

Crowd-sourced advocacy: Promoting disability rights through online storytelling

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Abstract

This paper sheds light on the emergent advocacy technique of building policy counter-narratives by crowd-sourcing, organizing, and disseminating personal life stories online. Focusing on the case of disability rights groups in the UK, this paper uses qualitative in-depth content analysis to examine 107 blog posts containing personal disability stories published in 2012-2013 by two anti-austerity groups. Although each of these groups managed its blogs differently, with one carefully curating stories and the other publishing crowd-sourced narratives as supplied by users, they generated virtually identical counter-narratives. These accounts challenged the dominant news narrative that presented disability welfare claimants as ‘scroungers.’ They did so by retaining its overarching structure – which functioned as the de facto coordinating mechanism for the crowd-sourced counter-narrative – and replacing its content with three main alternative arguments drawn from personal life stories. The implications of this new advocacy technique for disabled people and other marginalized groups are discussed. This includes considerations about the development of a form of stories-based advocacy that is both effective and respectful of the people who ‘lend’ their lived experiences for advocacy purposes. The paper concludes by highlighting the need for research to investigate whether the new voices that emerge through these processes are ‘being heard’ and can successfully re-frame public discourse about sensitive policy issues.

Keywords

Advocacy, Internet, storytelling, voice, disability, blogs

Introduction

Emotive narratives occupy an important place in contemporary policy debates. As Welch (1997) noted, ‘making public policy is a competitive business’ (p. 55) and ‘one particular type of argument that often seems to be effective in persuading the listening audience is the affective argument – the appeal to emotion that is so much a part of public policy debates’ (*ibid.*). Thus, in recent years different stakeholders, including traditional proponents of evidence-based policy such as government officials, have become increasingly inclined to using pathos-filled narratives – particularly ‘real life’ stories – to influence public debates on controversial policy issues. For example, British civil servants tend to arrange case studies and select numerical evidence to craft ‘policy stories’ that direct decision-makers towards certain outcomes (Stevens 2011). Furthermore, these stories are used also to publicize the positive effects of specific policy measures (Janda & Topouzi 2015). Given their persuasive strength and ability to reach both specialist and general audiences, it seems reasonable to expect ‘policy stories’ to become even more important in future policy debates.

Advocacy and activist groups have seized the emergence of emotive narratives in policy discourses as an opportunity to develop new techniques to influence public debate and policy decisions, using the Internet to crowd-source, organize, and disseminate their constituents’ personal stories. This emergent trend is part of a broader personalization of collective action in the Internet age. As the distinction between ‘public’ and ‘private’ increasingly disappears online, some have argued that ‘collective benefits will emerge from individual contributions’ (Flanagin et al. 2010, p. 186). Personalized action frames are particularly important for young people (Vromen et al. 2015) and have been shown to be able to support coordinated and focused activist

efforts while also expanding participation to include a broader range of individuals compared to traditional protests (Bennett & Segerberg 2011).

Although some scholars have criticized this personalization trend as a sign of ‘the growing centrality of marketing techniques in contemporary protest’ (Poell et al. 2016, p.1005), building a policy counter-narrative by collecting life stories online has some important advantages for advocacy organizations and their grassroots. First, from a tactical standpoint, crowd-sourcing content provides a rich set of accounts to choose from as evidence. Second, by enabling politically inexperienced citizens to become involved in advocacy processes from their private sphere, this process could facilitate the emergence of traditionally marginalized voices in public discourse, preventing elites from ‘speaking for others’ (Alcoff 1991). Third, it can foster empathy among those who contribute to this process, facilitating the emergence of commonalities that could strengthen a collective identity for those involved. As Jackson and Foucault Welles (2015) noted, sharing experiences online, particularly through social media, can help ‘traditionally marginalized groups create and maintain their own, alternative publics with the express goals of both legitimizing and communicating their lived realities and pushing the mainstream public sphere to acknowledge and respond to these realities’ (p. 398).

Despite its many positive implications, this growing trend in grassroots advocacy creates a dilemma for those who advocate for marginalized groups and are concerned that campaigns centered on personal stories may generate stigma and victimization. More broadly, there is also a risk that this type of ‘self-centered participation’ (Fenton & Barassi 2011, p.183) may ultimately promote a private and individualistic interpretation of the very problems for which a collective

policy solution is sought. Given the dearth of empirical studies in this area, this paper explores these tensions by discussing the growing popularity of story-centered campaigns in the British disability rights movement. Following a brief overview of the broader media and policy landscape, two recent online disability advocacy campaigns that used public blog posts to publicize crowd-sourced personal disability stories in an attempt to stop radical changes to disability welfare in the UK (#SpartacusStories and ‘Save the ILF’) are analyzed in detail. This provides a detailed overview of whose voices emerge through this technique, what these voices are saying, and whether this process can generate coherent counter-narratives. In light of this, this paper discusses also how organizations that advocate on behalf of marginalized groups can implement this emerging promotional technique in ways that are both effective from a strategic communication perspective and respectful of the people who ‘lend’ their life stories to advocacy campaigns. This paper concludes by highlighting the need for further research to determine whether these new voices are effectively ‘being heard’ and can influence issue framing in a variable and increasingly hybridized media ecology.

The disability advocate’s dilemma

Following the formation of a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government in May 2010, disability quickly rose to the top of the British policy and news agendas. David Cameron’s new government immediately promoted a range of radical reforms of disability welfare as part of a broader austerity package. A large part of the British news media supported these policy plans by greatly amplifying an existing narrative that presented disability benefits claimants as ‘scroungers’ who, despite their impairments, could have worked but preferred to claim welfare instead, or ‘cheats’ who in fact were not disabled at all (Briant et al. 2013). This type of

coverage, which was arguably epitomized by the *Daily Mail*'s front page headline '75% of Incapacity Benefit Claimants Are Fit to Work' (27 October 2010), completely ignored the lived experiences of disability benefit claimants (Garthwaite 2011, p.372), framing them as lazy and morally corrupt individuals in receipt of free handouts to which they were not entitled.

It was particularly difficult for disability rights advocates to challenge this narrative for two main reasons. First, the 'fraud' narrative capitalized on a series of 'folktales' and stereotypes that were already strongly rooted in many people's minds (Polletta 2009, p.42). Second, it defined the problem as a moral issue of 'fairness vs. cheating' (Matthews et al. 2016), which supported the powerfully persuasive impression that society was divided between 'decent' people (us) and disability benefits 'cheats' (them). This narrative triggered what Hughes (2015) calls the 'politics of resentment' against disabled people in which anecdotes and assumptions trump systematic evidence for which most Britons believe 30 to 40 per cent of disability benefits claims per year to be fraudulent while the actual figure is below one per cent (*ibid.*).

This context challenged disability advocates to build an effective counter-narrative. In the past, British disabled self-advocates successfully used large scale statistical evidence to persuade policy-makers of the urgent need for anti-discrimination legislation (Barnes 1991). Yet, today systematic evidence seems out of sync with a context in which both policy and news 'stories' are increasingly dominated by anecdotal and emotionally-charged content. In light of this, collecting and publicizing personal stories of disability through online media could provide a useful opportunity to build a viable counter-narrative. The proponents of this technique have indicated that personal stories are now more accessible than ever through social media, would provide the

‘expert’ view that so far has been missing from this debate (Garthwaite 2011) and avoid victimization by serving a clear advocacy purpose (Beresford 2016). However, the British disabled people’s movement traditionally has opposed the use of personal stories in campaign messages for three main reasons, including:

- Personal stories risk privatizing issues that are fundamentally political;
- The anecdotal evidence contained in personal stories provides a poor foundation for effective policy-making; and, perhaps most importantly,
- Personal accounts of disability, if distorted or not framed appropriately, can generate further stigma and victimization for disabled people (Doddington et al. 1994).

These concerns continue to affect the way in which disability advocates – in particular self-advocates – think about the use of personal stories today. As one prominent disabled self-advocate interviewed at the height of the UK disability welfare reform debate put it:

[we should] take personality out of our campaign because we [disabled self-advocates] are different from personal blogs, we want to be a united voice, and not speak only for one person at a time. ’

(Disabled People Against Cuts’ Founder, July 2011)

In light of these considerations, it was useful to review the initiatives that Britain’s most prominent disability organizations set up to oppose disability welfare changes from 2010

onwards to assess whether they resonated with these principles or, instead, incorporated personal stories of disability as a way to promote an alternative narrative.

Austerity as a catalyst for storytelling

Looking at the most prominent initiatives set up to oppose changes to disability welfare in the UK through 2016, it appears that campaigns centered around personal stories of disability have in fact proliferated in very recent years. While it is not clear exactly what may have sparked this new trend – if, for example, it originated from specific training in the advocacy sector – this practice echoed a consolidated tendency in the American disability movement to use individual testimony and litigation in order to advance collective rights for disabled people (Vaughn-Switzer, 2003). The first British advocacy group to launch a campaign featuring personal life stories was a digital network of disabled bloggers turned activists called The Broken of Britain. Having kept personal blogs for several years already, these young disabled individuals joined forces in 2010 and capitalized on the growing popularity of lifestyle blogs (Lenart-Cheng & Walker 2011) to launch a new type of disability advocacy that used a range of innovative techniques (Trevisan, 2016). Among these, The Broken of Britain's organizers invited other disabled Internet users to share their personal stories publicly on Twitter using the #MyDLA (short for 'My Disability Living Allowance') hashtag at critical moments during the welfare reform legislative process in 2011. Soon, several other disability rights groups followed in The Broken of Britain's footsteps and started to use personal stories to advocate for policy change.

This trend expanded rapidly to include a very broad range of disability organizations. At one end of the organizational spectrum there were established disability organizations, including both

professionalized charities and long-established self-advocacy groups. In particular, 18 out of 20 of the most prominent organizations that supported the largest anti-disability austerity coalition formed in 2011 – The Hardest Hit – and members of Britain’s largest disability umbrella organization – the Disability Benefits Consortium – launched one or more campaigns centered on personal stories between the onset of the welfare reform controversy and the time this article went to print (Table 1). Moreover, 12 of these organizations also set up dedicated ‘Your Stories’ sections on their respective websites, to which Internet users could contribute their experiences through a variety of channels, from email and online forms to direct blog postings.

[Table 1 about here]

At the opposite end of the organizational spectrum there were less formal grassroots advocacy groups. Among these was Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC), which, in a striking departure from the skeptical attitude towards personal stories expressed by its representative quoted earlier in this paper, soon decided to incorporate personal stories of disability in some of its initiatives, including the 2013 ‘Save the ILF’ campaign that is described in detail in the next section.

Today, disabled self-advocates seem aware of the potential ambivalence of personal stories, which may inspire pity and passivity if they are not presented appropriately. As one of The Broken of Britain’s founders explained in an interview with the author,

‘we [disabled people] shouldn’t have to do this [publicize personal stories], but unfortunately the [welfare reform] situation is so serious

that the only way that we can move away from this established round of rhetoric [focused on benefit fraud] is to use real people's stories [...] pitiful stories.'

(The Broken of Britain founder, July 2011)

These words acknowledge the role played by disruptive events such as the welfare reform in promoting the adoption of potentially controversial promotional techniques. In particular, the persuasive potential of personal narratives as an effective “antidote” to stereotype-filled mass media accounts is recognized here. As Polletta (2006) argued, even stories told from a victim’s standpoint and that describe ‘experiences of dependence and dehumanization’ (p. 140) can convey ‘an impression of agency and reasonableness’ (*ibid.*) provided that they are narrated adequately. In light of this, it is essential to better understand story-centered advocacy campaigns and their implications for social justice advocacy.

Analyzing personal stories

The rapid and widespread adoption of personal stories as a key online promotional technique for British disability rights advocates prompts four main questions:

- (1) Whose stories are included in these campaigns and who tells them? In other words, whose voices are represented?
- (2) What themes are represented in these stories?
- (3) Do they form a coherent counter-narrative?

What are the implications of this emerging practice for those at the center of personal stories and the disability community more broadly?

Exploring these fundamental issues provides a useful opportunity to discuss the significance of this emerging practice for disabled people and other marginalized groups more generally, and generates a foundation for further studies to examine the efficacy of this emerging form of advocacy communication.

In order to tackle these questions effectively, it is necessary to delve deeply into the stories shared by disability advocates online. Two advocacy campaigns that prominently featured personal stories of disability on their public blog sites offer particularly relevant case studies. The first is the #SpartacusStories campaign launched in January 2012 by the Spartacus Network, an innovative self-advocacy group led by a young generation of Internet-savvy disabled activists that followed in the footsteps of The Broken of Britain (Trevisan, 2016). #SpartacusStories sought to fend off plans by the UK government to replace Disability Living Allowance (DLA) – the main benefit paid to disabled claimants to enable them to afford the extra costs associated with being disabled – with a new benefit called Personal Independence Payment (PIP).

#SpartacusStories was centered on a public blog siteⁱ that featured 98 posts based on life stories about DLA. The second case study considered in this paper is the ‘Save the ILF’ campaign, which was launched by DPAC in March 2013 to oppose government plans to eliminate the Independent Living Fund (ILF), a comparatively small but important benefit designed to enhance the independence of people with very high support needs. ‘Save the ILF’ prominently displayed nine blog posts on its campaign siteⁱⁱ that chronicled the lives of ILF recipients. This marked a significant change of strategy for DPAC, which had been among the most vocal opponents of stories-centered advocacy, as was discussed above.

Given the exploratory nature of this project, it was crucial to analyze blog content in a way capable of capturing any emerging themes. Each blog entry was approached as a coding unit with the counter-narrative resulting from the combination of all blog posts as the unit of analysis. This process focused simultaneously on both manifest and latent forms of content. On one hand, SPSS was used to record and analyze some basic quantitative elements, including: the sponsor organization for each blog post; the date and time of each blog entry; its length (number of words); and authorship (direct account by disabled person; third person account by family member, friend, caregiver, or other; multiple authors). On the other hand, NVivo 11 was used to code each blog entry thematically in a process akin to the one used for analyzing in-depth interview transcripts. Some codes were determined a priori to capture elements expected to feature in personal stories of disability (e.g. personal details about the author, benefits and drawbacks of particular welfare benefits). However, most thematic codes emerged inductively during the analysis, including issues of agency, consequences of the welfare reform, and broader experiences with government services for disabled persons. Coding continued until theoretical saturation was reached and no new themes could be found.

In total, 107 blog posts centered on personal stories of disability were analyzed, 98 from #SpartacusStories and nine from 'Save the ILF.' 103 of these blog entries relied solely on written text, while only four included a picture. Three additional entries consisted of short YouTube videos. Given the low frequency of the videos and significant differences between text-based and visual media, YouTube contributions to these campaigns were not included in this paper but could be considered in further research. #SpartacusStories and 'Save the ILF' also enabled a comparison between different ways of managing stories-centered disability advocacy. This is

because the Spartacus Network appeared to favor a more hands off approach and posted personal stories as supplied by its supporters during a short three-day period between 16-18 January 2012. In contrast, DPAC published a smaller number of stories over a week in March 2013, possibly in an attempt to craft a more cohesive, coherent and controlled narrative.

Whose voices?

Overall, more than 80% (n=88) of the blog entries analyzed for this paper were written in the first person by disabled Internet users. Direct accounts formed the vast majority of stories in both the 'Save the ILF' (eight out of nine) and #SpartacusStories campaigns (80 out of 98). Very few posts (n=4) were narrated in the third person, generally by a family member, friend, or caregiver for a disabled person. The remaining blog entries were narrated by multiple authors (n=9), while for six it was impossible to clearly establish the number of authors. Although the authenticity of the accounts included in these blog entries could only be presumed, the level of detail included in many of these posts suggested that people with detailed knowledge and personal experience of the disability welfare system had indeed authored them.

The large percentage of direct accounts found in both case studies was consistent with what can be expected of campaigns that seek to achieve persuasiveness through pathos and empathy. However, it would be a mistake to underestimate the importance of this result. In particular, the voices of disabled people presented in these blog posts stood in stark contrast with the types of sources that informed disability coverage in major news outlets, which tend to privilege the point of view of doctors and other medical professionals over that of disabled people (Kang 2013, p.252). Instead, the direct accounts included in these two advocacy blogs subverted traditional

assumptions about expertise and cast disabled people as ‘experts’ with a view to diminishing the influence of those who typically craft policy narratives including politicians, civil servants and the news media (Stevens 2011).

In addition, it is interesting to note that nearly a third of blog entries (n=34) told the stories of several different people at once. This was the case not only for blog posts with multiple authors (n=9), but also for a quarter (n=22) of all the entries written in the first person, in which disabled individuals elaborated on how changes to disability welfare would affect their families, friends, colleagues and people in their broader social circles. This trend provided a first indication of how these blog posts skillfully used personal stories to frame the welfare reform as a collective problem that was likely to have a negative impact on everyone, not just disabled people, and argue that it was in the interest of non-disabled people too to mobilize against government plans in this area.

From the format and length of each blog post, it is possible to make some useful observations about the content management practices involved in putting together these two story-centered campaigns. In addition to posting all its stories over the course of just three days, the Spartacus Network’s blog did not seem to utilize a standardized format. Its blog entries varied greatly in length and generally tended to be longer (mean=809; median=627) than those posted on DPAC’s blog (mean=602; median=421). #SpartacusStories also used a variety of titles and writing styles, despite being narrated mainly in the first person. In contrast, DPAC’s blog entries followed a clear and somewhat standardized format including a common title (e.g. ‘Anne’s story,’ ‘Anthony and David’s story,’ etc.).

These results, together with the much smaller number of entries included on DPAC's blog (n=9), corroborated the impression that this group attempted carefully to assemble a coherent counter-narrative from personal stories. This is a strategically sound approach as coordination can help advocacy groups project more coherent messages online (Vromen & Coleman 2013). Yet, it also raises the issue of who should coordinate these stories to craft a coherent narrative and whether personal accounts can be curated at all without compromising their integrity. Instead, the advocates behind #SpartacusStories appeared to interfere less with crowd-sourced stories before posting them, affording their authors more freedom. While this constitutes a participatory approach in tune with the democratic ideal of self-advocacy, it also raises the issue of efficacy as the aggregate narrative that results from less coordinated stories is likely to be less coherent and potentially less persuasive. Despite their different approaches to content management, it is crucial to note that both sets of blog entries generated virtually identical counter-narratives, as is discussed in detail here below.

Anatomy of a crowd-sourced counter-narrative

Content analysis revealed that both DPAC and the Spartacus Network put forward very similar narratives on their respective blogs, emphasizing three main key themes. These included: (1) the role of disabled benefit claimants as active members of society; (2) the fact that disability welfare benefits everyone, not just disabled people; and, finally, (3) the fact that the real social divide is between honest citizens and morally corrupted elites, not 'decent' people and benefits 'cheats' as the fraud narrative implies. Each of these themes and the key sub-themes that

contributed to them (Table 2) are discussed in detail below, including through illustrative quotes drawn from the blog entries.

[Table 2 about here]

Agency

Disabled people's agency was by far the most pervasive theme identified across both campaigns as it featured prominently in 95 of the 107 (88.8%) blog entries analyzed for this study. Two forms of agency emerged from the personal stories contained in these blog posts. First, they discussed "everyday" agency by presenting disabled people as active contributors to society in their daily lives. These stories strived to paint a picture of disabled people as multi-faceted individuals whose identities are not defined primarily by their impairments but who are parents, workers, students and volunteers in the community. Indeed, two-thirds (n=68) of the blog posts analyzed for this study made at least one explicit reference to a specific impairment. However, the vast majority presented a wide range of impairments – from mobility problems to mental health issues such as clinical depression – to illustrate the complexity of disability and debunk the simplistic categorization used in policy and media narratives to justify the curtailment of state welfare for disabled people (Roulstone 2015). Furthermore, only 17 of these posts implied a sense of tragedy or hopelessness. Thus, impairments were mentioned mainly as a way to support the current levels of benefit provision, as is discussed in detail in the next section.

The blog posts that highlighted disabled people's 'everyday' agency regularly pointed out that they too 'paid' into the social security system and therefore were as entitled as anyone else to

receiving support when they needed it. Both paid employment and unpaid work by disabled people featured prominently in these posts. For example, one woman wrote that she was:

'a mum and a nan and a wife, a counsellor and a Doctor of Psychology. I have had this medical condition for many years but I've worked, paid my dues, assumed that when the time came that I would need some help from the state it would be there.' (Penny's story, #SpartacusStories)

Others stressed that the onset of disability, which could affect anyone, does not imply that people want to stop contributing to society. To illustrate this point, one writer on #SpartacusStories explained that she was about to lose her:

'job anyway, due to the centralisation of the office yet again, [...] meaning a commute that I couldn't manage [due to my disability ... but] Once I am gone from this job, I will look for part time work.' (Sara's story, #SpartacusStories)

Stories like these run directly in opposition to the British media narrative that in recent years has presented disability benefit claimants as 'work shy' and a 'drain' on society. Thus, this type of arguments was used to criticize explicitly the mass media 'myth' of disability benefits fraudsters, which itself was mentioned in more than 40% of the blog entries analyzed for this study, forming the most prominent sub-theme in the 'agency' category.

The other aspect of disabled people's agency that occupied a prominent position in these campaign blogs was political agency. This sub-theme appeared to serve two purposes simultaneously. First, there was a clear attempt to defy the image of disabled people as 'passive' and delineate them as a collective political body. Just over half (50.5%) of the blog posts mentioned DPAC and the Spartacus Network directly, praising their organizers for ensuring that:

'so many disabled people are blogging today to make their voices heard.'

(Chair of Scope, #SpartacusStories)

Second, more than a quarter (n=30) of all the blog entries analyzed for this study also sought to foster mobilization directly by putting forward explicit calls to action such as requests to sign petitions, contact politicians, and spread a different narrative by sharing more stories online. These requests were directed not solely to the disability community, but ostensibly to anyone, because:

'When the unthinkable happens to you or a loved one do you want to find yourself treated like a benefit scrounger [...]? If not, then speak up for disability benefits now. You'll be helping yourself later.' (Anonymous story, #SpartacusStories).

Calls to action directed at non-disabled people like this one sought to link individual circumstances to a collective problem that requires mobilization beyond the disability community. This was part of a broader tendency for both #SpartacusStories and 'Save the ILF' to use personal stories to re-frame the value of disability welfare and, in turn, increase the

salience of changes to these benefits for society more generally, as is discussed in detail in the next section.

The true value of disability benefits

The second key theme in blog entries was the significance of disability benefits not only for disabled people, but for society as a whole. It was here that the political nature of personal struggles was brought to the fore particularly effectively. Two inter-related sub-themes contributed jointly to this part of the narrative. First, the perception of disability benefits as government ‘handouts,’ which was central to the dominant news narrative outlined above, was challenged directly. In blog posts, benefits were re-cast as a fundamental support mechanism that ensured that disabled people can contribute actively to society. For example, one contributor to DPAC’s ‘Save the ILF’ campaign wrote that:

‘Through support from the Independent living Fund I have been enabled to go back to University and to enter employment. [...] I am paying into the system in 2 ways – as a Trustee of a charity – and as an economically active tax payer, thanks to my paid work. Additionally, 7 other people are economically active through their employment as my Personal Assistants.’

(Jenny’s story, ‘Save the ILF’)

More than half (51.4%) of the stories analyzed here included similar references to the positive impact of disability welfare, totaling 200 individual mentions for this theme. In addition to paid work, study and the opportunity to employ other people, other effects of disability benefits

mentioned included increased opportunities for socialization, the possibility to live at home, and greater independence. The sub-text in this kind of posts, either implicit or explicit, is that none of this would have been possible without benefits such as ILF and DLA. Moreover, the vast majority of the 34 blog posts that included multiple personal stories also highlighted that the positive impact of disability welfare stretched beyond disabled recipients to include their families and society more generally. This generated a theme that appeared in as much as 20% of all the content analyzed for this study. Thus, benefits were cast as a way to promote growth and social harmony.

Consequently, the withdrawal of disability benefits was framed as a detrimental policy decision for everyone, both disabled and non-. This constituted the second sub-theme in this part of the narrative, which sought to raise the stakes of non-disabled people in this issue. Nearly half (n=45) of the blog posts analyzed for this study included warnings about the broader implications of the welfare reform, which will mean that in the future

'many [disabled people in the UK...] will be a greater burden on society as well as being in greater pain and discomfort.' (Denise's story,

#SpartacusStories)

Several (n=18) of these blog posts pointed out the economic paradox inherent in taking away benefits from those who most need them. This would not only generate a direct loss to the economy by driving up unemployment among disabled people, but it would also cost the taxpayer more money to cover the care costs of these newly unemployed disabled people. One

particularly effective example raised in eight blog posts was the prospect that the new system could force benefit recipients who currently lived at home to move into

'residential care [, which] would be more expensive [than the current level of ILF provision] costing £225 in rent before any costs for support and personal care.' (Natassia and Petrell's story, 'Save the ILF')

As another story put it:

'#myDLA is the difference between living alone with help or going into sheltered accommodation. Without it I'd cost more to keep alive.'

(Anonymous story, #SpartacusStories)

These kinds of statements introduced numerical evidence to complement the human aspect of stories. This not only challenged directly one of the main arguments that the government used to support its reform plan – i.e. that disability welfare changes would save taxpayers' money – but pointed out also that everyone had a stake in the reform of disability welfare, thus establishing a direct connection with readers.

Honest citizens vs. morally corrupt elites

Having re-defined disabled people as positive contributors to society and the economy, and re-framed disability benefit changes as a collective problem that affects every ordinary citizen, the blog posts analyzed for this paper built on these two themes to subvert another tenet of the

dominant narrative on welfare reform, namely: the divide between ‘honest’ citizens and disability benefit ‘cheats.’ However, instead of challenging the existence of an us/them divide, blog posts sought to re-define its boundaries by placing all honest ordinary citizens, including disabled people, on the ‘us’ side and characterizing allegedly corrupt elites as ‘them.’ Remarkably, more than two thirds of the blog posts analyzed here (n=71) engaged with this theme directly.

The resulting narrative both reflected and fueled a growing popular dislike of elites, in particular politicians and bankers, who are perceived as disconnected from everyday reality. Anecdotal evidence was used to argue that the then

‘Conservative led/ Liberal Democrat coalition government [...] slogan, “We are all in this together [...] simply [was] not true. How is the disabled benefit recipient, who is now terrified of the loss of their already meagre income, in the same situation as the City finance manager eagerly awaiting his or her £100k perk?’ (Anonymous story, #SpartacusStories)

Crucially, this theme preserved the moral foundations at the roots of the ‘fraud’ argument that dominated the news media and policy narratives. Yet, it also shifted the blame for ‘cheating’ from disability benefit claimants to elites, which, blog posts argued, put their personal interests before the welfare of ordinary people. As ‘fairness’ has been shown to be a very persuasive argument that appeals to both conservative and progressive audiences in advocacy campaigns (Matthews et al. 2016), the emergence of a divide between honest ordinary citizens and ‘morally

'corrupt' elites in these narratives suggested an attempt to mobilize public opinion by channeling public anger away from disabled people and towards the government. This strategy was consistent with a long tradition in social movement politics to capitalize on negative emotions to mobilize new supporters, which has been amplified by digital technologies (Papacharissi 2015).

Discussion and conclusions

The research presented in this paper shed light on the practice of promoting disability rights through crowd-sourced story-centered advocacy campaigns. While historically controversial, this technique is now firmly in the repertoire of British disability organizations. Despite the usual limitations associated with case study research, the findings outlined here invite a number of considerations about this strategy and its implications for disability advocacy and other advocacy initiatives that operate on behalf of different marginalized groups. Three main inter-related points are worth considering in detail, including: the structure of the counter-narrative that emerged from personal blog entries in the #SpartacusStories and DPAC's 'Save the ILF' campaigns; the crowd-sourced nature of this narrative and different management and curatorial practices associated with it; and the ability of this emergent technique to re-frame public debates on controversial policy issues.

Alternative content, same narrative structure

Despite different curatorial practices, virtually identical counter-narratives emerged across both the campaigns analyzed for this study. This revolved around a set of 'morally corrupt' elites that planned to withdraw welfare payments from disabled citizens who were rightfully entitled to them by virtue of their active role in society, which would ultimately disadvantage and

impoverish everyone, disabled and non-. It is interesting to note that each of the three main themes in these stories directly challenged one of the key tenets of the dominant media and policy narrative, which was centered on the issue of benefit ‘fraud’ as immoral and anti-social behavior.

Thus, the story-centered blogs analyzed for this study sought to hollow out the dominant narrative by preserving its basic structure and filling it with opposite content. This provides some useful insights into the process of building a counter-narrative online through crowd-sourcing. In particular, it suggests that Internet users who volunteer their stories for this kind of campaigns tend to consider their own experiences through the lens of the dominant narrative, to which they react by highlighting how their own lives differ from the prevalent discourse. While in a way this process validates the structure of the dominant narrative, at the same time it also wholeheartedly rejects its main tenets.

This can be a very effective way to build a counter-narrative. As Polletta (2009) noted, ‘culture shapes [advocacy] strategy in the sense that abiding by the rules of cultural expression yields more calculable consequences than challenging them’ (p. 41). Therefore, it makes sense for advocates to stick to a familiar narrative structure that had already proved successful in influencing public opinion while trying to put across a radically different view. In the campaigns explored here, this was perhaps most evident in the retention of the moral foundation of ‘fairness vs. cheating’ in the counter-narrative, which constitutes a formidably persuasive type of discourse (Matthews et al. 2016). Similarly, the evidence included in the story-based counter-narrative was anecdotal, as in the news coverage that perpetuated the disability benefit ‘fraud’

myth. In blog posts, numerical evidence was drawn also from everyday life and individual cases – for example, by referring to the cost of residential care in a particular nursing home – instead of using more representative but also more ‘abstract’ statistics.

Adopting a similar structure to that of the dominant media narrative in story-based campaigns was advantageous also to disabled Internet users who wished to join in these advocacy efforts. This is because it enabled them to contribute to a complex policy debate from their private spheres by noting the discrepancies between their daily lives and the version of events projected by the news media. This functioned as an implicit coordinating mechanism, which produced coherent and virtually identical counter-narratives for both campaigns, irrespective of whether stories were centrally curated or not. This suggests also that sharing personal narratives online can facilitate the inclusion of politically inexperienced citizens, potentially democratizing advocacy work for marginalized groups.

Centrally coordinated vs. self-curating narratives

Previous work on storytelling and e-advocacy argued that organizers continue to play a fundamental role in ensuring that the narratives that result from these emerging participatory techniques are both coherent and effective (Vromen & Coleman 2013). Similarly, others pointed out that there is likely a tradeoff between maintaining the spontaneity of crowd-sourced personal stories and their efficacy in influencing policy-making processes (Lenart-Cheng & Walker 2011, pp.150-151). Yet, the #SpartacusStories case study analyzed here showed that it is possible to generate a coherent counter-narrative by taking a relatively hands off approach to story-based online campaigns. This participatory system affords individual users a lot of freedom, casting

them as experts and injecting new evidence in the public debate, which in turn provides advocates with useful ‘ammunition’ to win the policy argument (Beresford 2016, p.5).

That said, it is also important to consider whether, under different circumstances, the resulting crowd-sourced narrative may have been less coherent or even damaging for disabled people. In particular, the characterization of disability welfare changes as an economic paradox sought to mobilize non-disabled people by appealing to their own economic interests without requiring them to identify with another group. In this case, this arguably avoided the emergence of pitiful stories aimed at eliciting sympathy. However, it does not prevent that type of accounts from emerging in future campaigns. In order to avoid this, a certain degree of control over crowd-sourced personal narratives may be useful but it is important also that stories are not appropriated or distorted in ways that victimize those at their center. One way to ensure this is that those in charge of curating crowd-sourced stories be part of the very community for which they advocate, as in the case of DPAC’s disabled self-advocates. In this process, self-advocates who curate peer-generated stories to build coherent counter-narratives arguably do not act as filters, but rather help to elevate ‘everyday *experience* into shared public culture [...] in the service of effective social communication’ (Burgess 2007, p.210). At the same time, it is also important that these self-advocates can perform as effective strategic communicators. Pilot projects exist to provide people from marginalized groups – including disabled people – with basic journalistic skills (Thorsen et al. 2015). Similar initiatives could be set up in the community to focus on PR and strategic communication skills.

More broadly, the stories reviewed for this paper suggested that, in the age of social media, promotional techniques are becoming increasingly embedded in individuals who are keen to project their experiences in order to further their own wellbeing. Among the many interactive online platforms available today, blogs seem particularly suited to this process as their extended form lends itself to hosting ‘alternative [disability] narrations that are not necessarily in accordance with the dominant paradigms’ (Goggin & Noonan 2007, p.165) and communicating complex experiences that shorter forms of online media such as Twitter would struggle to capture appropriately. An additional benefit of blogs is also that their relatively simple interface makes them more accessible than, for example, a medium such as Facebook, broadening the potential range of disabled contributors to crowd-sourced counter-narratives. This, however, also raises the fundamental issue of whether blogs can support attempts to re-shape the dominant narrative on such sensitive social issues effectively. This is not simply a matter of how many people access campaign blogs directly. Instead, it involves the ability of this medium to affect relevant coverage in legacy media outlets with a view to reaching mass audiences.

The problem of ‘being heard’ and future research

Authors such as Dreher (2010) and Burgess (2007) have noted that most of the research about the ability of participatory online media to provide under-represented groups with a ‘voice’ in the public arena has overlooked one fundamental issue. That is, are these new voices are ‘being heard’ by anyone? Reaching mass audiences is fundamental in order to affect social change. Yet, ‘the difficulty of producing media change is not so much silence or an inability to speak up [...], but rather an inability or a refusal to listen on the part of both media producers and their assumed audiences’ (Dreher, 2010: 98). Advocacy blogs such as those examined in this paper could be all

but invisible to most people who have no particular interest in disability. In theory, distributing blog posts through social media could increase their visibility substantially. However, most conversations on platforms such as Twitter are also highly polarized (Barbera et al., 2015). This means that the voices that emerge from advocacy blogs may remain confined to social media ‘echo chambers.’ This is a key problem for blog-based advocacy and undoubtedly exceeds the scope of this paper, calling for more research on whether these initiatives reach their target audiences and ultimately constitute an effective form of advocacy. Nevertheless, it seems useful to reflect briefly on the implications of this issue in order to guide future research.

Blogs can be important sources of alternative information for publics that wish to engage with specialized topics. However, previous research has cast doubts over the ability of blogs to set the public agenda because ‘traditional media [...] remains a driving, “A-list” force in the creation of blog agendas’ (Meraz 2009, p. 701), which in turn confines the influence of blogs to framing. This is particularly true in countries whose online news market is dominated by legacy media such as the BBC’s website and the Daily Mail Online in the UK (Newman et al. 2016). As Chadwick (2013) noted, in this environment the most effective way for ‘non-elite’ actors to influence what he called the ‘political information cycle’ is to provide journalists with the right type of information at the most opportune moment ‘through timely [social media] interventions and sometimes direct, on-to-one interactions’ (p. 88).

While policy change is still very difficult to attain, as shown by the fact that the closure of the ILF went ahead as planned in summer 2015 despite campaigns such as ‘save the ILF,’ influencing traditional news framing seems more within the grasp of emerging online voices.

This is because personal stories such as those analyzed in this paper offer journalists an interesting ‘human angle’ for covering otherwise dry and technical issues like welfare reform. Previous work has suggested that, when activists provide media organizations with this kind of content at the right time, they are able to expand their press coverage and influence the narrative. For example, DPAC provided journalists with ‘quotable’ personal stories as part of its ‘Atos Games’ campaign during the 2012 London Paralympic Games (Pearson and Trevisan, 2015). As a result, press coverage for DPAC increased considerably in this period and more than half of the news items that mentioned this group included at least one personal story of disability (ibid.).

This type of cross-fertilization highlights the need to develop methods that can track the trajectories of personal stories across multiple forms of media. Combining traditional methods such as content analysis and emerging techniques such as website metrics could be a promising avenue for measuring the potential audience and impact of story-based online campaigns. This will provide researchers with methodology to determine which ‘voices’ travel successfully from blogs to other forms of media and can reach mass audiences instead of ‘preaching to the converted’ in some specialized corner of the Internet. This kind of work, which could be seen as an evolution of framing studies, will be relevant not only to political communication scholars but also to advocates who wish to evaluate the effectiveness of their initiatives and inform their strategic campaign planning.

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Tables

Table 1. – British disability organizations that launched stories-centered advocacy campaigns 2010-16

Disability organization	Stories-centered campaign(s)	'Your stories' website section
Action for ME	Y	Y
Action on Hearing Loss	Y (multiple)	Y
Age UK	Y	N
Ambitious about Autism	Y	Y
Epilepsy Society	Y	Y
Inclusion London	N	N
Leonard Cheshire Disability	Y	Y
Mencap	Y	N
Mind	Y	Y
National Autistic Society	Y	Y
MS Society	Y	N
MND Association	Y	Y
Muscular Dystrophy UK	Y	Y
ReThink	Y	N
Royal National Institute of the Blind (RNIB)	Y	N
Scope	Y	N
Sense	Y (multiple)	Y
The Stroke Association	Y	Y
United Response	Y	Y
UK Disabled People's Council (UKDPC)	N	N

Table 2. – Main emergent themes and sub-themes in campaign blog posts

Themes and sub-themes	Number of blog posts	Percentage of all blog posts
1. Agency <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Critique of news media coverage o Call to action 	95 43 30	88.8% 40.18% 28%
2.a Positive impact of disability benefits <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o On everyone, not just disabled people 	55 22	51.4% 20.56%
2.b Disability welfare reform will hurt everyone <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Disability welfare reform is based on an economic paradox 	45 18	42.05% 16.82%
3. Us/them divide: honest citizens vs. corrupt elites	71	66.35%

ⁱ http://spartacus-stories.blogspot.com/2012_01_01_archive.html (Last accessed: 27 July 2016)

ⁱⁱ <https://campaigndpac.wordpress.com/tag/ilf/> (Last accessed: 27 July 2016)