal," albeit a complex one to navigate. In contrast, their U.S. counterparts overwhelmingly withdrew into a more conservative approach that sought to blend traditional control patterns with two-way communications. The last point in particular was counter-intuitive because American groups, given the technological context in which they operate and the influence of the Obama '08 success story, were expected to be more comfortable and thus in tune with the use of social media for campaigning purposes.

It was again reasonable to assume that the climate of profound emergency connected to the disability welfare reform underpinned the move of UK formal

organisations towards a more positive perspective on social media. As reported above in relation to the personalisation of social media and email content, British formal disability organisations regarded it as a necessity to entrust online supporters with a certain degree of freedom as they accepted that certain changes in organisational dynamics were beyond their control. The impression was therefore one of a set of groups that sought to manage an inevitable transition rather than blatantly ignoring it. In particular, as discussed in Chapter Six, British participants cited The Hardest Hit as an example of campaign enriched by suggestions made by ordinary supporters on social media. In addition to that, they also outlined the value of the likes of Facebook as:

> *"essential tools for online protest for those who otherwise would not make the march, whether because of financial or physical barriers, or because they don't deal well with crowd situations."*
> (Campaigns officer, UK charity, Aug. 2011)

As a campaigns officer from one of Britain's biggest impairment-specific charities noted:

> *"there is an audience who are younger who maybe wouldn't engage with a 'Victorian' organisations like ours who now can do so on their own platform."*
> (Campaigns officer, UK charity, Sept. 2011)

Thus, the spin was generally on the innovative rather than the controversial aspects of social media. Indeed, further empirical research would be needed to establish whether the social media presence of these groups actually stood up to the principles discussed in interviews. However, these comments corroborated the impression of a refreshing departure from the suspicious attitude to these platforms encountered among Scottish disability groups during fieldwork carried out for the pilot study that preceded this project (Trevisan, 2012a). In particular, it is useful to point out that, while pilot study participants had primarily cast social media as channels for marketing and fundraising (*ibid.*, pp. 396-7), representatives of UK organisations interviewed for this project made no mention of such functions, demonstrating a rather more sophisticated understanding of these platforms as geared towards dialogue with users.

This was in stark contrast to the rhetoric deployed by American organisations when discussing the function of social media in interviews. Overall, participants from these groups came to social networking platforms from a rather different angle, explaining that:

> *"social media can facilitate a conversation, but online advocacy is an entirely different thing."*
> (Head of communications, U.S. non-profit, Aug. 2011)

This was exemplified by the choice of some groups to prevent ordinary users from starting their own conversation threads on "official" Facebook pages (Table 7.5). As explained by a participant from a pan-disability organisation, this decision reflected a determination to:

> *"keep it [Facebook] somewhat superficial unless we know that everybody's gonna agree […] we don't wanna give our supporters an opportunity to get into a 'dog-fight' on our Facebook page."*
> (Head of communications, U.S. cross-disability non-profit, June 2011)

The last point in particular constituted a direct discrepancy with UK organisations, which consistently enabled supporters to post "starter" contributions and potentially help shaping the agenda for online discussion (Table 7.6).

Table 7.5 – Facebook key features (U.S. groups)

U.S. Organisation	Anyone can start Facebook thread	Facebook Causes App
AAPD (incl. JFA)	No	Yes
NCIL	Yes	No
NDRN	No	No
Access Living	Yes	Yes
ADAPT	No	Yes
UCP	Yes	Yes
Easter Seals	Yes	Yes
The ARC	Yes	Yes
Autism Speaks/Autism Votes	No	Yes
Mental Health America	Yes	Yes
NFB	n/a	n/a
LDAA	Yes	No
MS Society	Yes	Yes

Table 7.6 – Facebook key features (UK groups)

UK Organisation	Anyone can start Facebook thread	Facebook Causes App
UKDPC	Yes	No
Inclusion London	n/a	n/a
NCIL	n/a	n/a
Disability Alliance	Yes	No
RADAR	Yes	No
LCD	Yes	No
MENCAP	Yes	No
RNIB	Yes	No
SCOPE	Yes	No
MS Society	Yes	No
MIND	Yes	No
Ambitious about Autism	Yes	No
NAS	Yes	No
Action for ME	Yes	No

Furthermore, in accordance with the funding model discussed in the previous section, U.S. groups had integrated a fundraising element in their Facebook presence. Most of them had adopted "Causes," an app that allows supporters to make donations through Facebook (Table 7.5). This was again in opposition to the experience of their British counterparts, none of which was using this tool at the time of data collection (Table 7.6).

As shown in previous research, it is logical for non-profits in any sector to fear that handing control over to users will ultimately deprive their leaders of authority and endanger their position as intermediaries in policy-making (Kenix, 2007; 2008a; 2008b). Yet, organisations *de facto* do not have a choice but to measure themselves with new forms of online engagement. In this context, future successes depend on their ability to appropriately understand and embrace both the challenges and opportunities offered by new media (Brainard and Siplon, 2002; 2004). In light of these considerations, most American participants showed to be aware that they may be taking a risk by sticking to a traditional approach. In particular, communication specialists interviewed for this study consistently sought to place responsibility for this choice onto their:

> *" public policy team[s, who] are resistant to the openness of social media."*
> (Head of communications, U.S. impairment-specific non-profit, June 2011)

Besides their comments on the purpose of social media, participants also expressed a series of wider views on online action and on how this compares to its offline counterpart. While these considerations indirectly informed much of what was discussed so far in this chapter, the final section focuses specifically on this point, which bears crucial connections to the local institutional architecture of each country and the position occupied by disability non-profits in their respective governance structures.

7.7 - *"Showing up on Capitol Hill is equivalent to 10,000 emails"*: Does online action really matter?

The quote in the heading above is drawn from an interview carried out with an American participant in July 2011. While it possibly makes for a simplistic sound-bite, it also encapsulates a view shared by the vast majority of American participants. As it became apparent early on during data collection, U.S. organisations, irrespective of their founding ethos, attributed different importance to "real life" and online participation respectively. Put simply, these groups had established a "hierarchy of value" between offline and online

political action for which the former was considered superior to the latter. This was exemplified not only by the sceptical attitude these groups displayed towards social media, as discussed above, but also by the fact that none of them had set up a "virtual participation" page in connection with their main policy objectives and advocacy targets. Although it may be cynically argued that it was entirely natural for this type of assertions to come from a group of "Washington-insiders" who liaise with decision-makers on a daily basis and in a way have to "justify" their expensive K Street offices, such offline vs. online dichotomy still prompted a series of important reflections.

In particular, the perspective of U.S. organisations was in direct contrast with what resulted from interviews with UK groups. As outlined above in relation to the shifting idea of "membership," British organisations interpreted online participation in campaign events and other initiatives as more than a mere supplement to offline action. As one participant explained:

> *"they [online and offline action] are of equal value because they matter in different ways to different people – for example, they allow people who would be excluded from direct action to also voice their concerns as through Twitter we can reach politicians and the media directly."*
> (Head of communications, UK charity, Aug. 2011)

In this context, online action was seen as complementary to offline initiatives yet not in a subordinated way. What, then, lay at the root of such divergent evaluations of online action? As suggested by participants themselves, these trends were linked to important differences in the political culture and institutional architecture of the two countries. This not only constituted further evidence in support of the idea that online politics is deeply interwoven with offline events, but it also showed that opportunities for disabled users to become engaged online are strongly dependant upon local constraints.

In particular, American participants explained that:

> *"the best way to have influence on Capitol Hill is relationships, personal relationships: who knows who, who has the ability to talk to whom, because personal relationships influence people, […] of course you can see a video or whatever, but it's not gonna have the same effect on you, or getting an email."*
> (Chair, U.S. member-led non-profit, June 2011)

In other words:

> *"you're not gonna beat an in-person presence on the Hill, you're not gonna beat a real conversation with a legislator […] so virtual action alone would probably not get you anywhere."*
> (Government relations officer, U.S. member-led non-profit, June 2011)

These widely held beliefs resonated with the function traditionally assigned to formal interest groups in the U.S. federal policy-making process (Walker, 1991: 49). In light of this, disability non-profits participate in one of the core pillars of American democracy, which *de facto* enshrines them in the Washington lawmaking apparatus by bestowing upon them a "statutory" representative role. While this system may appear somewhat discomforting to the European eye, in American terms this more plainly provides an "institutionalised" path for the citizenry's grievances to be heard by representatives (Kernell and Jacobson, 2006: 515-27). In the U.S., both professionalised and member-led disability non-profits implicitly acknowledged the validity of this structure by pointing out in interviews that they needed to ensure what they called "the Washington balance," which required them to build a constructive liaison with decision-makers while also letting them know if the people they represented disagreed with a particular policy measure or proposal.

Although in interviews this system was praised for "getting things done," at the same time it also restricted the action repertoire available to American disability organisations. Thus, all the groups under scrutiny refrained from organising protest marches and public demonstrations, which they generally equated to "police arrests" and identified as tactics suited only to "militant" groups like ADAPT (Zames-Fleischer and Zames, 2001: 82-83). Instead, their collective action efforts included Capitol Hill rallies and briefing days. These effectively constitute "managed" events where attendance is restricted to invitees and therefore tend to lack spontaneity. In this context, online action was subjected to much of the same restrictions as its offline counterpart. This not only explained the absence of "virtual protest pages" from the repertoire of American disability non-profits, but also provided a justification for their reluctance to experiment with forms of online collective action that:

> *"let just anyone take part, including those who may send out the wrong message."*
> (Head of communications, U.S. non-profit, July 2011)

As a participant from a pan-disability organisation stated:

> *"constituents are unrestrained and don't see social media as places to be nice or polite, it's more like for policy-makers to get a flavour of the 'fury' but we also need to ensure that we're seen as responsible negotiators."*
> (Policy officer, U.S. cross-disability member-led organisation, June 2011)

Seen in perspective, the emphasis that American participants placed upon personal relationships in policy-making also informed their choice of email as a useful medium for supporters to target decision-makers directly, providing those prevented from travelling to Washington with some sort of surrogate for face-to-face encounters with legislators.

Conversely, in Britain the role of non-profits as intermediaries in democratic governance and policy-making has traditionally been less "institutionalised," although ironically perhaps more dependant on state funding. If in fact attempts have been made since New Labour's government tenure to co-opt willing organisations into a closer relationship with decision-makers (Barnes et al., 2003; Craig and Taylor, 2002), it could be argued that this set-up still misses the formality that characterises the American system. As a result of this, and despite some of the groups under scrutiny were no strangers to the process of "institutionalisation" promoted in recent years to the dismay of disability scholars (Barnes, 2007; Barnes and Oliver, 2012), British formal disability organisations tended to rely on a richer repertoire with which to reach policy-makers than that of their U.S. counterparts. Among its most high profile components are mass gatherings, marches and demonstrations, included those that took place throughout 2011 as part of the mobilisation against the welfare reform. In this context, online action has understandably come to occupy a rather valuable position. As one participant put it:

> *"online and offline complement each other – some voices can be heard online that would not be offline; for instance some of our members would find it difficult to attend a protest in person*

but can participate virtually. However, online participation alone is not enough."

(Communications officer, UK charity, Sept. 2011)

In relation to the last point made in the quote, British organisations also stressed that meetings with policy-makers constituted very valuable opportunities to "get things done." In all fairness, some of them did in fact admit to using social media as a mean to an end: gaining visibility online in order to be invited to face-to-face meetings with MPs and government officials. However, even in these cases the rhetoric of complementariness prevailed over that of hierarchy. Thus, the outlook shared by British participants echoed the arguments put forward by internet scholars who regard the distinction between "virtual" and "real" as artificial, and the boundaries between the two, if they exist, to be entirely permeable (Rogers, 2009). In this framework, it makes little sense to rank online action against its offline counterpart. Rather, these constitute two profoundly interwoven components of the same process.

7.8 – Conclusions

In conclusion, this comparison exposed two complementary sets of findings. First, some substantial differences emerged between the digital repertoires of British and American formal disability organisations. Second, interviews shed light on the perceptions, beliefs and experiences that had led to these discrepancies. Overall, UK groups were found to be relatively more comfortable with online interactivity, innovation and experimentation than their U.S. counterparts. British groups were more "in tune" with technology. They had built "virtual" headquarters for their impromptu coalition against welfare reform proposals, used email to publicise a variety of collaborative actions, interpreted social media as potential "online protest" platforms and were open to negotiating between the challenges and opportunities presented by flexible forms of "online membership." Conversely, U.S. organisations were reluctant to join forces towards a common goal, saw email as the only truly valuable online channel for political action and were often convinced that traditional control tactics could be applied to Web 2.0 platforms.

These findings were rather counter-intuitive as previous research has tended to identify American political groups as trend-setters in online activism, thus characterising U.S. formal disability organisations as somewhat of an exception in an otherwise innovative context. However, this is not to say that the groups examined in this study were naïve about digital politics but rather that the development of online tactics for influencing

policy-making is deeply affected by contextual factors. Indeed, this supports the original assumption made in this project that online campaigns never really start from a blank canvas, but that the use of digital media has to be adapted to suit both pre-existing and time-specific circumstances. Therefore, while the proposition that established organisations have been blending their repertoires with participatory elements derived from "networked" and "social movement" activism holds as a general trend, the extent to which this ongoing transformation is actually taking place is likely to differ from one country to another, as well as among different policy areas within the same country. This is especially relevant in relation to social policy issues, which are generally debated and decided upon at national level.

In light of the findings discussed in this chapter, a truly useful conceptualisation of "context" is therefore one that combines "systemic" factors with more volatile elements. In other words, the traditional focus on national norms and institutions adopted in previous comparative internet research needs to be integrated and adjusted by paying greater attention to "circumstantial" factors, in particular in relation to crisis situations. Indeed, the relationship between the circumstantial and systemic components of "context" is a complex one that reaches well beyond the scope of this project and will require further investigation to be fully captured and understood. Yet, four key elements emerged from the cases analysed above that invite further reflection. These include:

Circumstantial factors:

- Controversy type (Is the campaign merely targeted at policy objectives, or are there wider political implications?)
- Catalyst nature (Does the issue at stake focus on resources re-distribution with potentially divisive consequences, or is it rather an ideological and potentially unifying one?)

Systemic factors:

- Constitutional arrangement (How strong are political parties? Are institutions highly centralised or organised in a more localised federal system? what position do civil society groups occupy within the policy-making process?)
- Community ties (Are there any collaboration and/or conflict precedents? Is political action in that particular area of politics/policy traditionally inspired by individualism or group agency?)

Undoubtedly, future research is poised to refine and expand this list. However, Controversy, Catalysts, Constitutional arrangement and Community ties constitute key contextual elements that can be reasonably assumed to influence online campaigning in any given democratic context. As such, this "4-Cs" matrix provides researchers, campaigners and policy-makers alike with a useful starting point for studying, planning, or indeed responding to online activism.

Table 7.7 – Key factors influencing disability e-campaigning in Britain and America

	Circumstantial factors		**Systemic factors**		**E-activism Features**
	Controversy type	**Catalyst Nature**	**Constitutional Arrangement**	**Community Ties**	
UK	Double (Policy + political)	Ideological (unifying)	▪ Strong parties ▪ Westminster centralism ▪ Parliament as key legislator ▪ Civil society groups "outside the tent"	▪ Pre-existing coalition on welfare issues ▪ Internet as useful "space" for impromptu, temporary unity	▪ High interaction (2-way comms) ▪ High innovation (social media for campaigning; "online membership") ▪ High coordination (online coalition) ▪ High integration (Online/offline of equal value)
USA	Single (Policy-only)	Resource-focussed (divisive)	▪ Loose parties ▪ Federal system ▪ Congress and Courts as key legislators ▪ Interest groups are part of "apparatus"	▪ Pre-existing collaboration on civil rights issues BUT ▪ Deep rifts amongst disability-specific groups ▪ Individualism	▪ Low interaction (top-down comms) ▪ Low innovation (email; online supporters vs. members divide) ▪ Low coordination (separate campaigns) ▪ Low integration (offline/online hierarchy)

While systemic factors can be fairly predictable, contingent elements are by definition difficult to anticipate. Yet, as shown by the case studies discussed in this chapter, the latter can constitute particularly effective innovation drivers in online campaigning (Table 7.7). In particular, both the nature and magnitude of the UK welfare reform crisis crucially pushed British disability organisations towards a more sophisticated repertoire of online action throughout 2011, whereas previously this type of groups had held rather conservative views on digital media. Therefore, while pre-existent institutional and cultural factors were responsible for "shaping" the detail of online disability rights campaigns in Britain and America, it was the specific crisis context that provided a catalyst for change in one case and somewhat inhibited innovation in the other. This issue will be discussed in

greater detail in the overall conclusions to this thesis with a view to contributing to the conceptualisation of the relationship between policy crisis and online activism.

Chapter 8 - Conclusions

This thesis investigated the relationship between disability activism and new media at a time of crisis in the UK and the United States. Undoubtedly, the case study approach adopted in this project invokes maximum cautiousness in attempting to generalise its findings. Yet, several key elements emerged that transcended the significance of individual case studies, inviting reflections on the transformations underway in the realm of citizen-initiated politics as well as the impact of such changes on disabled people's political inclusion. In particular, four issues came to the fore in this study that contribute substantially to both the fields of online politics and disability studies. These include:

1) changes in the ecology of British disability activism supported by both new and existing organisational forms;
2) a new model of "peer-mediated" yet democratically ambiguous citizenship supported by the emergence of a young, technology-savvy disabled leadership;
3) the centrality of circumstantial factors – in particular economic and political crisis – to the evolution of e-campaigning as well as the need for these to be better understood and conceptualised; and, finally,
4) difficulties for online dissent groups in achieving tangible policy outcomes, which call for further work to look at the broader context of policy-making in order to find the causes at the root of this pattern.

Each of these is discussed in detail below together with a tentative agenda for future research in the area of disability and new media.

8.1 - Towards a new ecology of British disability activism

Online campaigning in the wake of the UK Coalition government's welfare reform was responsible for some substantial changes in the ecology of British disability activism. First, it encouraged both existing organisations and informal networks of experienced self-advocates to overcome some of their reservations towards participatory online media. Undoubtedly, in their approach to digital campaigning these groups were still influenced by their traditional repertoires and respective founding ethos. However, they also engaged with new media on an unprecedented scale. Second, and possibly even more importantly, digital media also supported the emergence of a new type of disability activist group:

digital action networks. These were characterised by a young and technology-savvy disabled leadership who adopted a pragmatic single-issue approach and devised a distinctive online-only campaign repertoire. For these bloggers-turned-activists the internet provided fundamental channels to develop a new type of disability self-advocacy, which was respectful of both "professionalised" campaigns run by charities as well as ideologically-driven "militant" activism, yet at the same time also highly sceptical of their potential efficacy.

The "digital switch" implemented by both formal disability organisations such as those participating in The Hardest Hit coalition and experienced disabled activists such as DPAC's founders constituted a source of innovation in a context that until recently was lagging behind general trends in citizen-initiated politics. Importantly, this highlighted the propensity of existing groups to engage with digital media for campaigning purposes "out of necessity" in conjunction with traumatic events such as acute policy crises. Yet, such innovation remained "incremental" as it derived primarily from attempts to blend new elements into existing communicative and political action repertoires. On the one hand, experienced activists remained anchored to traditional protest tactics, restricting online campaigning to a support role that reaffirmed the centrality of offline contentious initiatives. On the other hand, formal organisations sought the input of online supporters in crafting their message, at least in part. Thus, they adopted a more "receptive" campaign style, yet one that at the same time also preserved their (presumed) role of brokers and mediators of the disability community's interests *vis-à-vis* representative institutions.

In contrast, the emergence of a digital action network such as The Broken of Britain represented an element of profound rupture with the past that defied conventional wisdom about the irrelevance of the internet as a civic resource for disadvantaged social groups. Its founders were a group of disabled bloggers who used online media to overcome the traditional dichotomy between "professional," charity-like organisations and social-movement-type groups. As such, they replaced existing campaign approaches with an innovative, online-only organisational paradigm capable of attracting a different kind of supporters. This initiative filled a gap in disability activism by using digital media to devise less contentious and arguably more effective ways of expressing dissent at a time in which disabled people's pleas were finding little support across the entire political spectrum.

In a way, this could be interpreted as a sign of fragmentation because politically-minded disabled users took advantage of online media to bypass established organisations and set up their own campaign, establishing a precedent for others to also do so in the future. Nevertheless, this experience crucially provided internet users disenchanted with

the efforts of "institutionalised" disability organisations but at the same time also uncomfortable with the contentious repertoire of "die hard" activists with a viable channel to join the debate on disability welfare policy and, possibly, participate in online activities to contrast the government's agenda. In particular, The Broken of Britain, as also The Hardest Hit albeit in a slightly different fashion, facilitated the sharing of personal disability stories as a vehicle for users unfamiliar with political debate to articulate their concerns and better understand complex policy measures. Importantly, this trend was in line with a more general personalisation of the online political discourse and supported by previous work that praised interactive online platforms for hosting unmediated and alternative representations of disability (Thoreau, 2006; Goggin and Noonan, 2007). In addition, it also showed the value of sharing personal narratives in promoting political citizenship as well as agency among disabled internet users (Watson, 1998) and highlighted the "political" nature of seemingly "private" experiences that had previously been pointed out by feminist disability scholars (Crow, 1996; Fawcett, 2000; French, 1993; Morris, 1991; 1992).

In interpreting the results of this project, it is important to keep in mind that it focused on a limited number of purposively selected case studies. Therefore, its primary objective was to shine light on particularly innovative groups and pioneering practices rather than enable sweeping generalisations. That said, the picture of British disability activism that emerged from these findings was one that was shifting towards the matrix of "connective action" proposed by Bennett and Segerberg (2012: 756), yet somewhat selectively. Certain key organising practices of traditional "collective" action continued to characterise the groups under scrutiny, including emerging ones such as The Broken of Britain. In particular, "digitised" activist groups such as DPAC remained strongly opposed to the use of personalised action frames, which instead are becoming increasingly ubiquitous in contemporary online campaigning. While this choice was possibly one of the reasons at the root of this group's difficulties in generating a substantial amount of conversation on their Facebook page, as discussed in Chapter Six, it also confirmed how consolidated activist practices can not only resist but also shape the use of digital media for campaigning purposes (Kavada, 2010). Furthermore, formal disability organisations assumed a background role to create a digitally-enabled and loosely connected coalition (The Hardest Hit), yet only on a temporary, issue-focused basis and closely guarding their independence and individual identities. Finally, the analysis of social media content revealed that The Broken of Britain were in fact a much more centrally coordinated group than it could have been envisaged initially.

These considerations raised two main questions. First, there was the issue of whether this new, digitally-enabled ecology of British disability activism can be sustainable in the long term. In particular, are the organising practices and action repertoire introduced by The Broken of Britain here to stay? The digital age is generally considered as one of increasing organisational fluidity. As Castells (2012) noted in the conclusions to his most recent work, networked movements "will continue to fight and debate, evolve and eventually fade away in their current states of being" (p. 244). Thus, technological development, evolving uses of new media and changing circumstances should all be expected to nurture further changes in the future of disability advocacy and networked activism more generally (Rainie and Wellman, 2012: 276). Nevertheless, the rise of the "We Are Spartacus" campaign from The Broken of Britain's "legacy" in early 2012 echoed the idea of sedimentary networks, which leave behind traces that allow them to re-emerge months or even years after the original events (Chadwick, 2007 and 2012b; Flanagin, Bimber and Stohl, 2006: 42). This made for an encouraging premise, showing that digital action networks may be more than a temporary oddity in the landscape of British disability activism. However, as in the case of "headline chasing" organisations such as MoveOn.org (Karpf, 2010a; 2012), the sustainability of this form of advocacy will depend on the ability of core organisers to ensure continuous membership turnover by regularly adjourning their agenda and repertoires to attract new supporters, compensating for those who lapse once a given issue has lost its thrust. In addition, resilience will also be tied to the achievement of a more flexible leadership structure compared to the one displayed by The Broken of Britain, as discussed below.

Second, there was the issue of whether any of these forms of digitally-assisted disability activism could effectively enhance the sense of citizenship for those involved. This point was at the centre of the overarching research question responsible for the genesis of this project and closely connected to the structure of each of the groups in question. As such, the next section focuses in detail on the implications of the digital transformation of disability activism for disabled people's citizenship and political inclusion.

8.2 – Work in progress: Digital disability activism and inclusive citizenship

Although it was clear from the onset of this study that technology-enabled mass empowerment as theorised by authors such as Finkelstein (1980) and Nelson (1994) remained purely utopian, the picture that emerged from empirical research was not one of "politics as usual" either, or at least not entirely. Rather, the unprecedented use of online

media by campaigners in the wake of the most severe disability policy crisis in recent years affected the citizenship levels of those involved in two main ways. Once again, pre-existing disability organisations involved in The Hardest Hit as well as DPAC's experienced self-advocates supported a partially updated version of their traditional participation schemes. Instead, The Broken of Britain embarked on a more ambitious plan to make interactive new media campaigns work for disabled users. Yet, despite the praiseworthy aims of this operation, its execution was nevertheless affected by an important democratic deficit that limited its significance for the political inclusion of online supporters.

8.2.1 – Formal organisations and "digitised" activists: Greater engagement but within clear boundaries

Both formal organisations and experienced disabled activists provided some genuine opportunities for the engagement of "ordinary" users in campaigning initiatives, albeit in forms anchored to their respective traditional repertoires. In particular, DPAC's choice to tie online protest to offline contentious action signalled the lack of a qualitative shift in the nature of their campaigning style. This approach went some way towards defying distance and other physical barriers for users interested in participating. Yet, the contentious character of these initiatives also determined a low level of granularity and choice, effectively maintaining a high-entry threshold to this group's online activities in a equal and opposite fashion to the one characterising many government-sponsored e-democracy initiatives (Chadwick, 2012b: 50). In other words, DPAC's online operations quite simply offered more of the same rather than a truly flexible range of options for users to choose from, expanding rather than re-designing the space for their engagement.

Formal disability organisations that joined forces in The Hardest Hit went somewhat further in terms of personalisation and user-engagement. Indeed, they resorted to street demonstrations, which was a rather unusual move for otherwise "institutionalised" groups and reaffirmed the importance of physical space and offline protest in times of crisis displayed also by much larger contemporary movements such as Occupy and the Spanish *Indignados* (Gerbaudo, 2012: 155). However, they also promoted both mediated (e.g. "share your stories") and un-mediated (e.g. personalised messages to policy-makers) online alternatives capable of generating micro-empowerment at the individual level. In addition, their ability to look beyond formal "membership" and appreciate the value of looser forms of association with a cause also enhanced their campaign's relevance for users looking for opportunities to channel their anger into something more than plain

online *talk*. This was disability activism re-configured to be more readily available, if not more "inclusive," but only to a limited extent. Potential online supporters were afforded freedom within constraints that had been designed not necessarily to retain tight organisational control, but undoubtedly to avoid fragmentation.

8.2.2 – Online networks, de facto leadership and "peer-mediated" citizenship

In contrast, The Broken of Britain presented a more complex situation. As shown by the analysis of Facebook conversations in Chapter Six, three different types of user had clustered around this group's web presence. These included:

1) The five disabled bloggers responsible for launching The Broken of Britain. They expressed a particularly "hands on" approach to online activism and therefore were central not only to the very existence of this campaign but also to its continued growth until the sudden stop in November 2011.
2) Nearly two-hundred supporters who interacted with one another as well as with core organisers on the group's Facebook page, around thirty of whom did so on a regular basis. However, their involvement remained largely confined to political *talk* rather than *action*. Thus, their role in shaping the campaign only went as far as core organisers were willing to adopt their suggestions and follow up on their requests.
3) A majority of supporters who simply followed The Broken of Britain's updates on Facebook (ca. 1,400) as well as Twitter (ca. 5,000).

Thus, the different communicative styles adopted by each of these groups set them at different lengths along the continuum between digital "residents" and "visitors" envisaged by White and Le Corbu (2011), which could possibly be stretched even further to include a majority of "observers" whose main contribution was to augment the number of those backing the campaign on social media. As communication practices have a fundamental role in defining the very structure of contemporary networked activism (Gerbaudo, 2012: 139; Castells, 2012: 229), a parallel can be drawn between such communicative styles and associated citizenship profiles. As Nakamura (2004) wrote, this helps to "envision various *categories* of online citizens rather than thinking in terms of gaps and divides. Just as on airplanes […] this metaphor can be useful because it dodges the problematics of the binary digital divide by envisioning internet use as subject to several gradations" (p. 80).

In particular, The Broken of Britain's founders could be described as "connected citizens." They capitalised on their familiarity with technology, knowledge of the policy context and personal experience of disability to broadcast alternative and un-mediated views on disability welfare. At the same time, they also devised opportunities for others to enrich the campaign by adding their own personalised content through a combination of readily available online media (e.g. "blogswarms," targeted Twitter hashtags) that accounted as much as possible for the needs of users with different impairments. Second, supporters who regularly contributed to Facebook discussions echoed the idea of "monitorial" citizens (Schudson, 1999/2011). They used online media to keep up to date with and comment on the course of events, informing the positions of core organisers with their opinions and personal accounts – especially disabled users – but also taking a back seat when it came to political action. As Prior noted (2007), "monitorial" tasks are encouraged and facilitated by the hyperlinked nature of online information. Finally, the position of those who followed the campaign on social media but only very rarely, if ever, contributed their own content remained somewhat ambiguous. In some ways, it could be tempting to class these users as "slacktivists." Yet, their role as campaign "followers" suggested it may be unfair to automatically consider them as passive free-riders. This is because, in theory, they could at any point use the knowledge accumulated by keeping up with the campaign as well as the welfare reform progress on social media to join the ranks of monitorial citizens, especially in conjunction with issues or events of particular significance to them. Thus, their perceived inactivity might have been only temporary, expressing a latent or embryonic form of citizenship.

While further research spanning a greater period of time would be necessary to clarify the last point, it is useful to visualise these three citizenship profiles as a series of concentric circles (Fig. 8.1). At the centre of this system are core organisers, from which opportunities for others to become involved – and thus accrue political rights – radiate. This representation evokes both the tendency for core (professional) and periphery (volunteer) agents in political campaigns to be increasingly connected and interdependent (Anstead, 2009) as well as the idea of citizenship as a series of consecutive concentric stages outlined by Turner (1986). Intuitively, this categorisation may look at odds with the concepts of participatory parity and inclusive citizenship as defined in feminist theory (Fraser, 2003; Lister, 2004 and 2007a). Yet, it ought to be pointed out that participatory parity does not require the utopian achievement of the most sophisticated citizenship profile by everyone. Rather, it predicates that all are given fair opportunities to participate in politics.

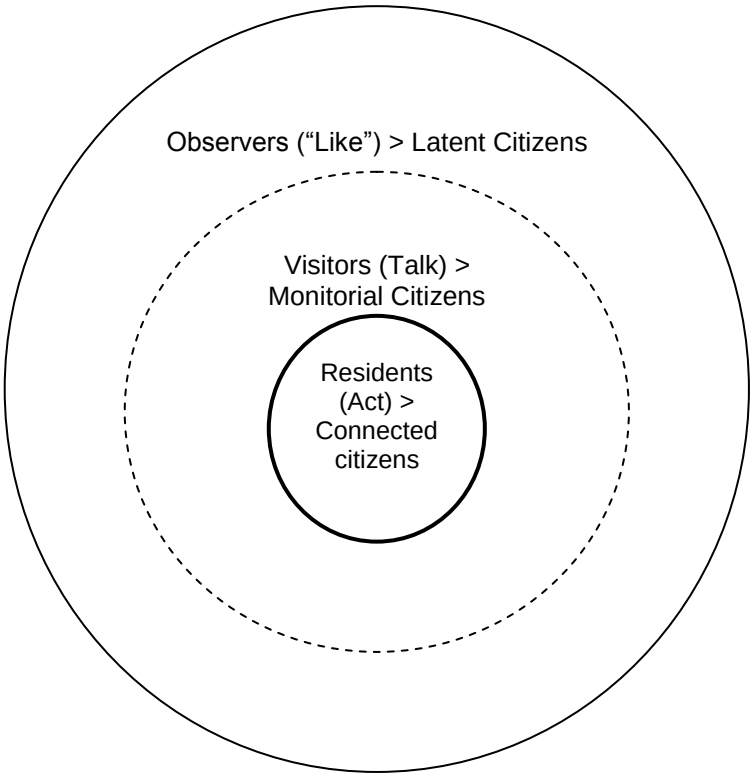


Fig. 8.1 – The Broken of Britain communicative styles and citizenship profiles

As such, the key question here is one of how permeable the boundaries between communicative styles – and thus citizenship profiles – really were and how likely it was for users to move across them to become more or less directly involved in campaigning. This is a complex matter connected to a variety of factors including, for example, the type of issue(s) at stake at any given moment and the motivation that derives from them, the specific online platforms involved in a given campaign and the know-how of users. Nevertheless, one element that stands out among others and is particularly useful to discuss here is the “leadership” style exercised by core organisers. In other words, did those at the centre of The Broken of Britain perform their role in a way that facilitated or inhibited the transition of online supporters to a more active behaviour and thus a more meaningful level of citizenship?

Different participatory styles were always expected to coexist within each of the groups under scrutiny. This can be seen as a function of the “customised” participation model promoted by online media through an ever-expanding range of options from which users can select those most suited to their preferences and/or needs (Prior, 2007; Bimber, Flanagin and Stohl, 2012: 179). Therefore, The Broken of Britain was never really envisaged as a perfectly horizontal network that grew spontaneously or just “happened” online. As in all networks, different “nodes” performed different functions and thus a certain amount of disparity between core organisers and supporters was inevitable.

However, a close look at the relationship between the five blogger-turned-activists who started this campaign and their online supporters revealed a surprisingly high degree of centralisation in terms of how decisions were taken and The Broken of Britain's "brand" managed. With hindsight, the presence of such a strong "leadership" inscribed this group within a wider paradigm that covers both innovative advocacy organisations such as MoveOn.org (Carty, 2011: 70), as well as recent movements such as Occupy, the Spanish *Indignados* and some of the groups responsible for the Arab uprisings of 2011 (Gerbaudo, 2012). While in fact online media helped all of the above to project a "leader-less" image (Castells, 2012: 221), their ability to ignite mass mobilisation has invariably been linked to the existence of a "concealed" leadership construed and exercised through social media by relatively small groups of core organisers (Gerbaudo, 2012: 143-4). More broadly, this also echoed the tendency for social media to be highly influenced by a minority of "power users" who contribute a much larger proportion of content than the average user, especially on Facebook (Hampton et al., 2012).

Indeed, the role of this *de facto* leadership should not necessarily be interpreted in a negative way. Rather, recent work has found "super-users" to be performing crucial tasks as forum moderators and facilitators of online deliberation, especially in non-political online spaces (Graham and Wright, 2013). Yet, an important difference separated The Broken of Britain from the mass movements mentioned above. While in fact the latter engaged in street demonstrations that somewhat mitigated the influence of their self-appointed online leadership (Gerbaudo, 2012), The Broken of Britain's founders actively shunned offline mass gatherings. Whether this was part of a deliberate strategy to enhance the credibility of this campaign in the eyes of policy-makers or more simply a choice dictated by disabling barriers and resource constraints, it nevertheless strengthened the position of core organisers, granting them continued control over the campaign message and the modes of engagement available to supporters.

These choices resonated with the use of Facebook as a platform to talk and acquire validation rather than mobilise and organise supporters, as discussed in Chapter Six. In addition, they were also consistent with this group's approach to policy-making, which, unlike networked movements such as Occupy (Castells, 2012: 225), did not reject the legitimacy of representative institutions *per se* and therefore benefited from the existence of clear leaders capable of liaising with politicians in selected offline arenas (e.g. briefing meetings at the House of Commons; question time at the 2011 Labour Party Conference). Thus, the boundary between "observers" and "monitorial" citizens was a flexible one that supporters could essentially cross at their will, while the one between supporters and core organisers was a rigid one that contributed coherence to the campaign in the short term.

In light of this evidence, it would be legitimate to ask whether The Broken of Britain's founders did in fact constitute an emerging digital "elite" (Hindman, 2009) who used social media to construct a sense of community where there was in fact no "community" as such along the lines of what other campaigners have previously done through email (Eaton, 2010). Yet, espousing this cynical interpretation would also mean disregarding the role of core organisers in catalysing the attention of users that may otherwise have remained entirely disengaged from the debate on disability welfare and providing a digitally-based alternative to existing forms of disability activism. However basic, this process afforded The Broken of Britain's supporters an opportunity to take some important steps in the direction of meaningful political participation. As such, a more useful way to understand the effects of networked campaigning on the sense of citizenship of those involved is to look at it not as a function of the individual but as an outcome of the connection between "ordinary users" on one side and disabled bloggers-turned-activists on the other. From this angle, the latter did not represent an isolated elite, but rather acted as "brokers" for the concerns of other disabled people in a process that could be described as "peer-mediated" citizenship. Undoubtedly, this was not a perfectly democratic arrangement. Leaders were effectively self-appointed and not subjected to a clear accountability mechanism. Nevertheless, this did not amount to "citizenship by proxy" either, as the voice of disabled people had not been delegated to non-disabled third party representatives, but remained firmly in the hands of pioneering self-advocates. While this experience set an important precedent in disability politics, it remains for both researchers and future activists to understand whether a more representative model of online organising can actually be achieved without renouncing the benefits provided by strong leadership.

A final point ought to be made about the online-only nature of this campaign. While in fact both the other groups examined in this study were committed to reaching out to potential stakeholders – in particular disabled people – through offline as well as online channels, The Broken of Britain confined their initiatives almost exclusively to the digital domain. On the one hand, the visibility acquired by this campaign defied the conventional wisdom rooted in a simplistic understanding of the digital divide for which the internet could not represent an important civic resource for disadvantaged groups such as disabled people. In particular, core organisers showed a strong determination to make e-campaigning as accessible as possible by capitalising on their experience as disabled users to combine readily available interactive media in innovative ways. On the other hand, however, the lack of any offline alternatives represented a serious barrier for that majority of disabled Britons who, to this day, cannot use the internet on a regular basis.

That is not to say that non-users would necessarily have been cut out completely. Undoubtedly, it was still possible for them to come in contact with the campaign by means of proxy internet use (Dutton and Blank, 2011: 55) as well as through friends and acquaintances in a similar fashion to the "cascading" model employed by candidates in recent election campaigns, especially in the U.S. (Gibson, 2009; Kreiss, 2012). Nevertheless, non-users were still left without a channel for direct input and forced to depend on others if they wished to participate. While they wait for technology to become more accessible and connection more affordable, core organisers of future "networked" disability activist ventures should make the extension of this new way of organising to non-users a top priority. This is not only an issue of equal opportunities, but also one of strategy and political efficacy. If in fact on this occasion The Broken of Britain managed to punch above their (numerical) weight, their online-only model inherently restricted their ability to grow and mobilise others. As supporter numbers continue to matter in today's political game (Chadwick, 2012b: 54), this is likely to represent an important limit for any other disability rights campaign wishing to take the same approach but hoping for greater policy success than that achieved by the groups analysed in this study.

8.3 - Crisis and the "context" of contemporary online activism

As hypothesised at the start of this project and confirmed throughout case study analysis, the digital renewal of British disability activism was indissolubly tied to the situation created by the welfare reform crisis. In particular, the comparison between Britain and the U.S. clarified how the very nature of catalyst issues and the political climate that surrounds them can play a fundamental role in triggering or inhibiting innovative forms of e-campaigning. While systemic contextual elements such as constitutional arrangements and community ties have been researched extensively in previous work on internet politics, it is particularly useful to reflect here on the conceptualisation of circumstantial factors and their relationship with both contemporary disability politics and digital activism more generally. Indeed, the correspondence between disruptive events and citizen mobilisation pre-dates the internet era (Woliver, 1993). Yet, as an increasingly diverse range of actors is taking the digital avenue to expressing dissent, it is crucial to distinguish between *'crises'* that can and cannot ignite innovation in online activism. The case studies discussed in this thesis suggested that the more "intense" a controversy was, the more inclined campaigners and activists would be to experiment with participatory media. The "intensity" of an issue or debate as perceived by citizens was determined by two complementary dimensions.

First, there was the nature of the issue(s) at stake. Was it a mere matter of resource allocation, or did it have rather deeper ideological ramifications? Resource-focused debates can be reasonably assumed to provide campaigners with few incentives to get out of online "conservatism" and try new repertoires. Furthermore, this type of issues also can foster division among individuals competing for a limited amount of resources. The controversy surrounding Medicaid cuts in the U.S. offered a classic example of the dilemma faced by activists and campaigners under these circumstances. While proposed measures were poised to affect the vast majority of disabled Americans, they also fuelled intra-group competition. Ultimately, this led to a fragmented response and disfavoured high-profile action as no one wanted to be seen as a "trouble-maker" when budget allocations would eventually be made. Instead, deeper crises involving the re-definition of fundamental rights can be assumed to favour the adoption of new, bolder tactics. This was the case for British disability organisations, which joined forces to experiment an unprecedented mix of participatory media and street rallies when faced with a setback of over a decade in disability policy.

Second, the surrounding political climate also mattered. Did activists enjoy any form of institutionalised support (e.g. from parliamentary opposition parties), or were they left to organise and make their point outside formal arenas? When activists have no choice but to "fight their own corner," this can promote more imaginative online campaigning solutions, both supporting and providing alternatives to direct action. In particular, British disability activists found themselves in what could be described as a "double" crisis. This is because Labour, the main opposition party and the biggest parliamentary force traditionally associated with progressive politics, was especially slow at mounting a decisive attack against government welfare plans. Thus, a political "void" was created around the interests of disabled citizens, which generated an opportunity for the adoption of new online repertoires by established groups as well as the emergence of wholly innovative forms of activism. In contrast, U.S. disability advocates enjoyed the support of the White House in their opposition to Republican budget plans. In addition to strengthening the success chances of American campaigners, this lack of political isolation also mitigated the general sense of emergency, somewhat curbing the need for innovation and extra-ordinary initiatives.

In light of these considerations, both the nature of the issue(s) at stake and institutional endorsements for the positions of activists (or lack thereof) represent useful coordinates for better capturing the "context" of internet politics. That said, owing to the limitations associated with case study research and waiting for further conceptual work to be carried out on this topic, it is best to avoid casting these elements as normative

conditions. Rather, they can either favour or disfavour innovation and growth in online activism in conjunction with systemic contextual factors, as evidenced in Chapter Seven. Furthermore, flexibility should be adopted in approaching and assessing the "intensity" of a given crisis, as seemingly similar issues may take on very distant meanings in different countries. Undoubtedly, the empirical work carried out for this project focussed on particularly clear-cut cases in which both contextual factors pointed in the same direction (i.e. ideological/double vs. resource-focused/single crises – see Fig. 8.2). This inevitably raises the issue of whether this model can be applied to cases where either indicator points in a different direction, making the distinction between "high" and "low" intensity less apparent and open to interpretation.

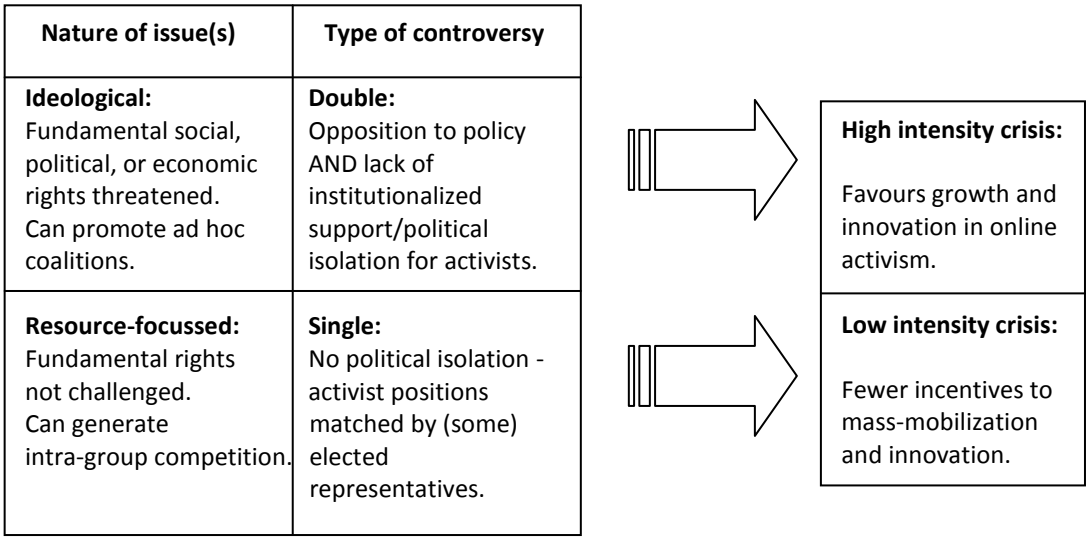


Fig. 8.2 – Dimensions of 'crisis' in relation to e-campaigning innovation

Empirical work on less straightforward case studies will help illuminating this grey area and achieving a more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between crisis and online activism. Nonetheless, the evidence collected for this project revealed a promising research path. In spite of the apparent uniqueness of issues and events surrounding online activism at any one time, keeping a close eye on both the nature of the issue(s) at stake and the surrounding political climate can help scholars understanding whether growth and innovation in online activism should be expected.

Crucially, this strong focus on crisis did not replace institutional variables in the idea of context that emerged from this work. Rather, comparative results could be more convincingly explained by considering both these sets of factors. For example, the declining popularity of mass-email campaigns among British disability organisations was explained by the relative ineffectiveness of this tactic in a system in which parliamentary party allegiance is tightly enforced. This factor was co-responsible, together with the intense policy crisis, for orientating British groups towards an innovative online repertoire.

Similarly, the absence of a unified online response to Medicaid cuts proposals in the U.S. did not derive from a complete lack of collaboration among American disability organizations. Rather, the latter have previously cooperated on civil rights issues for disabled citizens (Vaughn-Switzer, 2003). This meant that the U.S. context is *per se* not unsuited to online collaboration among different strands of the disability movement. Instead, the issue at stake on this particular occasion failed to strike the chords that would have re-activated old connections among disability advocates. As such, dismissing the traditional approach to comparative internet research *a priori* would be short-sighted and potentially misleading. Rather, this needs to be integrated and adjusted by placing a greater focus on circumstantial elements. While different systemic elements are likely to come to the fore depending on the regime(s) under scrutiny in any given project, the two dimensions of crisis discussed here transcend geo-political boundaries, providing a useful starting point in comparative internet politics research.

8.4 - Dominant policy narratives and the limits of online activism

Finally, it is useful to reflect briefly on the tangible impact of these campaigns on the policy decisions they sought to influence. If in fact both new and established British disability groups experimented with participatory online media as well as hybrid online/offline repertoires, their approaches fell short of generating substantial modifications in government plans for reforming disability benefits, which were passed virtually unchanged as part of the Welfare Reform Act 2012. In all fairness, all of the British case studies examined for this project achieved some important "tactical" successes through their use of online media, which helped them aggregating popular support, acquiring visibility on traditional mass media, gaining validation within the disability community and securing credibility in the eyes of policy-makers (e.g. invitations to parliamentary briefing sessions, etc.). However, this did not prevent them from ultimately loosing the policy "war." In contrast, the relatively conservative strategies and fragmented efforts deployed by U.S. disability organisations were met with compromise on budget allocations that preserved Medicaid federal funding for disabled Americans while a series of other public expenditure cuts was ultimately agreed by Congress (see Chapter Seven). Why did this happen and what does it say about the limits of online activism?

The efficacy of e-campaigning in securing concrete policy outcomes is a complex issue that could only be discussed exhaustively in a separate study. However, it is useful to advance some suggestions on the basis of the evidence collected for this project with a view to informing future research. The main impression emerging from case study work

was that missed policy goals should not be interpreted as a sign of the inability of online activism *per se* to reach out to decision-makers effectively. Instead, e-campaigning failures as well as successes are better understood as part of a wider "ecology of policy-making" in which traditional as well as online media outlets, public opinion and political opportunity all take part. From this point of view, British disability activists constituted an isolated voice promoting an alternative counter-narrative in something of a David and Goliath struggle. First and foremost, their arguments clashed with pervasive news frames portraying DLA claimants as "benefit scroungers" (Briant et al., 2011). As acknowledged by both core organisers and online supporters (see Chapter Six), such negative stereotyping of disability welfare recipients created a situation for which not only public opinion was especially hostile towards those perceived as a fraud-inclined social group, but the same type of suspicion was also shared among other components of the anti-cuts movement. This generated further marginalisation for disability campaigners and their pleas. Under these circumstances, the government had no real incentive for changing policy plans that resonated not only with their traditional electorate but possibly also with a wider proportion of the population.

Overall, this suggested that it may be difficult or even impossible for online campaigners to successfully challenge and replace dominant frames in contested policy areas such as that of disability welfare, especially if government spin is aligned at the same time with both traditional media coverage and public opinion more broadly. This is even more so if decision-making processes extend across a fairly lengthy period of time. As Lester and Hutchins (2009) wrote in their work on online environmental activism and the news media, "journalists are less likely to regard online protest action as newsworthy as time passes, either ignoring it or reverting back to the preferred story frames of government and industry – 'publicity stunts', 'meaningless', 'desperate' " (p. 592). That is not to say, however, that the point of view of online activists simply cannot achieve visibility. Rather, as Chadwick (2011b) pointed out, "the hybridised ways in which important political news events are now mediated presents new opportunities for nonelite actors to enter news production assemblages through timely interventions" (p. 19).

These issues speak to an emerging debate in communication and media studies. While so far the vast majority of work on the socio-political consequences of the internet has tended to analyse the online medium in isolation, growing importance is increasingly been attributed to the study of interactions between novel and pre-existing forms of mass media. As Hoskins (2013) recently wrote, "the influences and impact of any medium cannot be understood in isolation from other media" (p. 4). Such awareness of the need for meaningful research to embrace a multitude of platforms and actors has generated some

useful attempts to describe and conceptualise contemporary news production and event mediatisation processes through emergent paradigms such as those of "new media ecology" (Awan et al., 2011) and "hybrid media system" (Chadwick, 2013 in press). Owing to the novelty of these approaches, both methodology and terminology in this area are surrounded by a high degree of uncertainty, with labels such as 'big media' vs. grassroots journalism (Gillmor, 2006), emergent vs. established media (Hoskins, 2013), and elite vs. nonelite actors (Chadwick, 2011b) all appearing in recent work. Nevertheless, this literature has in common a renewed focus on the interaction between online actors – both groups or individuals – on one side and "traditional" news outlets on the other, as print and broadcast media have been referred to in this thesis. Although the growing centrality of online communication to organising and campaigning calls for a re-assessment of established theories of political communication and news production (Entman, 2003), the case studies examined in this project showed that a complete evaluation of contemporary activism should also cover its evolving relationship with "old" media, which continue to play a central role in policy-formation processes (Koch-Baumgartner and Voltmer, 2010: 223).

In contrast to what was argued in recent speculative work on present and future media systems (Bennett, 2013), the rise of online platforms and alternative news providers has not determined the demise of established players and elites. Rather, "with the arrival of the Web and the growth of the blogsphere the public forum and mobilizing functions of journalism have [arguably] grown" (Schudson, 2008: 25). Interactive and social media in particular have triggered radical changes in the dynamics of news production and consumption to which "old" media have responded fairly successfully. Thus, getting to the root of the policy failure that characterised the campaigns examined in this thesis will require an in-depth investigation of the ways in which competing narratives of disability welfare were produced, shared and re-framed across media platforms, as well as an analysis of the relationship between online activists and journalists. While this constitutes material for a further study, the issues highlighted above hinted at the existence of some important limits to the efficacy of digital activism in times of crisis. In particular, researchers and activists alike should reflect on the extent to which ubiquitous social media communications may in fact reinforce existing dominant narratives and negative stereotypes, thus offsetting much of their value as platforms for spreading alternative paradigms and ideas of resistance.

In this context, an episode that would be particularly useful to examine in future research is that of the "Responsible Reform Report" released by the aforementioned "We Are Spartacus" campaign in January 2012. This document provided an alternative analysis

of the replies to the public consultation set up by the government to discuss DLA reform. As such, it showed how, in its own report, the Department for Work and Pensions had ignored the fact that most consultation replies contained overwhelmingly negative feedback, "hand-picking" instead those much rarer comments that supported its plans. The release of the "Responsible Reform Report" was timed to coincide with a period of intense discussions over the welfare reform in the House of Lords. On its launch day (17th of January 2012), the report quickly became a top-ten trending topic on Twitter in the UK (#spartacusreport). In addition, it was used as evidence in Lords debates and extensively covered by sympathetic news outlets including the Guardian, the Independent and the BBC. As a result, the Lords voted some substantial modifications to the Welfare Reform Bill. Yet, amendments were then overturned by MPs in the following Commons reading, which brought the Bill back to nearly its original form. The study of this and similar events could help illuminate the apparent paradox for which online media afford emerging activist groups enhanced opportunities to contribute to the contemporary "political information cycle" (Chadwick, 2011b), but at the same time this may not necessarily ensure the achievement of concrete policy change.

8.5 – Looking ahead: What next for disability and new media studies?

The research carried out for this project shed light on previously disregarded aspects of the relationship between disability and new media, exposing the centrality of the latter in the evolution of disability activism and citizen-initiated politics more broadly. Nevertheless, this thesis remains an introductory analysis that ought to be understood within the limitations associated with case study work set in a time-sensitive socio-political framework. In particular, at the time of writing (July 2013) there continues to be no clear end in sight for the economic crisis that started in 2008 and has become associated with controversial policy plans in a number of advanced industrial nations. Thus, it seems reasonably safe to assume that more challenges await disabled people in the near future. This context invites further work that builds directly on the findings of this study as well as expanding this type of research to examine the significance of online media as mobilising and organising platforms for other disadvantaged social groups. In addition to the relationship between online campaigning and the wider "ecology of policy-making" mentioned above, three other key issues stand out as potential priorities. These include:

1) **The relationship between disability activism and new media in the longer term.** Given the political and economic uncertainty of current times, as well as fast-paced

technological evolution, electronic organising around disabled people's rights is likely to see further transformation. A starting point here could be to expand social media analysis over a longer period of time using a large, randomised sample of user-generated content. To this end, the coding frame devised for this study and the data collected through it could inform automated coding and sentiment analysis as discussed in Chapter Five.

2) **The effects of online media on the inclusion/exclusion of disabled citizens from the realm of "formal" politics.** While this project focused on grass-roots activism and civil society organisations, decision-making ultimately remains located in representative systems and institutionalised politics. Is the internet re-configuring that domain in ways likely to affect disabled people, either positively or negatively? In particular, as online media are becoming increasingly important in contesting and winning elections, what is the impact of digital campaigns on disabled people's political rights?
3) **The importance of the internet as a civic resource for other groups traditionally marginalised in democratic politics.** As showed in this project, extra-ordinary circumstances can lead to unexpected changes in online participation patterns for a group such as disabled people. Thus, the current economic situation and future policy controversies that might ensue, notwithstanding their impact on living standards and social relations, provide researchers with an opportunity to better understand the use of online media among those that in previous studies have incautiously and simplistically been relegated to the raw end of the digital divide.

This is a broad research agenda that could be approached from several different angles and with multiple methods. It is nevertheless essential that anyone wanting to delve into these topics, whatever strategy they may wish to adopt, remains open to any possible outcome and lets the data do the talking. Compelling theoretical concepts such as the digital divide can provide useful inspiration but at the same time also restrict our perspective on emerging social phenomena. Instead, this study showed that it pays to challenge established paradigms and ask whether what we see is the entire picture or there are in fact details that still ought to be uncovered.

Appendix A – Online Media Inventory Matrix

Feature Type	Feature	Code
Personalisation and User Input	Audience segmentation (customisable website)	Present (1); Absent (0)
	Share your stories	Present (1); Absent (0)
	Polls & surveys	Present (1); Absent (0)
	Clicktivism “Plus”	Present (1); Absent (0)
Broadcast information (top-down communication)	Email action network	Present (1); Absent (0)
	Other email lists and/or discussion groups	Present (1); Absent (0)
	RSS feed	Present (1); Absent (0)
	Regular newsletter	Both online and offline (1) Online only (2) Offline only(3) Absent (0)
	Events calendar	Present - customisable (1) Present – not customisable (2) Absent (0)
	Personal contact details for officers	Present (1); Absent (0)
	Generic contact details	Present (1); Absent (0)
Social media and community apps (horizontal communications)	Discussion forum	Present (1); Absent (0)
	Official blog(s)	Present – comments enabled (1) Present – comments disabled (2) Absent (0)
	Members-only area	Present (1); Absent (0)
	Twitter	Present (1); Absent (0)
	Facebook	“Fan” page (1) Group (2) Absent (0)
	YouTube	Dedicated channel (1) Individual videos (2) Absent (0)
	Flickr	Present (1); Absent (0)
	Join button	Present (1); Absent (0)
	Donate button	Present (1); Absent (0)
	Share button	Present (1); Absent (0)
Action resources	e-petitions	Present (1); Absent (0)
	e-postcards/letters	Present (1); Absent (0)
	Dedicated campaigns/advocacy website section	Present (1); Absent (0)
	Event maps	Present (1); Absent (0)
	Virtual protest page(s)	Present (1 – please indicate media used) Absent (0)
	Innovative uses of online media for e-action	Please specify
	Other resources	Please specify

Appendix B – Semi-structured Interview Guide

Pre-interview:

a- Are you a staff member/trustee/volunteer/activist/all of the above, other?
b- Role and responsibilities? To what extent are these formalised?
c- How/why did you become involved in this organisation/campaign?

Advocacy and campaigning in the internet age:

- Why were you attracted to the internet for campaigning in the first place?
- Has the internet changed campaigning/lobbying/advocacy as you knew it? What are the most significant changes that have occurred in the past five years?

Digital media strategy:

- Whom are you trying to reach through the internet? Are there any particular target groups?
- What position does the internet occupy in your overall communications strategy (if any)?
- How far ahead do you plan your online operations? And what if something unforeseen happens that forces you to change plans/react quickly?
- You use a number of online platforms, how do you co-ordinate between them?
- Can you provide an example of something you think you have achieved through the use of digital media?

User preferences:

- (As a disabled campaigner,) what is your personal experience with the internet?
- From your point of view, what are the most useful online platforms and why? And from the point of you of your members/supporters?
- Are there any specific strategies you have developed in order to reach as many disabled users as possible?

Participation catalysts:

- What prompted you and the group/organization you are part of to become engaged in online politics?
- Where do you see your online presence in 12 months time?
- What effects would you say your internet campaigning has had? Overall, would that be a positive balance?

Appendix C – Interview Information Sheet

Information Sheet for interview participants

Connected citizens or digital isolation?
Online disability activism in times of crisis

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Please read and carefully consider the following information about the study and do not hesitate to ask for clarification if you require more information.

About the study:
My name is Filippo Trevisan and I am a PhD student in the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Glasgow, UK. I am currently conducting research on the relationship between disabled people and the internet. This project is funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council.

The purpose of this work is to understand whether the internet can help disabled people to become more involved in civic and political activities. From a more practical point of view, the study also aims at making recommendations to both policy-makers and technology developers in relation to the components of the internet that might be most useful to foster disabled people's participation in democracy.

What does taking part in the study involve?
As part of the research, I am hoping to interview prominent figures in disability politics (politicians, leaders of non-profit and advocacy groups, communication managers for disability organizations, activists, popular bloggers, etc.) in order to unveil reasons for which they may or may not benefit from the internet in their work. If you agree to take part in the study you will be asked to participate in an interview lasting between 30 minutes and one hour. The interview will either be conducted either via telephone or email at a mutually convenient time, or face-to-face at a mutually convenient location (e.g. your place of work).

I am interested in hearing from you about your experience of using (or not using) the internet both in general, and more specifically in the context of campaigning, lobbying, and organising support for other politically and civically relevant initiatives. The interview will be organised around themes and specific examples relating to your own professional experience. You will also be given the opportunity to comment on policy issues which are relevant.

With your permission, the interview will be recorded. You do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to, and you may withdraw interview at any time.

What will happen to my answers?
The requirements of the Data Protection Act and Freedom of Information Act (UK) will be observed. All your comments will be anonymised and you will not be identified at any stages after the interview, nor in the final PhD thesis or in publications that might derive from it. Only myself and my supervisors will have access to raw data arising from the research and this will be stored securely within locked cabinets at the School of Social and Political Sciences. All electronic data

will also be password-protected. All information collected will be treated confidentially. If you wish, you can review the transcript of the interview and suggest amendments in order for it to accurately reflect your opinion.

Further questions or concerns:
This study has been approved by the College of Social Sciences Ethics Committee at the University of Glasgow. If you have questions about the research you can contact me at the details below:

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Alternatively, you can also contact the School's Head of Research:

Prof. Nick Watson
Head of Research
School of Social and Political Sciences
University of Glasgow
email: n.watson@glasgow.ac.uk

University of Glasgow | College of Social Sciences

Connected citizens or digital isolation?
Online disability activism in times of crisis

Consent form

Researcher: Filippo Trevisan
School of Social and Political Sciences
University of Glasgow, UK

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to leave at any time, without giving any reason.

3. I confirm that my contribution will be recorded with my consent; I also understand that my name will not appear on the transcript and that it will instead be replaced by a code identifier. The data will only be used for the purposes of this research project.

4. I understand that any data I provide through taking part in this research will be held in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998 (UK).

5. I agree / do not agree (delete as applicable) to take part in this research.

Signature of participant

_____

Name of participant (please print) **Date**

_____ _____

Appendix D - Facebook Content Coding Frame

Section A: Apply to each entire thread as coding unit

Box	Variable	Inter-coder Reliability	Categories
A	Thread ID	--	T001; T002; T003; etc.
B	Sponsor/owner of page/content	1	HHIT – The Hardest Hit DPAC – Disabled People Against Cuts BOB – The Broken of Britain
C	Date coded	--	DD/MM/YYY
D	Coder ID	--	Initials
E	Thread length	1	Nr of posts (including starter post)
F	Date of original post	--	DD/MM/YYYY
G	Date of most recent post	--	DD/MM/YYYY
H	Nr of unique contributors	1	Nr
I	Structural focus	.72	1- politics 2- policy 3- both 4- other 5- n/c
J	Structural topic	.86	1 – on primary topic (Welfare reform and cuts) 0 – on other topic

Section B: Apply to each individual post as coding unit

Box	Variable	Inter-coder Reliability	Categories
K	Post ID	--	P0001; P0002; P0003; etc.
L	Date posted	--	DD/MM/YYYY
M	Time posted	--	24hr
N	Function of post	1	1 – starter; 2 – comment
O	Post length	.95	Nr of words
P	Medium of post	-- (multi-code)	1 – Text 2 – Photo (original) 3 – Video (original) 4 – Link to mass media site (traditional) 5 – Link to mass media site (emergent/activist) 6 – Link to sponsor/owner's own site 7 – Link to blog (main blogger) 8 – Link to blog (other) 9 – Link to other disability organisation/campaign 10 – Other 11 – n/c
Q	User ID	--	User0001; User0002; etc.
R	User type	.92	1 – Page owner 2 – Administrator/main blogger (posting using personal screen name) 3 – Individual user/supporter 4 – Other campaign/organisation 5 – Other (specify)
S	Personal story?	.90	1 – YES; 0 – NO
T	Personal story authorship (source of story)	.86	1 – Direct account in the 1st person 2 – Friend/family member 3 – Carer (un-related) 4 – Professional help (medical, legal, etc.) 5 – Other (specify) 6 – n/c

			0 – n/a
U	Content of post (enter all that apply)	-- (multi-code)	1- Welfare reform plans and public expenditure cuts 2- Other issues with the welfare/benefits system 3- Current government plans in other policy area (please specify) 4- Opposition policy/plans 5- Sponsor's own event/initiative 6- Other organization's event/initiative 7- Political process more generally (elections/legislative process/decision-making) 8- Politicians attitudes to social inequalities/discrimination 9- Other disabling barriers (including societal attitudes) 10- Other (issues not connected to disability and/or politics) 11- n/c 0 - n/a
V	Problem Framing	.75	1 – Collective 2 – Individual 3 – n/c 0 – n/a
W	Argument framing (if in doubt, indicate more than one)	.64	1- Socio-economic citizenship 2- Political citizenship 3- Civil (legal) rights/Human rights 4- Moral panic 5- Tragedy 6- Media Propaganda 7- Irony 8- Other 9- n/c 0- n/a
X	Institutions mentioned (enter all that apply)	-- (multi-code)	1- Prime minister (by name/role) 2- Department for Work and Pensions 3- Minister for Disabled People (by name/role) 4- Other government member/-s (by name/role) 5- Government (generic) 6- Parliament (and parliamentary committees, MPs - generic) 7- Leader of the opposition (by name/role) 8- Conservative Party 9- Lib-Dem Party 10- Labour Party 11- NHS 12- Private contractors for DWP/NHS (e.g. ATOS Origin) 13- Traditional Mass Media 14- Other (please specify) 0 - n/a
Y	Mention political action (enter all that apply)	-- (multi-code)	1- Individual online/offline action (e.g. email/phone/write to government officials; contribute to consultation process) 2- Invite leaders/organizers to meet with politicians and/or contribute to consultation process 3- Collective online action (e.g. sign e-petition; contribute to e-protest page; use personal social networking profile as part of innovative collective action such as #TwitterStories, etc.) 4- Collective offline action (e.g. protest march, rally, demonstration, occupation)

			5- Contact mass media 6- Contact other online locations (spread the word) 7- Oust politicians at next election 8- Unspecified need to influence decision-makers 9- Other (please specify) 0 - n/a

Appendix E - Facebook Content Coding Manual

Objectives of content analysis:

- to acquire a basic understanding of online interaction dynamics between group/campaign organisers and "ordinary" users;
- to explore the arguments underpinning the discussion;
- to clarify the relationship between online *talk* and political *action*.

The conversation threads you will code are drawn from the Facebook walls of three groups that are currently campaigning against government plans for a radical reform of disability welfare:

a) **The Hardest Hit** (Formal organisation – www.thehardesthit.org.uk):
This is the UK's main "mainstream" campaign against disability welfare changes. It is run by a coalition of over fifty prominent charities (both traditional and membership-run), most of which are members of the Disability Benefits Consortium (DBC). Active since early 2011, The Hardest Hit possibly represents the most significant joint-venture between British organizations "of" and "for" disabled people since the campaigns that led to the introduction of landmark anti-discrimination legislation in the mid-1990s. The main focus of this "coalition" has been on supplementing the work that charities already do with Parliament and the government with "high-visibility" events and rallies such as the marches against the Welfare Reform Bill in London and other UK cities on 11 May and 22 October 2011.

b) **Disabled People Against Cuts** (Digitised activists – www.dpac.uk.net):
A group of disabled activists who met for the first time at the Lib-Dem party conference in October 2010 and since decided to set up a blog and social media presence to support their initiatives and voice their dissent in the longer term. Many of the founders have been involved in disability activism for a long time, some since the 1980s. DPAC are currently working towards building a democratic, accountable, and sustainable structure for the group and have held their first national conference on 29 Oct. 2011 in London.

c) **The Broken of Britain** (Digital action network – www.thebrokenofbritain.org):
An online collective of disabled bloggers, each of whom with considerable blogging experience about both their personal experience with the welfare system and other disability policy issues. After blogging individually for several years, they came together for the first time in October 2010. They operate almost exclusively online. They have launched a series of online initiatives to influence policy makers, participated in meetings on the Welfare Reform Bill with MPs and ministers, and frequently "represented" the views of disabled people in the media in recent months (e.g. Guardian, Independent, BBC, etc.). Contrarily to DPAC above, The Broken of Britain's activists seem to have adopted a strategy that is less about confrontation/protest, and more about seeking "change from within" by participating in institutionalised debates, including party conferences. However, it should also be noted that they are not formally accountable to anyone but themselves. In their own words, they have been "taking a break" from campaigning (but not from personal blogging) since 8 Nov 2011.

Sampling and coding units:
The coding frame is divided into two separate but complementary sections. Section A requires coders to focus on each entire discussion thread as a single unit. While some

variables apply to the original post (i.e. the post that initiates a new conversation) and to all comments that follow in a combined fashion, others apply to the original post ONLY. This is clearly indicated in the coding instructions below, so please take note of this when carrying out the coding exercise. Section B requires coders to focus on each post as an individual coding unit irrespective of its length.

Please note that some variables will allow you to multi-code. If this is the case, it will be explicitly indicated next to the variable name in the guidelines below and in the summary table provided in a separate document (i.e. "enter all that apply").

Coding Sheet:
Please note that despite the coding frame is divided in two sections, coding will be carried out on a single Excel sheet for all variables. The first ten columns from left to right will include data for Section A, while the remaining columns will include codes for section B. If in doubt, please see the sample coding sheet provided by the researcher.

Abbreviations:
n/c = not classifiable
n/a = not applicable

Glossary – specific abbreviations that may be found in online discussions:

BCODP	British Council of Disabled People (predecessor of UKDPC, see below)
DA	Disability Alliance
DBC	Disability Benefits Consortium, federation of over 50 UK disability charities including both traditional and member-led ones
DLA	Disability Living Allowance
DPO(s)	Disabled People's Organisation(s), member-led, self-advocacy and self-help organisation
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
ESA	Employment and Support Allowance
LC Disability	Leonard Cheshire Disability, major charitable provider of services to disabled people, especially in the area of care homes, strongly criticised by member-led disabled people's organisations
ILF	Independent Living Fund (threatened under current policy proposals)
ODI	Office for Disability Issues (part of DWP)
PA	Personal Assistant
PIP	Personal Independence Payment, new universal benefit to replace all existing types of benefits under current government plans
UKDPC	United Kingdom Disabled People's Council (successor of BCODP)

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Coding Frame and Variables Descriptors/Examples:

Section A – Fill out once for each entire thread:

Thread ID: T001; T002; T003; etc.

Sponsor/owner of page/content:
HHIT – The Hardest Hit (Formal organizations' campaign)
DPAC – Disabled People Against Cuts (Digitised activists)
BOB - The Broken of Britain (Digital action network)

Date coded: DD/MM/YYYY
Coder ID: Initials

Thread length: total Nr of posts (including starter post)

Date of Original post: DD/MM/YYYY

Date of Most recent post: DD/MM/YYYY

Number of unique contributors to thread: Nr

Structural focus: does the *original post* concentrate on politics, policy, both, or neither?

N.B.: When a post includes a link to a news media site, you should code for this variable looking at the combination between the comment (if any) provided by the Facebook user who posted the link, and the title of the news material the link refers to (if displayed).

1- *politics*:
the post focuses on one or more points of explicit political or ideological nature, such as: party ideology, personal like/dislike for candidates, elected representatives, or members of government, elections, etc.; therefore, the post is likely to mention some of the main actors of institutional politics (parties, party leaders, government members, individual politicians, etc.) and/or to include comments based on political and personal judgement as opposed to drawing on the merits of policy proposals (e.g. "the Tories are fixated on the Thatcher years," "Nick Cameron lied during the election campaign," or more in general "I distrust politicians"); in other words, this is about the political environment and associated judgement/sentiments;
2- *policy:*
the post concentrates on specific policy measures/plans (especially welfare policy), and draws primarily on their merits (e.g. "the Welfare Reform Bill is unfair"); this can include references to personal stories/circumstances, as long as there is a clear, explicit or implicit, connection with policy measures/proposals (e.g. "I am afraid to loose my entitlement to DLA," "my brother has Down syndrome and I feel his rights are being violated"); in other words, this is more about the output of the decision-making process than it is about the politics involved in it;
3- *both*:
an original post that combines and connects two or more elements listed above; it may often start as a specific policy point and then move over to criticize/attack/praise politicians on broader ground; this does not imply that one domain is dominant over the other in the post, but only that the two explicitly co-exist;
4- *other*:
the original post does not mention policy measures, nor make an explicit or implicit connection with institutionalised or protest politics, but rather focuses on third issues (including personal ones); although these may bear some political significance, this is not explicitly acknowledged by the author of the post;
5- *n/c*

Structural topic (overall coherence): does the original post focus on a topic closely connected to the primary concern of the owner/sponsor of these Facebook pages? (i.e. disability welfare reform/cuts)

N.B.: When a post includes a link to a news media site, the same guidelines provided for the previous variable apply.

1 = on primary topic (disability welfare reform/cuts)
0 = on other topic

Section B: Apply the following codes to each post

Post ID: P0001; P0002; P0003; etc.

Date posted: DD/MM/YYYY

Time posted: 24hr clock (e.g. 2:15pm = 14:15)

Function of post: 1 = starter post; 2 = comment.

Length of post: Nr of words (for posts including a link to other sites, count all text displayed)

Medium of post:
(**enter all that apply followed by semicolon:** e.g. for a post including a link to a YouTube video and the following text "check out my new campaign video!" enter: 1; 3; for a post including ONLY a link to a YouTube video and no additional comment enter: 3):

1 – Text (original)
2 – Photo (original – including links to photo-sharing sites such as Flickr, Picasa, etc.)
3 – Video (original – including links to video-sharing sites such as YouTube, Vimeo, etc.)
4 – Link to traditional media site (e.g. Guardian, Independent, BBC, etc.)
5 – Link to emergent/activist media site (e.g. liberalconspiracy.org; disabledgo.com; ablemagazine.co.uk; BBC Ouch!, etc.)
6 – Link to sponsor/owner's own site (e.g. thebrokenofbritain.org; dpac.uk.net; hardesthit.org.uk)
7 – Link to blog: main blogger (for a list of key supporting blogs see below)
8 – Link to blog: other
9 – Link to other disability organisation/campaign
10 – Other (specify; if link, cut and paste into box)
11 – n/c

Key blogs supporting The Broken of Britain ("spokes"):

- benefitscroungingscum.blogspot.com
- diaryofabenefitscrounger.blogspot.com

User ID: User0001; User0002; etc.

User type (post authorship):
1- Page owner (i.e. Broken of Britain; Hardest Hit; Disabled People Against Cuts)
2- Admin/central blogger/campaign leader (posting using personal screen name, see below for details)
3- Individual user/supporter

4- Other campaign/organization
5- Other (please specify)

Central bloggers/organisers for The Broken of Britain are: Kaliya Franklin, Lisa Ellwood, Rhydian James Fond, Sue Marsh

Central bloggers/organisers for DPAC are: Linda Burnip, Debbie Jolly, Eleanor Lisney, Ellen Clifford

Personal story?: does the post contain references to a personal story/experience of disability?

0 = NO; 1 = YES

Personal story authorship (explicit): are disabled people telling their own stories or is someone else talking on their behalf?

N.B. Only code for this when relationship between user and story is explicitly apparent (e.g. "the other day I had to undergo medical assessment…" = 1- direct account; "my brother has Down syndrome…" = 2- friend/family member; etc.). If in doubt/not explicit enter "6- n/c."

1- direct account in the first person
2- friend/family member
3- carer (un-related)
4- professional help (medical, legal, etc.)
5- other (please specify)
6- n/c
7- n/a

Content of post: what issue(s) are they talking about?
(enter all that apply, i.e. all that are mentioned in the post; I have tried to be as exhaustive and clear-cut as possible here, but there may still be some overlap)

1- Welfare reform plans and public expenditure cuts
2- Other issues with the welfare system (including NHS)
3- Current government plans in other policy area (please specify, e.g. higher education, public service cuts, public sector pay freeze, etc.)
4- Opposition policy/plans
5- Sponsor's own event/initiative (including protest/event practicalities)
6- Other organization's event/initiative
7- Institutionalised politics in general (e.g. elections/legislative process/decision-making)
8- Politicians/authorities' attitudes to social issues/inequalities (including disability discrimination)
9- Other disabling barriers and discrimination (including societal attitudes in general)
10- Other (issues not connected to disability and/or politics, please specify)
11- n/c
0- n/a (short posts with limited meaning such as straightforward expressions of agreement/disagreement, i.e. "agree," "fully behind you", and simple greetings would fit in this category)

Problem Framing: do users regard the issue/-s that they are discussing as individual or collective ones?

1 – *Collective*
Common group problem: it can start from a specific/personal example, but needs to imply that there is more than just a single case at stake; most often, this type of frame will be signalled by the use of plural syntax (e.g. it is about "us"; "we" should do something/are treated a certain way; etc.), however, this should not lead to automatically discounting posts expressed in the singular, but close attention should instead be paid to their meaning and context;
2 – *Individual*
Personal problem expressed in such a way that does not imply others are affected or requires a collective solution/action;
3 – *n/c*
0 – *n/a*

Argument Framing: why are they saying what they are saying? what type of reasoning underpins their arguments?

If in doubt, please indicate all that you think apply*

1- *Socio-economic citizenship/rights argument:*
all posts showing a sense of entitlement to benefits and other welfare provision on grounds of social justice, fairness, special needs, right to personal dignity; it typically portrays disabled people as "deserving" and/or tries to counter accusations that those on disability benefits would be "scroungers" or social "parasites"; these arguments may differentiate between disabled and non-disabled people thus making a case for public assistance being "owed" to disabled people as compensation for society-inflicted disablement, or more simply as a way to make up for impairments; this can include tragedy and dependency discourses that link impairment to the right to receiving state benefits;
2- *Political citizenship/rights argument:*
all posts drawing on the political and policy-making process *per se*, and possibly (but not necessarily) highlighting role of disabled people (and their carers/families) in it; i.e. disabled people (and others) should enjoy fair opportunities to participate and have their say in decisions, and as a result benefit from policies not because something is "owed" to them, but because they have equal political rights and should ultimately count as anyone else in this process; it frames what is being said as a political problem, and not simply as one of resource redistribution.
3- *Civil (legal) rights/Human rights argument:*
posts drawing on legislation or legal protection for disabled people, and/or universal equality principles and independent living; differently from the socio-economic argument described above, this implicitly or explicitly derives from a view of disabled and non-disabled people as equal citizens; it also tends to be less about financial compensation and more about promoting equality *per se* in all aspects of social life.
4- *Moral panic argument:*
posts drawing on moral principles/ideology (and lack thereof, particularly in the current political environment) as determinants for policy agendas and approaches to wealth re-distribution; if victimisation of disabled people is implied, responsibility for this tends to be ascribed to "evil" politicians who "hate" disabled people; typical posts will refer to policy proposals and/or politicians as "unjust/perverse/immoral" and "always picking on the weak/vulnerable," etc.

5- *Tragedy argument:*
posts offering a negative outlook on the condition/future of disabled people but not connecting that to any of the rights and/or moral panic arguments listed above; although tragedy is not necessarily framed as an individual issue, clear responsibilities for it are not identified either.

6- *Media Propaganda argument:*
posts framing disability discrimination and the disability welfare reform in particular as the outcome of negative mass media stereotypes – these may range from content hypothesising a media "conspiracy" against disabled people to those more simply questioning sensationalism and the commercial norms that drive the editorial line of some news outlets;

7- *Irony:*
posts that use irony and have no clear association with any of the frames outlined above fall under this category; these are messages for which sarcasm appears to be an end in itself; they are not necessarily meaningless but also do not contribute to the discussion in the same way in which the ones framed as above do.

8- *Other (specify)*

9- *n/c*

10- *n/a*

Institutions mentioned (enter all that are explicitly mentioned):

1- Prime minister (by name or role)
2- Department for Work and Pensions
3- Minister for Disabled People (by name or role)
4- Other government member/-s (by name or role)
5- Government (generic)
6- Parliament (and parliamentary committees, MPs - generic)
7- Leader of the opposition (by name or role)
8- Conservative Party
9- Lib-Dem Party
10- Labour Party
11- NHS
12- Private contractors for DWP/NHS (e.g. ATOS Origin)
13- Traditional mass media
14- Other (please specify)
0 n/a

Mention political action (enter all types of action that are explicitly mentioned):

1- Individual online/offline action (e.g. email/phone/write to government officials; contribute to consultation process)
2- Collective online action (e.g. sign e-petition; contribute to e-protest page; use personal social networking profile as part of innovative collective action such as #TwitterStories, etc.)
3- Collective offline action (e.g. protest march, rally, demonstration, occupation)
4- Invite leaders/organizers to meet with politicians/contribute to consultation process
5- Contact mass media
6- Contact other online locations (spread the word)
7- Oust politicians at next election
8- Unspecified need to influence decision-makers
9- Other (please specify)
0 n/a

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