

## **Resisting disability benefits cuts in a digital age**

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### **Abstract**

The Internet, Twitter and Facebook are now key to many people's political participation and have played a prominent role in recent popular uprisings. But what part have digital communications technologies and services played in resistance to cuts to disability benefits? This question is pertinent both because it relates to the wider and continuing agenda of welfare retrenchment and because it involves groups of people who, for various reasons, have been under-represented in research into online collective action. This paper presents preliminary findings from a study into two collective action events which have occurred in response to government policy on disability benefits. It shows how different constituency networks can be rapidly enrolled in the online collective action process. It takes a relational approach to networks which places the focus not only on the structure of the ties that make up the network but also on the communicative processes that shape them and are shaped by them. This involves a pragmatic multi-method research design using digital tracing and hyperlink analysis to identify mobilizing agents and present snapshots of the networks involved in the two events. The findings also shed light on existing debates about

the distinctions between social movements and interest group processes, particularly in terms of commitment and collective identity.

## **Context of this study within my PhD**

This paper describes preliminary findings from a study that forms one part of a more extensive research project I am undertaking for my PhD. The objective of my PhD is to build on collective action theory from the perspective of the collective action processes online. My research covers events that have occurred in response to threats to disability benefits in the UK. This paper looks at two online campaigns to resist these changes between July 2009 and May 2011. It is concerned particularly with identifying and characterizing the mobilizing agents and networks involved. It gives a snapshot of the campaign and issue networks in the two events and allows some comparison between the kinds of networks involved. Comparison across events and the issue of continuity of engagement is pertinent to wider theoretical debates about what distinguishes social movements from other “cognate collective action processes” (Diani and Bison, 2004 p281). These issues are touched on in this study but are important to its place in my wider research project. I discuss them in more detail in the final section.

## **Why focus on disability benefits cuts?**

The actions I am studying have primarily involved disabled people and carers. This demographic focus distinguishes my work from many comparable empirical studies<sup>1</sup>. Research has consistently shown that disabled people are under-represented among Internet users (for example: Dutton, Helsper and Gerber, 2009, Pillai et al., 2007, Dobransky and Hargittai, 2006). Studies based on the political behaviour of general Internet populations reflect this bias and might therefore fail to pick up on differentiated aspects of use. These differentiated aspects could become more prevalent if, as evidence suggests, the balance in online populations is changing.

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<sup>1</sup> There is a large body of comparable literature, which can be divided into whether it starts from the perspective of an organisation, eg Eaton 2010, Earl 2010; types of organisation such as SMOs or NGOs, eg Ackland and O’Neil, 2011, Shumate, 2008, Van de Donk et al, 2004,; a form of online communication, such as blogging, eg Karpf 2008, Park, Thelwall and Kluver, 2005; a type of protest, such as online petitions or demonstrations eg Van Laer, 2010, Fisher and Boekkooi 2010, Margetts et al, 2009; or an issue eg Marres and Rogers, 2008. But attention to disabled people or carers organising collectively is relatively rare, for one example see Cheta, 2004.

Overall, access to the Internet in Britain is growing: for example the percentage of people who have the Internet at home rose from 58% in 2003 to 70% in 2009 (Dutton, Helsper, and Gerber, 2009). There are however a number of digital divides and one way of delineating these is according to whether they are a question of exclusion or choice. Exclusion in this context is “structured by social, economic, geographical or physical situation of individuals” (Dutton, Helsper and Gerber 2009, p16). Income, socio-economic group and disability are key sources of exclusion. Disability stands out among these exclusionary divides because it is shown to have diminished, albeit marginally, between 2007 and 2009, while others, such as exclusion by educational level, increased and, by income, remained roughly stable (Dutton, Helsper and Gerber, 2009, p17). Not only do the absolute and relative numbers of disabled people accessing the Internet appear to be rising but research into the psychological processes underlying collective action suggest that it is driven by shared feelings of injustice and grievance (Postmes, 2007), referred to in other research into online mobilisation as “group based anger” (Van Laer, 2010, p410). The continuing pressure on welfare budgets and in particular, disability benefits, has the potential to heighten these feelings. In addition, studies in the US and UK identify a positive correlation between individuals being online and their political activity (Mossberger, Tolbert and McNeal, 2008, Gibson, Lusoli and Ward, 2005). The UK study (Gibson et al p 578) also found that while women and people from poorer backgrounds are less likely than men and higher social status individuals to engage in activist politics offline, they are equally likely to participate politically online, once existing levels of political involvement and experience on the Internet are taken into account. This is relevant because disabled adults are twice as likely to live in low-income households as non-disabled adults<sup>2</sup>. Taken together these points suggest, therefore, that a focus on disabled people’s political activity online both addresses this group’s under-representation in past studies based on general Internet populations and responds to the possibility that they may form a growing proportion of populations using digital communications technologies to take part in or resist welfare policymaking in

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.poverty.org.uk/summary/disability.htm> (Accessed 27 May 2011)

future. As others have observed:

ICTs now play an indispensable role in social and political organizations online around welfare issues, in state and private administration of welfare, and in processes of identity-formation concerning welfare.

(Goggin and Newell, 2006, p309)

### **Methodological approach**

I am approaching my wider PhD research and this study by first identifying events around which political activity involving disabled people has been occurring and then developing my findings into a reflection on underlying theory of collective action. This is in contrast to research which starts at the organisational level, asking for example how social movement organisations or non-governmental organisations are using the Internet (for example Ackland and O'Neil 2011, Schumate, 2008). It also avoids the assumption that the Internet is necessarily beneficial to disabled people, a stance that has been criticised by some (for example Ellis and Kent, 2008, Adam and Kreps, 2006). This can follow from a user-deterministic approach to technology, which fails to acknowledge that technologies both constitute and are constituted by social situations (Dhalberg, 2004). As a result they have the potential to be disabling as well as an enabling (Hickey-Moody, Wood, 2008, Annable, Goggin and Stienstra, 2007). My research neither assumes that online collective action by disabled people is "a good thing", nor does it attempt to answer two related and much-debated questions: whether digital technologies provide a public-sphere-enhanced route to democracy (for example Hindman, 2009, Coleman and Blumler, 2008, Sunstein, 2007, Benkler, 2006) or whether online activism is a poor substitute for its offline predecessors (for example Morozov, 2011, Karpf, 2010, Shulman, 2009). It sets out, rather, to better understand the process of collective action by studying its manifestation in relation to a population that has been under-represented in prior research. This addresses the possibility that wider debates about the value of online collective action may be marred by an inadequate understanding of the phenomenon.

## The meaning of online networks

The methodology reflects a conception of networks drawn from relational sociology. The idea is that networks embody both content and form, and by extension, agency as well as structure (Crossley, 2010, Edwards, 2010, Knox, Savage and Harvey, 2006). Communicative processes establish ties between groups and individuals, which, in turn, shape the processes which occur by virtue of those ties. Networks are dynamic, evolving phenomenon, so maps or other characterisations are snapshots rather than a representation of a permanent relations. In practice, research from this perspective is focused not only on the structure of the ties that make up the network but also on the communicative processes that shape them and are shaped by them. This informs understanding of what the ties represent. The issue of what ties represent, in turn, opens up the question of whether they are instrumental or expressive. These two categories need not be thought of as discreet; it may be more useful to see expressive and instrumental functions as end points on a continuum. Interest in ties as channel for the instrumental exchange of resources, particularly information, has motivated approaches to the analysis of online collective action that focus on informational cascades and critical mass (González-Bailón, S., 2009, Margetts et al, 2009). However my study does not assume that ties are primarily instrumental, their expressive function is also of interest, particularly since, as social movement literature suggests, collective identity may be a key component of the glue holding disability movement networks together<sup>3</sup>. In practice this has informed a pragmatic, mixed-methods research design, combining digital tracing and hyperlink analysis.

## Hyperlink analysis and digital tracing

On the web<sup>4</sup>, the issue of what networks represent frequently translates to questions over the interpretation of findings from hyperlink crawls, since this is one of main tools for uncovering online networks. Hyperlink analysis uses

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<sup>3</sup> see Shakespeare (1996) for a discussion of the impact of a disabled identity.

<sup>4</sup> The web is one of the services which runs on the Internet. It is a system of connected documents (often containing pictures, video and sound) which can be searched. The Internet is the system of interconnected computer networks. Web documents are accessed via the Internet with a web browser.

automated searches of websites and pages to identify and quantify links to other sites and pages and thereby generate a hyperlink network (Park, 2003, Park and Thelwall, 2003). Depending on the researcher's perspective, the network is interpreted in various ways. Social network analysis (SNA), which sees ties in terms of the exchange of resources, focuses on how ties position actors (Park and Thewell, *ibid*). From an associational sociology viewpoint, hyperlinks are reputational markers<sup>5</sup> or markers of credibility (Rogers, 2006, Park et al, 2001). Some studies conceive of ties as having both symbolic and resource-exchange functions, for example, Ackland and O'Neil (2011). Hyperlink analysis can also be used to address networks from the perspective of an issue: identifying the networks which are a party to that issue (Rogers, *ibid*), or within a given community, getting a sense of an issue's saliency by looking at the frequency and intensity of hyperlinks surrounding it (Park and Thewell, *ibid*).

The diversity in possible interpretations of hyperlinks has led to the claim that a single theory of hyperlink analysis is not possible and the recommendation that some form of methodology triangulation be used (Thelwall 2006). The limitations of hyperlink analysis are tackled in some studies by supplementing it with other methods, such as interviews (Hepburn, 2010) or content analysis (Ackland and O'Neil, 2011). In my case, recognition of the limitations informed my decision to start data collection by looking at the communicative processes which led to the formation, or reinforcement, of links, rather than starting with the links and trying to interpret their meaning.

Another consideration in using hyperlinks as the main unit of Web analysis is that they are less dominant as a form of linking than they were. Social buttons now enable users to share and recommend web content via services such as Facebook, Twitter, Digg, Reddit and Delicious. For example, the Share button on Facebook works much like a hyperlink, except that the link is not visible as it is embedded in the code of the button. This channels the act of linking through Facebook (which, incidentally, adds to concerns over the accumulation of

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<sup>5</sup> For a discussion from the developers of Issuecrawler about how to interpret links see <https://www.digitalmethods.net/Digitalmethods/TheLink>

information such services are now able to amass (for example, Bonneau et al, 2009). Like, Share and Tweet buttons also act as quantified recommenders, or reputational indicators (Gerlitz, 2011). For example, the number of times a webpage has been Liked, Shared or Tweeted is often displayed in the buttons that facilitate those actions. My study therefore included digital tracing using the BackType<sup>6</sup> and Twitter Scraper<sup>7</sup> tools to help understand the part played by the newer forms of linking.

### **The collective action events in context**

The first of the two events my study covers is the online response to the Labour Government Green Paper, “Shaping the Future of Care Together” (HM Government, 2009). The consultation over this Green Paper was conducted both online and offline. The online consultation that is the subject of this study ran from July-November 2009 and was part of the wider “Big Care Debate”. My focus is on the nearly 3,000 online comments that individuals made on the executive summary of the Paper. The reasons this activity can be viewed as “collective” include the fact that there was campaign behind it: people were organised and organised themselves to comment. Unlike in most consultations, comment makers could see one another’s comments online, so were aware, as they participated, how many others had done so and what they had said. The reaction of the consultation organisers at the time, both in technical management of comments and the officials’ blogs, suggests that they were surprised by the high level of response. A detailed analysis of these comments will be conducted in the second phase of my research project. But an overview and analysis so far suggests that the vast majority of them were made by disabled people and carers, opposing what they saw as a potential threat to disability allowances. This response therefore constituted a number of people coming together in pursuit of broadly the same goal: objecting to the Green Paper. The degree to

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<sup>6</sup> BackType is a social media monitoring tool which measures, for example, the number of times a URL has been Tweeted, Liked or Shared. It can be accessed at <http://www.backtype.com/>

<sup>7</sup> Twitter Scraper is a search tool and can be launched from <https://wiki.digitalmethods.net/Dmi/ToolDatabase>. The advanced Twitter search tool is at <http://search.twitter.com/advanced>



which this is a case of “action”, rather than, say, participation is debatable. However I take the contentious politics perspective that ignoring institutional activity risks overlooking the interactions between differing forms of activity and the roots social movements can have in less visible institutional activity (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, 2001 p7-8). In this study, where the emphasis is primarily on collective action, rather than social movements, it seems reasonable to start from the premise that the comment making on the Green Paper can be construed as collective action, with the proviso that this does not assume potential for any particular degree of social, or political, change. (The theoretical debates behind this study are discussed in more detail in the final section.)

In fact in this case, the potential for any immediate change was overtaken by events. Propositions in the Green Paper and the White Paper that succeeded it failed to pass into legislation, in part, because a general election was called and the Coalition government came into power in May 2010. The new administration instigated a programme of unprecedented public spending cuts, including the proposal to remove the mobility component of Disability Living Allowance (DLA). In response a group of people, some of whom had been involved in the Green Paper campaign, set up as a user-led disability rights campaign in October 2009, centred on a website and Twitter account, called Broken of Britain. This included hosting a blogswarm, a mass blogging event on January 14-16. It was called One Month Before Heartbreak to mark the time before the end of the new consultation period<sup>8</sup>. A separate but overlapping network, campaigning against benefits cuts more generally, held a National Day of Action on January 24, which included a number of protest events across the country focused on Atos Origin, the company contracted by government to carry out work capability assessments for benefits claimants. The campaign has a presence on the web as the National Protest Against Benefits cuts blog and on Facebook, as a group called Benefits Claimants Fightback.

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<sup>8</sup> This consultation required that people submit their comments rather than post them online where they would be visible to others. The new Welfare Reform bill was introduced to the house of commons on February 16, two days before the consultation officially closed.

Just over a month later, bodies representing disabled charities and organisations set up a web-based campaign called Hardest Hit. The bodies were the Disability Benefits Consortium (a coalition of 40 charities and organisations) and the UK Disabled People's Council (an umbrella body for 300 organisations). Hardest Hit organised a national march on May 11, 2011 which was attended by somewhere between 3,000 and 8,000 people<sup>9</sup>. The online activity behind this event is the focus of the second part of this study. The march illustrates the interconnection between online and offline spheres. Although the event took place in the street, much of the organisation and mobilisation of people to attend occurred online. The march itself was also accompanied by many familiar forms of digitally recording and experiencing an event: simultaneous tweeting, posting of videos to YouTube, photos to Flickr, blogging and so on. Background research showed that there was division among disability rights activists over the march, with some choosing to distance themselves from the event because it was organised by institutions representing disabled people rather than more directly by disabled people and service users themselves<sup>10</sup>.

### **Data collection and analysis**

Data collection for the two events included extensive background research to understand the setting and dynamics of each of the processes studied. This background research was carried out at the time of each event. In the case of the Green Paper campaign, aspects of data collection and analysis took place some months after the consultation closed. Although it would have been optimal to conduct this analysis at the time of the consultation, this was not possible for practical reasons, such as getting ethics approval. However, the Green Paper comments were still online at the time of this analysis as were many of the discussions surrounding it and links to it.

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<sup>9</sup> Police estimates out numbers between 3,000-8,000 according to press reports <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2011/may/11/hardest-hit-march-disabled-people> (Accessed 3 June, 2011)

<sup>10</sup> See for example this post from May 10 on the "Where's the Benefit" blog which discusses the pros and cons of the Hardest Hit march, concluding that they neither endorse nor oppose it: <http://wheresthebenefit.blogspot.com/2011/05/hardest-hit-demo-pros-and-cons.html>

### The Green Paper Campaign

Early on in the study, it became clear that an organisation called Benefits and Work had played a central part in the campaign, using email and posts on its website to encourage participation in the online comments section of the Green Paper. In order to verify this, I compared the dates campaign emails had been sent by Benefits and Work with the rate of comment making on the Green Paper (see Appendix 3).

Having established that there seemed to be a relationship, I then traced the first campaign email. This involved copying the opening paragraph of the first Benefits and Work campaign email into Google and determining, from the results of that and related searches<sup>11</sup>, a list of webpages where the paragraph was replicated. I then investigated the webpages to understand more about the context of the destinations, making an assessment against the following criteria.

1. Is this webpage on the informational or collaborative content model – ie are people other than those who manage the site able to post material?
2. Where exchanges take place on the page, what is their nature – ie is it primarily discursive, sharing of information, or something else?
3. Where multiple actors contribute to the website, are there indicators of collective identity among them. For example, shared language, emotional investment, real or imagined shared attributes and experiences<sup>12</sup>

Tracing the passage of the email gave a snapshot of the campaign network. Next, I sought to envisage the hyperlink relations between those in the campaign network using Issuecrawler, which is a publicly available hyperlink analysis tool from Govcom.org Foundation<sup>13</sup>. Examples of research which uses Issuecrawler include McDermott (2010), Marres and Rogers (2008), Bruns (2007), Rogers (2006).

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<sup>11</sup> See Appendix 1 for more details of the search process

<sup>12</sup> These criteria for collective identity are drawn from Melucci, 1995, and Snow, 2001

<sup>13</sup> Issuecrawler can be accessed at <http://www.govcom.org/>

In addition, I did a search to find webpages which linked to both Benefits and Work and the Green Paper but which did not necessarily include text directly taken from campaign emails. This was important because it enabled later direct comparison with the Hardest Hit campaign. In light of the move to new forms of connection beyond hyperlinking, I also investigated the role of Twitter in this campaign, using BackType and Twitter scrape.

### The Hardest Hit March

A snapshot of the campaign network behind the Hardest Hit march was harder to capture since there was no evidence that the march had been organized by emailing individuals to the same degree in the Green Paper campaign. A good alternative was to approach data collection and analysis from an “issue” perspective – the issue being the May 11 march<sup>14</sup>. Because Hardest Hit is run by two groups representing about 340 organisations in total, it was not feasible to seed a hyperlink analysis of the online networks behind the march with URLs of all these organisations. So, in order to capture online activity behind the march, I conducted a search on Google both on the day of the march and a few days beforehand using the terms “hardest hit disabled march May 11”. This also meant I would be able to compare these results with those from second, more generalised Google search I had conducted for the Green Paper campaign. This search gave an idea of the most “reachable”<sup>15</sup> sites on the Web to feature the march. I selected the first 10 pages of the results so that the number of returns was comparable to those for the Green Paper campaign search. The top results of this search were then used to seed a hyperlink crawl using Issuecrawler. I excluded news sites from this crawl on the basis that I wanted to understand the campaign-as-issue network rather than look at the reporting network. As with the Benefits and Work campaign, I investigated the role social buttons played in the campaign using BackType and Twitter Scrape. The study not only focused on uncovering the online networks and mobilizing agents involved in the march but also on comparing this collective action process with the Green Paper campaign

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<sup>14</sup> This also facilitated comparison with the campaign-as-issue network I had from the hyperlink analysis in the Green Paper case

<sup>15</sup> This assumes that Google results serve as a proxy for reachability (Earl, 2006). See Appendix 1 for further discussion of this point.

and, following Diani and Bison (2004), seeing if the same groups or networks of actors are involved in consecutive events. I therefore revisited the webpages and websites which analysis had revealed to be active in the Green Paper campaign to see whether they also featured the Hardest Hit march. By the time I was designing this stage of the study, it had become clear from the Green Paper analysis that forums had played a central role in disseminating the campaign message. In order to estimate their relevance in the second mobilization, I also conducted a Google search designed specifically to pick up forum participation by using the search term “‘last post’ hardest hit May 11 disabled”.

## **Preliminary findings**

### The Green Paper campaign

Background research carried out at the time the consultation was still running had shown that Benefits and Work led the campaign to encourage individuals to comment on the Green Paper (see Appendix 3). By the time the consultation closed there had been 2,976 comments on the executive summary. At least two other mobilizing agents were active in the associated objectives of encouraging people to sign an online petition<sup>16</sup> and in getting charities and other institutional stakeholders to publicly declare their position on the Green Paper. There was also a sizeable Facebook group (with around 4,700 members in September 2009) specifically oriented towards the campaign, although it concentrated more on channeling members to sign the online petition or join the Benefits and Work campaign than sending them directly to the comments sections of the Green Paper. Benefits and Work is both a private company, which offers benefits advice to members, and also occasionally serves as an information and campaigning point on policy developments. Much of this information is open to the public as a news stream. Emails were sent to people who signed up to the Green Paper campaign but they were also published on this news stream. I followed returns on the email search up to saturation point, discarded any which were invalid,

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<sup>16</sup> the petition was signed by 23,709 people and a record of it can be seen here: <http://petitions.number10.gov.uk/AttendanceA/>

irrelevant or inaccessible to the public. This resulted in a list of 55 URLs. Of these 63%, were forums or message boards, 24% were blogs, 7% Facebook groups. One of the URLs was the newpage of a charity and the remaining 2 were miscellaneous news pages (see Appendix 4 for a table of these results).

Because a section of the Benefits and Work (B&W) email was copied into the forum, the way in which B&W had framed the issue was therefore replicated. The text also frequently included a link which enabled people to sign up to the B&W campaign. In many cases this posting was followed by discussion among users of the forum or board. These discussions were along various themes, including people reporting that they had taken particular actions for example joining the B&W campaign, or writing to their MP. A suggestion of group anger was also evident in many of these discussions for example in the use of the word “we” referring to disabled people, as opposed to “them” the authorities or social services, and in the use of words such as “disgusting” and “shocked” when people described how they felt about the proposals. There were indicators that a sense of collective identity was present in the networks represented by many of these websites and pages, although I need to conduct further research and analysis in this area. However, the sharing of attributes is likely to be a feature of users of forums that are aimed at disabled people based on the nature of their disability. An emotional connection is also likely to be a feature of such sites and indeed discussion on some of them is focused on the lived experience of contributors. Of the total, 18 of the forums were based on being disabled, so were 9 of the blogs and 3 of the Facebook groups. However the identity around which these networks might coalesce cannot be assumed to be the same. For example in some it may be primarily about being disabled, whereas in others it may be about being a disability rights activist.

Twitter did not feature heavily in the Green Paper campaign. Benefits and Work tweeted just 10 times during the consultation period. Benefits and Work only joined twitter at start of campaign, although its presence there has grown since. By May 2011, it had tweeted 38 times and had 828 followers, up from 380 followers a year earlier. I also carried out a BackType search of the page of the

Benefits and Work website which featured the original email. This showed that 41 tweets had linked to it. Benefits and Work did not itself have a Facebook page at the time of the Green Paper campaign, although, as stated previously, there was a grassroots Facebook group with around 4,700 members linked to the campaign.

The results of the hyperlink analysis, which was seeded with the URLs generated from the email tracing, were complex and I am still working on interpreting them. However the attempt to establish the links between those in the campaign network was marred by trying to use hyperlink analysis in the context of networks which involve a number forums. The hyperlink analysis did not show any evidence of forums linking to one another or indeed of other URLs linking into the forums. The only forum which appeared in the network was by virtue of it linking to other nodes in the network, rather than it receiving any inlinks. It seems likely that the nature of forums makes linking into them a less common activity than linking out and therefore Issuecrawler does not pick up readily these networks. (For a description of how Issuecrawler works see Appendix 2). I therefore conducted a second hyperlink analysis using the same seeds but altering the settings of the search to generate a campaign-as-issue network. I also used the campaign-as-issue approach in the Hardest Hit march. As before, these results are still being analysed.

The Google search using the terms Benefits and Work and a link to the Green Paper yielded rather similar returns to the search for the first paragraph of the email in terms of forums, which accounted for 62% of the returns. Of the rest 14% were blogs, 7% organisations for disabled people, and 3% rights organisations.

### The Hardest Hit march

The searches using the term “Hardest Hit May 11 march disabled” generated several pages of returns from which I took the first 10. After discarding irrelevant returns and repeats, I narrowed this down to 58 URLs. Of these 69%

were charities or organisations, for disabled people, 9% rights organisations, 5% forums and 4% blogs. Many of these bodies therefore represented the institutional face of the disabled community. Their webpages conformed more to the broadcast or informational model of web use than the collaborative content style celebrated in the term “social web”. As such, the webpages did not themselves represent networks to the same degree forums, blogs, Facebook or other social networking sites. There were only three forums among the list of top returns from the searches.

The search directly for forums (adding the term “last post” to pick up on them), showed the involvement of 14 more forums in the march, however. This indicates the way in which hyperlink-based searches such as Google result in forum results appearing lower down the list of returns. This renders them less visible than hyperlink-rich sites such as organisations. The same effect was apparent when Issuecrawler was used to map the relations between those involved in the Green Paper campaign: the hyperlink-poor forums tended to drop out of the results. This effect has obvious implications for assessments of where mobilisation takes place on the Internet. However insofar as the bias applied equally to search returns for both campaigns, the Green Paper search still returned a much higher proportion of forums among the “top” results than the Hardest Hit campaign. This indicates that grassroots networks based around forums were less prevalent in the Hardest Hit campaign.

However a social network element to the online activity behind the march was more evidenced by its presence on the social networking services of Facebook and Twitter. A BackType analysis of the Hardest Hit webpage which enabled people to register for the march showed it had received 1,669 tweets by May 11, this compared with a total of 41 tweets about the campaign launch page on the Benefits and Work website. Many of the charities and organisations that were central to the campaign have Facebook pages which are liked by large numbers of people. For example the RNIB page is “liked” by 2,776 people, the Mind page is liked by 11,620 people and Scope is liked by 4,107. “Liking” a page means that postings on that page are forwarded to a user’s News Feed, which keeps them in



touch with its activities. The Hardest Hit march was mentioned by all these charities. Hardest Hit itself also had a Facebook page which was liked by 1,570 people. The comparable Facebook group in the Green Paper campaign had 4,700 members.

From revisiting the search returns for the Benefits and Work campaign, I established that about one third of webpages which featured the first email text also evidenced participation in the online activity around the Hardest Hit march. This shows that there was some continuity between the two events. Coupled with this, the Hardest Hit march, as already stated, involved a lot of organisations for disabled people. Many of these organisations submitted responses to the Green Paper but not by adding comments online, as this activity was reserved for individuals. I am still interpreting the results of the hyperlink analysis of the Hardest Hit march but they suggest that disabled people's charities and organisations are relatively prominent, compared to the Green Paper Issuecrawler results.

Overall the findings indicate that in the Hardest Hit campaign, compared to the Green Paper campaign, individuals were reached more often via an intermediary – an organisation or charity for disabled people. When Google searches on both cases were based on the mobilizing agent and the “event”, the Hardest Hit campaign returned more links to the pages of organisations and fewer links to threads on forums than the Green Paper case. On Facebook, a superficial numerical comparison between the two campaigns indicates there was less relatively less direct engagement with the Hardest campaign page and more through the pages of the charities and organisations. The Hardest Hit case did however show relatively more engagement on Twitter. This result could be explained by a migration of individuals from forums to Twitter and/or by more activity of bloggers on Twitter. More research needs to be done to understand this aspect of the study. However prior research has shown that the population

of Twitter tends to be younger and more liable to access the Internet via mobile devices than Internet populations in general<sup>17</sup>.

### **Theoretical background and discussion**

Behind the questions asked both by this study and my PhD is the debate over the traditional distinctions between interest groups and social movements. Although scholars warn against hard and fast definitions of social movements (Annetts, Law, McNeish and Mooney, 2009, p7, Crossley, 2002, p7), a widely accepted characterisation is that they are: informal networks based on shared beliefs and solidarity which mobilize about conflictual issues, through the frequent use of various forms of protest (Della Porta and Diani, 2006, p20).

The debate about the distinctions between social movements and interest groups turns on various points. One is theoretical and stems from the association of social movements with conflictual issues. This is often expressed in terms of whether action is institutional or extra-institutional (see for example Annetts, Law, McNeish and Mooney, 2009, Della Porta and Diani, 2006, Diani and Bison, 2004). This distinction is challenged by McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001, p6.) who argue that “the boundary between official prescribed politics, and politics by other means” is less useful than a division along the lines of whether an episode of contention is “contained” or “transgressive”. Contention is transgressive when it consists of episodes in which: government is a claimant, an object of the claims or a party to them; the claims affect the interests of the claimants; some parties are newly self-identified political actors and/or at least some parties employ innovative collective action. Innovative collective action, in turn, needs to include collective self-representations and/or adopt means that are unprecedented or forbidden by the regime (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, 2001 p7-8). The institution-based distinction, they argue, leads analysts to neglect or misunderstand the parallels and interactions between institutionalized and extra-institutionalised actions. This position has, in turn, been criticized by social

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<sup>17</sup> see for example the Pew Internet report on Twitter and Status updating (2009). Available at <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2009/Twitter-and-status-updating.aspx> (Accessed 6 June 2100)

movement theorists such as Diani and Bison (2004) for consigning social movement processes to the category of just another episode of contention. This downplays the substantial differences between social movement process and “more cognate collective action dynamics” (Diani and Bison 2004, p281). Key to these differences are the presence of collective identity. Actors in social movement processes are “linked by solidarities and shared identities that precede and survive any specific coalitions and campaigns” (ibid, p283).

Challenges to distinctions between social movements and interest groups have also been made on the basis of empirical findings, the more contemporary of which are drawn from the online environment (for example Bimber et al, 2009, Chadwick, 2007, Bimber, 1998). Chadwick (2007, p3) argues that hybrid political organisations are resulting as “digital network repertoires”, developed by social movements, spread to interest groups and political parties. Other research suggests that the Internet encourages new forms of activism that undermine commitment, creating protest “users” rather than “members” (Earl and Schussman, 2003). This claim is questioned by a study into those taking part in a number of recent protest events (Van Laer, 2010), which suggests that using the Internet is related to sustaining and reinforcing particular motivational elements, with online activists showing higher levels of group-based anger.

A second and connected area of debate is around the notion of grievance. Much social movement oriented research into online collective action has drawn on either a new movement perspective or resource mobilization theory, both of which tend to underplay the role of material grievance in collective action. Yet social welfare movements, including struggles over disability benefits, sit uneasily with theoretical distinctions between old and new movements (Shakespeare, 1993).

The empirical findings from this study and my wider research project will enable me to reflect on these points of contention. Although findings from the study are only preliminary at this stage, some comment on the theoretical implications is possible. The study sought to understand which mobilising agents and networks enrolled in the two events and how they might they be characterised. In the

Green Paper campaign, the snapshot generated suggests that Benefits and Work was a major mobilizing agent, but so too were the individuals who signed up to the campaign and then spread the word of it in online forums and on blogs and Facebook. In the Hardest Hit campaign, the mobilizing agents included the two bodies behind the Hardest Hit website, and many of the charities and organisations which they represent. Disability rights bloggers active on the Web, Twitter and Facebook also appear to have played a key role in both campaigns, although I need to do more analysis in this area to substantiate this. My findings therefore suggest the Hardest Hit campaign enrolled a mix mainly of organisation-centred networks and activist networks; and the Green Paper campaign enrolled a mix of forum-centred grassroots networks and activist networks.

These findings challenge assumptions that institutional activity is necessarily less oppositional than non-institutional activity. Both campaigns enrolled networks of disability rights activists but the Hardest Hit campaign also featured many organisations acting as intermediaries, whereas the Green Paper campaign appeared to tap more directly into grassroots networks. However being a march, the Hardest Hit action fits notions of non-institutional action; whereas participation in a Green Paper consultation is a type of action more often associated with co-option than protest. The contradictory nature of these findings, I suggest, can in part be explained by the idea that citizens are able to resist public practices through an oppositional or counter agency (Barnes and Prior, 2009) and that the assemblage of “publics” for participation can be a form of resistance to power (Newman and Clarke, 2009). Actions which are institutional might therefore also be transgressive or conflictual.

Viewing these events on a network level may also help explain their apparent boundary crossing. For example, my findings suggest that the collective identity and commitment driven by group anger could be a stronger component in some of the networks involved in the processes studied than in others. Might then the mix of networks that enroll in a particular event determine whether, overall, it constitutes a social movement or interest group process?



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## **Appendix 1: Searching using Google**

The data collection for my study relied to a degree on the use of the Google search engine, which has been criticized for its partiality (for example Thelwall, Vaughan and Björneborn, 2005). So, in the data collection for the Green Paper campaign, I supplemented its use with other search engines in the manner described below. However returns on the Google searches were more comprehensive than those from the other mode of searching in this instance. So, in subsequent searches I relied more heavily on Google but I remained aware that its returns are merely one representation of what is on the web and should be evaluated as such.

The exact way a Google search operates and the algorithm it uses is not in the public domain. However in general terms it relies on hyperlink analysis: finding and ranking URLs (addresses of pages on the web) on the basis of how many other high profile sites or pages link to them. Results from a Google search therefore represent an approximation of a population of reachable sites (Earl, 2006), rather than a complete list of every webpage that relates to the search terms. Another drawback of Google is that it has been shown to tailor search results to the IP address from which the search is launched and to return different results on different days (Thelwall, Vaughan and Björneborn, 2005). For this reason, I conducted the search on more than one occasion and from more than one computer. To further mitigate against Google bias, I employed a second search tool in the analysis. This tool was LexiURL searcher which uses the Yahoo search engine. However as noted above the results from the second search method were very comparable but less extensive than those from the Google search.

## Appendix 2: How Issuecrawler works <sup>18</sup>

Issuecrawler identifies and then follows hyperlinks from a set of starting points, or seeds. These starting points are selected by the researcher and can number up to 300 (for general users). The starting points determine the shape and scope of the network and are often chosen as a result of prior research, including the results of searches on engines such as Google. For example, the researcher might simply want to find the hyperlink patterns between a set of webpages or websites or, more commonly in cases where Issuecrawler is used, they may have in mind an “issue” and will therefore select seeds which they think are a party to that issue (Rogers, 2006). Once the seeds are selected, Issuecrawler starts by crawling them and capturing their outlinks. It then crawls those outlinks themselves, capturing their outlinks. This can be done up to three times (crawl depth). Any outlinks that are made by two or more of the starting points become part of the network (co-link analysis). These provide the starting point for the next co-link analysis. The co-link analysis can be carried out up to three times (three iterations). Choosing webpages, rather than entire sites, makes this process more fine-grained because the focus of one page within a site might vary from another.

The network generated from this process can be depicted in various tabulated forms and also as a map showing linked nodes. The nodes stand for the webpages or sites. The size of the node indicates the total number of inlinks it receives from the network. The closeness of one node to another depends on how often links are exchanged between the two. This helps identify clusters of interrelated nodes, possibly indicating “matching values and beliefs” or “shared communities of participants” (Bruns, 2007). The arrows between the nodes show the predominant pattern of interlinking, ie whether the node is mostly linking out or being linked into.

The settings of Issuecrawler can be altered, to vary what it does. For example the start pages (seeds) can be privileged so that they are retained in the network

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<sup>18</sup> Detailed instruction on how to use Issuecrawler, scenarios of use and studies which have used Issuecrawler are available on the GovCom website [http://www.govcom.org/Issuecrawler\\_instructions.htm](http://www.govcom.org/Issuecrawler_instructions.htm)

through the iterations of co-link analysis, irrespective of whether they themselves receive two outlinks from the network. As mentioned above, the crawl depth and number of iterations can also vary between one and three. Setting the number of iterations at two is recommended for capturing issue networks.

An issue network refers to the sets of interlinking web pages which are party to a common issue. It differs from popular understandings of networks, and social networking, in that the individuals or organizations in the network do not need be on the same side of an issue, nor be acquainted with each other, or desire to be acquainted (Marres, 2006).

**Appendix 3: Timeline comparing dates on which Benefits and Work (B&W) sent emails and the number of comments made on the Green Paper executive summary**

(note: table has only been completed to September 3 at this stage)

<b>Date</b>	<b>Email sent by B&amp;W</b>	<b>Reported numbers in campaign</b>	<b>Content of B&amp;W email</b>	<b>Number of comments made</b>
AUGUST 5	email		ask to sign up to campaign	2
6	email		reports that 5,200 odd signed up in first 24 hours	4
7				12
8				2
9				4
10				6
11	email	13,815	asks people to put pressure on disability charities	12
12				2
13				5
14				1
15				2
16				2
17				3
18	email	19,000		4
19				4
20				6
21				0
22				0
23				3
24				3
25	email		first request to comment on the Green Paper website	211
26				95
27				138
28				37
29				22
30				13
31				21
SEPTEMBER 1	email		reiterates request to comment on GP and says that a lot have already done so	583
2				155
3				28

<b>Appendix 4: Destinations of first campaign email in Green Paper Campaign</b>					
<b>Page type</b>	<b>Colloborative or broadcast</b>	<b>Date email posted</b>	<b>Participation indicators (forums)</b>	<b>Nature of exchanges (forums)</b>	<b>May 11 march covered?</b>
Blog disabled	C	6-Aug	4 comments		yes
Blog disabled	C	5-Aug			no
Blog disabled	C	5-Aug			yes
Blog disabled	C	5-Aug			yes
Blog disabled	C	5-Aug			yes
Blog disabled	C	5-Aug			no
Blog disabled	C	8-Aug			n/a
Blog disabled	C				no
Blog disabled	C				no
Blog health	C	6-Aug			no
Blog other	B	7-Aug			yes
Blog other	C	6-Aug			no
Blog other	C	26-Aug			turned to private site
Facebook group by shared geographic location	C		61 members		no
Facebook group disabled	C	Aug	1 reply		closed
Facebook group disabled	C		45 members		no
Facebook group disabled	C	August	2,234 members		no
Forum disabled	C	5-Aug	214 posts 46 authors	Talk of actions taken including letters to MPs, making comments on Green Paper, spreading word	yes
Forum disabled	C	3-Sep	28 posts, 23 authors	Comment of injustice of situation and urging people to take action.	no

				Sharing news of personal situation	
Forum disabled	C	5-Aug	1 post 1 author		no
Forum disabled	C	5-Aug	9 posts 8 authors	Lots of reports of signing upto B&W campaign	yes (comes up as news on a read only section)
Forum disabled	C	7-Aug	1 reply		no
Forum disabled	C	6-Aug		Details not publicly visible	no
Forum disabled	C	5-Aug	15 posts 12 authors	General supportive comment ppl say they have taken action and spread message elsewhere	yes B&W newsletter mentioning May 11 posted
Forum disabled	C	5-Aug	4 posts 3 people	Reports of signing up	no
Forum disabled	C	7-Aug	30 posts 5 authors	Links to the Green Paper and subsequent emails from B&W. Replies from letters to MPs. Encouraging others to take action	no
Forum disabled	C	5-Aug	2 posts 2 authors		n/a
Forum disabled	C		10 posts 6 authors	Details not publicly visible	no
Forum disabled	C	11-Aug	2 posts 1 author	n/a	no
Forum disabled	C	10-Aug	2 posts 2 authors	n/a	n/a
Forum disabled	C	5-Aug	75 posts	Links to green paper and petition. People	no

				reporting on response to protests made	
Forum disabled	C		12 posts 6 ppl.	Talk of taking various actions, including spreading the word further and subsequent news	no
Forum disabled	C	5-Aug	15 posts 10 authors, Lots of talk abt fighting to keep benefit and remaining independent	A lot of people say they are signing up to the campaign. Later someone posts 2nd email and link to GP. Direct link to B&W	yes
Forum disabled	C	6-Aug	9 posts 5 authors	Talk of spreading the message including to Facebook. Further emails from B&W posted	n/a
Forum disabled	C	5-Aug	22 posts 20 authors	Links added. Comments in support and reporting action taken. One dissenting voice - ie some debate	yes
Forum other	C	5-Aug	54 posts 21 authors	Debate over issue. Some dissenting voices. Links added including to Green Paper	n/a

Forum other	C	5-Aug	10 posts, 10 authors	Reports of signing up to campaign and spreading the word	no
Forum other	C	5-Aug	41 posts 25 authors	Debate with some dissenting voices. Link to Green Paper added	yes
Forum other	C	7-Aug	9 posts 7 authors		no
forum other	C	14-Sep	1 post 1 author	n/a	no
Forum other	C		1 post 1 author		no
Forum other	C	5-Aug	11 posts 7 authors	Reports of steps taken, joining campaign writing to MP, links added	no
Forum other	C	5-Aug	6 replies		no
Forum other	C	5-Aug	2 replies	Report of signing up	no
Forum other	C	5-Aug	3 replies		n/a
Forum other	C	6-Aug	10 posts 10 people	Talk of spreading the word	n/a
Forum other	C	6-Aug	4 posts 4 authors		no
Forum other	C	13-Aug	27 posts 8 authors	disability section of general forum site	n/a
Forum other	C	6-Aug	2 posts 1 author	n/a	no
Forum other	C		20 posts 6 authors	not publicly visible	n/a
Forum other	C	5-Aug	12 posts 10 authors.	Includes benefits advice workers.	yes



				Exchange of information	
Forum other	C	5-Aug			no
misc - health advocacy and news hub	B	5-Aug			yes direct posting of B&W newsletter giving info
misc - political org news pages	B	27-Jul			no
Organisation or charity	B	no date visible			no