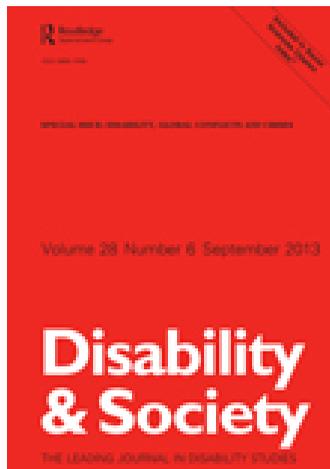


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Reporting disability in the age of austerity: the changing face of media representation of disability and disabled people in the United Kingdom and the creation of new 'folk devils'

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Reporting disability in the age of austerity: the changing face of media representation of disability and disabled people in the United Kingdom and the creation of new ‘folk devils’

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Following its election in 2010 the UK’s Coalition Government has sought to implement radical restructuring of disability-related benefits justified by reference to the financial crises of 2007/08. In this article we examine how these changes have impacted on coverage of disability in the UK media comparing and contrasting coverage of disability in newspapers in 2010/11 with a similar period in 2004/05. Our analysis suggests that disabled people have become a ‘folk devil’ and that there has been a significant change in the way that disability is reported. Newspaper coverage in 2010/11 was less sympathetic and there was an increase in articles that focused on disability benefit and fraud, and an increase in the use of pejorative language to describe disabled people. An audience reception study suggests that this coverage is having an impact on the way that people think about disabled people.

Keywords: content analysis; folk devils; media representation

Points of interest

- There now many more newspaper articles on articles on disability than there used to be and there has been a change in the way that the articles describe disabled people.
- There are fewer articles in which disabled people are presented in a sympathetic manner.
- Newspaper articles on disability now focus more on benefit fraud and entitlement to benefits and words such as cheat, scrounger or fraud are used much more commonly.
- When we asked people to describe what a typical newspaper story on disability would be about fraud and benefit cheating was the most common answer.
- Disabled people have become, for some newspapers, a folk devil and this change has been justified by a need to reduce costs in welfare provision as a response to the global financial crises.

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Introduction

The financial crises of 2007/08 and the ensuing global recession has resulted in what the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has called the ‘worst economic crisis of the past 50 years, with dire consequences for workers and their families’ (OECD 2009, 3). Whilst responsibility for this crisis is contested, it has been suggested that recovery from it has been hampered by high levels of sickness and disability benefits that have acted both as an obstacle to raising labour-force participation rates and a major contributor to public expenditures (OECD 2009). Welfare reform has become a central aim for many governments across the world as they have sought to impose new financial regimes based firmly in the precepts of neo-liberal economics. A key target has become a reduction of what is described as the ‘burgeoning welfare burden’ and countries have attempted to follow the OECD’s advice to ‘activate existing disability benefit recipients’ (OECD 2009, 5 and 9). The G20 have identified the reform of disability benefit schemes as a policy priority for economic recovery (OECD 2010, 3). Nowhere is this more apparent than in the United Kingdom, where according to Taylor-Gooby and Stoker (2011) the financial crisis is being used as an excuse for a massive restructuring of welfare systems and public services.

The think-tank Demos estimate that in the UK disabled people will lose over £9 billion in welfare support in the next five years and that these policy changes¹ will hit disabled people harder than any other group (Wood and Grant 2010). More recently Duffy 2012 has estimated that disabled people in the United Kingdom face an average reduction in support of £4410 per person per annum and that 29% of all proposed cuts are targeted at disabled people.

These cuts, or at least the desire to implement such cuts, are not unique to this current government and previously both Conservative and Labour administrations have sought to reduce welfare spending on disability. All such attempts failed; cuts to disability benefit were seen as too politically dangerous and counter to public opinion (The Guardian 1999). What is unique about the situation today is not that the UK government is talking about making cuts to welfare provision; it is that the government is actually implementing them and that it is using the financial crises to legitimate these cuts (Diamond and Lodge 2013).

Disabled people and their organisations in the United Kingdom have argued that the response in the media to much of the debate that followed the call for changes to sickness and disability benefits has focused on disabled people’s entitlement to such support. These claims have been accompanied by claims of widespread fraud and misrepresentation of welfare claimants (see, for example, Scope 2011). They have argued that not only has this formed the basis for much of the discussion on disability in the media, but that there has been a significant change in the way that the media have reported disability. These claims, however, have been anecdotal and there has been no firm evidence to support the charge that the media have changed the way that they are reporting disability. In an attempt to see whether there is any evidence for these charge we have carried out a comprehensive content analysis of media reporting on disability across five newspapers in 2010/11 and compared it with a similar period in 2004/05.

In our analysis we have drawn on the ideas of Stanley Cohen who, in 1972, identified the tendency for societies ‘to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic’, where ‘a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges

Table 1. Comparison of the sample October–January 2004/05 and October–January 2010/11.

	2004/05	2010/11	Increase/decrease (%)
<i>The Sun</i>	101	197	+95
<i>The Mirror</i>	138	204	+48
<i>The Express</i>	145	268	+85
<i>The Daily Mail</i>	140	130	–7
<i>The Guardian</i>	189	216	+14

Table 2. Proportion of articles that referred to themes of discrimination/marginalisation.

	2004/05	2010/11
<i>The Sun</i>	18.8% (19/101)	12.2% (24/197)
<i>The Mirror</i>	22.5% (31/138)	18.6% (38/204)
<i>The Express</i>	22.1% (32/145)	11.6% (31/268)
<i>The Daily Mail</i>	14.3% (20/140)	16.9% (22/130)
<i>The Guardian</i>	31.2% (59/189)	29.6% (64/216)
All tabloids	19.5% (102/524)	14.4% (115/799)

Table 3. Prevalence of ‘fraud’ category in articles.⁶

	2004/05	2010/11	Increase/decrease (%)
<i>The Sun</i>	2.0% (2/101)	7.1% (14/197)	+255
<i>The Mirror</i>	4.3% (6/138)	3.9% (8/204)	–9.3
<i>The Express</i>	4.1% (6/145)	8.2% (22/268)	+100
<i>The Daily Mail</i>	0.7% (1/140)	3.8% (5/130)	+443
<i>The Guardian</i>	0% (0/189)	0.5% (1/216)	–
All tabloids	2.8% (15/524)	6.1% (49/799)	+118

Table 4. ‘Deserving’ category as high prominence in articles.

	2004/05	October 2010–January 2011
<i>The Sun</i>	7.9% (8/101)	0% (0/197)
<i>The Mirror</i>	0.7% (1/138)	7.3% (9/204)
<i>The Express</i>	6.2% (9/145)	1.1% (3/268)
<i>The Daily Mail</i>	1.4% (2/140)	0.8% (1/130)
<i>The Guardian</i>	0.5% (1/189)	3.7% (8/216)
All tabloids	3.8% (20/524)	1.6% (13/799)

to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests’ (1972, 9). Whilst disabled people differ from Cohen’s study of what he called ‘deviant youth cultures’, there are key features that his model shares with the themes we identify here in relation to the ‘cycle of a moral panic’ (1972, 24) and we have employed many of his concepts. Cohen’s ideas, whilst now over 40 years old, hold as true today as they did when he first described them and they provide an ‘analytical power and flexibility to examine a variety of cultural happenings with a theoretically integrated apparatus’ (Ben-Yehuda 2009, 1).

Methodology and design

In carrying out the research we employed a range of qualitative and quantitative methods including interviews, focus groups, content analysis and the comparative case-study approach.

Content analysis

Content analysis is an established method for exploring media coverage of disability (Haller 2010). Previous research on disability using content analysis has tended to look at the themes under which disability is covered and reported on by the media. Work, for example, by Barnes (1991), Cooke, Daone, and Morris (2000), Philo (1996), Ross (2003) and Haller, Dorries, and Rahn (2006) have documented how the media frames disability and have identified a number of themes under which it is reported. In this study we have used content analysis to quantify and examine both how disability and disabled people are represented and also importantly and differently to these earlier studies to compare and contrast media reporting over two time periods; October–January 2004/05 and 2010/11. This approach has allowed us to compare newspaper coverage in the period immediately following the Comprehensive Spending Review initiated by the then newly elected Coalition Government in October 2010 with a similar period in 2004/05. We chose this second period as the comparator because the then Labour government were also attempting to change welfare entitlement and disability policy.

All articles with the words ‘disabled’, ‘disability’, ‘disabilities’ and ‘incapacity’ were obtained using the electronic database LexisNexis from the following newspapers:²

- (1) *The Sun*: Conservative Party-supporting tabloid.³
- (2) *The Mirror*: traditionally Labour-supporting tabloid.
- (3) *The Express*: Conservative Party-supporting tabloid.
- (4) *The Daily Mail*: Conservative Party-supporting tabloid.
- (5) *The Guardian*: leftist broadsheet, supported Liberal Democrats in 2010.

The resulting search produced 713 articles for October 2004–January 2005 compared with 1015 articles during October 2010–January 2011. We also carried out a subsequent analysis of newspaper articles for March–April 2011 and returned 548 documents.⁴

A reliable and purpose-specific coding schedule was developed for and by a team of coders, whose analysis was checked collectively to ensure a consistent approach. Coding categories identified references to disability and its changing social context, and the political issues that arose in the coverage. In order to assess potential differences in the coverage, specific references to disabilities were noted across three broad impairment groups:

- Physical and sensory impairments.
- Mental health.
- Learning difficulties.

All articles were coded according to how prominent a particular theme was in the article, and these variables were measured on a five-point scale (ranging from a

'bare mention' to a 'dominant theme' in the article). Both implicit and explicit references were noted, when these appeared in the headline. Specific examples of pejorative language referencing disability benefit claimants directly or indirectly were also noted to enrich later analysis. In order to identify the most frequently cited 'voices' across the body of articles, references attributed to politicians (by political party), charities, carers and disabled people, among other key commentators, were all recorded.

Audience reception analysis

We supplemented the content analysis with an audience reception study and we held a series of focus groups between June and August 2011. We used the focus groups to examine key trends highlighted during the quantitative content analysis and this set the agenda for the focus groups and the topic guide.

Seven focus groups were conducted in both England and Scotland; five with non-disabled people, and two with people who self-identified as disabled. They were organised according to the standard audience reception techniques (Philo 2004). Each focus group consisted of between five and eight participants and 42 people in total took part in this element of the research. Some disabled people also took part in individual, one-to-one interviews. The participants were all volunteers, recruited from a range of different organisations and selected to ensure variety. These focus groups were supplemented by interviews with six journalists and media commentators who specialise in the field of disability. These interviews allowed us to contextualise both the newspaper reporting and the comments made in the focus groups. All the interviews and focus groups were taped for subsequent analysis using a standard qualitative method (Silverman 2010). The content of each focus group and the interviews were examined and key themes across the groups and the interviews were identified.

Research findings

In what follows we present the findings and combine both the content analysis and the audience reception study. The section starts out by contextualising coverage of disability in the five newspapers and then moves on to explore how disability itself was covered in 2004/05 compared with 2010/11 and how disabled people are portrayed. The data showed marked politicisation in media coverage of disability, a shift that reflected the Coalition Government's agenda. Coverage in 2010/11 was also characterised by increased discussion of disability as a benefit *problem*, and of disabled people as a burden on the state. Where percentages are given they refer to the percentage of articles that discuss disability, unless otherwise stated.

Disability coverage

The number of disability-related articles was very much greater in 2010/11 compared with 2004/05 (Table 1). We noted an overall increase of 43% in the total number of articles where disability was mentioned. This increase was found in all newspapers except *The Daily Mail*. The greatest increases were in *The Sun* and *The Daily Express*.

Disabled people as a political tool

The increase in incapacity benefit claimants and concerns about welfare spending on disability are long-term issues, dating back to at least the early 1980s (Beatty and Fothergill 2010) and was high on the political agenda in both 2004/05 and 2010/11. There were, however, significant differences in the way that the media reported the topic in the two time periods. In September 2004, when Tony Blair, the then Prime Minister, announced new policies aimed at cutting the numbers receiving disability benefits, the way Blair's comments and those of his government were reported in 2004/05 were markedly different to the way similar comments were reporting in 2010/11.

In 2004/05 whilst there was some personalisation of the issue and some blame placed on disabled people, much of the reporting focused on perceived failings of the government and professionals. Following a press release by Alan Johnson, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, who on 18 October 2004 accused doctors of driving what he called the 'sick note culture', putting responsibility on them as the 'gatekeepers' vetting benefits, *The Daily Express* described Britain as a 'soft-touch' for 'work-shy' people who 'languish' on benefits (*The Express*, 19 October 2004). Whilst this article contained some criticism of benefit claimants, attacks were mainly directed at health service professionals, the government and welfare policy. In 2004/05, 9.5% of all tabloid articles on disability contained such attacks on the government and there were no articles defending government policy in the area. Whilst terms such as 'scroungers' and 'fraudsters' were, on occasion used, the focus of the article was on a perceived 'weakness' of the government in dealing with such people. *The Daily Mail*, for example, argued that 'the cost of sickness and incapacity benefits has soared since Labour came to power' (29 October 2004).

By contrast in 2010/11 most of the papers were supportive of the government and its attempts to reduce welfare spending. In *The Sun*, for example, in an article entitled 'Hacking off the Head of the Welfare Monster' Coalition policy was endorsed. With this change in direction came a change in the way that the media reported disability and disabled people, and it is to a discussion of this that this paper now turns.

The end of sympathetic portrayals?

Our analysis suggests that there has been a marked shift in the way that disability and disabled people are described. In 2010/11 there was a relative decline in sympathetic, albeit it often stereotypical, coverage seen in relation to disability compared with that found in 2004/05. Such coverage, documented previously by Barnes (1991), Haller (2010) and Lynch and Thomas (1994), is typified by stories that emphasise 'heart-warming portrayals of people who overcame their disabilities while being constantly good-humoured, patient and courageous' (Lynch and Thomas 1994, 9). Articles of this type were most common in *The Daily Mail* and made up 18.6% of its coverage 2004/05; by 2010/11 these figures for *The Mail* had dropped to 10.8%. Sympathetic articles also fell in *The Guardian* from 14.8% of articles in 2004/05 to 5.6% in 2010/11, and in *The Mirror* from 13.8% to 6.9% across these periods.

Articles that emphasised 'triumph over adversity', a theme where disabled people were presented as struggling to overcome barriers, also dropped. In *The Guardian* it decreased from 26.5% of articles in October–January 2004/05 to 21.8% in the same period in 2010/11. 'Triumph' also fell dramatically in *The Daily Mail* from 15.7% to only 7.7% of coverage. References, by contrast, increased in *The*

Mirror between these comparable periods from 10.1% to 15.7%. In the tabloid press in general it fell from 29% of all disability-related articles to 22%.

These changes were accompanied by changes in the number of articles where discrimination against disabled people and their marginalisation were the central theme between the two periods (Table 2). The proportion of such tabloid articles fell from 19.5% to 14.4%, the greatest fall occurring in *The Express* (from 22.1% to 11.6%). There was also a reduction in the number of articles describing disabled people as being in genuine need (from 13% to 9%).

Creating the ‘undeserving’: the emergence of the folk devil

Our analysis also suggests that the changed coverage has resulted in a re-evaluation of who is and who is not deserving of benefits. Whilst there was only a marginal difference in the proportion of articles that described disability benefit recipients as ‘undeserving’ – 15.5% in 2004/05 compared with 15.9% in 2010/11 – there was a large increase in the actual number of such articles (127 in 2010/11 compared with 81 in 2004/05). In *The Express*, for example, articles discussing claimants in this way fell from 21.4% in 2004/05 (more than any other tabloid) to 15.7% in 2010/11; the actual number of these articles it produced increased by 26% (from 31 to 42 articles).

Whilst the change in the actual proportion of the articles was not great there was a noticeable qualitative change in the way that disability and disabled people were described. Articles coded in this section included one that claimed 75% of incapacity benefit claimants were ‘skiving’ (The Express, 26 January 2011). Others articles suggested that disability benefits were a drain on the economy (increasing from 22 tabloid articles in 2004/05 to 37 in 2010/11); with some articles even blaming the entire deficit crisis on incapacity benefit claimants. One headline in *The Sun* read:

Shirker’s Paradise; Exclusive: IDS on Benefits Britain, Wagner’s one of Million who Claim Incapacity, Work-shy are Largely to Blame for Deficit Crisis. (*The Sun*, 1 December 2010)

In 2010/11 there was an increase in the use of pejorative terms to describe disabled people. Such words were found in 12% of tabloid articles in October–January 2004/05 (63 occurrences) compared with 18% of tabloid articles (144 occurrences) from October to January 2010/11. The most common examples from October–January 2004/05 were:

Term	Occurrences
Handout	18
Scrounger	15
Sicknote Culture/Society	13
Cripple	8

It would be wrong to ascribe the blame for many of these terms solely on the press, as often during both periods such terms were used by politicians and were included in articles as direct quotes. In 2004, for example, Tony Blair spoke of people ‘languishing on benefits’ (*The Guardian*, 14 October 2004), a phrase that was picked up and repeated five times. Alan Johnson’s phrase ‘sicknote culture’

(DWP, 15 March 2005) and ‘sicknote society’ were also popular. In 2010/11, Chris Grayling, Minister of State in the Department for Work and Pensions, promised the new government would not ‘use the language of shirkers and scroungers’ (Garthwaite 2012, 370). Despite Grayling’s pledge, in October–January the use of such terms increased dramatically in 2010/11. The OECD description of Britain as ‘Sick Man of Europe’ became ‘Sick Man of the World’ in *The Sun* (Newton Dunn, 1 December 2010).⁵ George Osborne, Chancellor of the Exchequer, claimed living on incapacity benefit had become a ‘Lifestyle Choice’ – a phrase that was quoted 11 times. The most common phrases from October–January 2010/11 were:

Term	Occurrences
Scrounger	34
Handout	58
Workshy	25
Cheats	25

Articles in which fraud was a central theme increased from 2.8% of tabloid coverage in October–January 2004/05 to 6.1% in October–January 2010/11 (see Table 4). In *The Express* fraud coverage moved from 2.1% to 4.2%, with the number of articles growing from six to 22. The proportion of such articles in *The Daily Mail* increased from 0.7% in 2004/05, to 3.8% in 2010/11. In *The Sun*, fraud also increased markedly from just 2% in 2004/05 to 7.1% in 2010/11.

Debate on disability and benefit intensified dramatically across the two periods and in 2010/11 there was increased scrutiny of the benefits system accompanied by politicised newspaper portrayals of disabled people; disability claimants were defined either as (the few) ‘deserving’ or (the majority) ‘undeserving’ of benefit. The articles and the phrases and words used within them, themselves already laden with meaning, were often reinforced by the use of strong headlines; for example, the front-page headline ‘75% on Sick are Skiving’ carried by *The Daily Express* (26 January 2011) associate disability and disabled people with fraud. All of these articles are marked by an exaggeration and distortion of the level of fraud and the strength and prominence of fraud as a tabloid theme conflicts with the recorded or estimated levels of fraud. These, according to the latest DWP statistics, are relatively low and estimated to be at 0.5% for Disability Living Allowance and to be at 0.3% for Incapacity Benefit (DWP 2012). This framing has seen the emergence of disabled people, or at least those claiming benefits as a new ‘folk devil’.

The emphasis on disability and benefit, and in particular benefit fraud, was noted by our focus groups. The first question we asked in the groups was for the participants to describe a typical story on disability and to give what they thought would be a typical headline in the newspapers. By far the most common replies focused on benefit and benefit fraud:

I’d say stories like ‘Fiddler on the Roof’, you know the story about the slater who was claiming incapacity benefit. (Focus Group 1)

I think it’s all benefits. There was one that’s just done a marathon and he was claiming that he could barely even walk and that’s dishonest. (Focus Group 3)

This theme was also picked up by the focus group participants who were disabled, who commented about media coverage on disability presenting:

All the same themes – disabled people as dole bludgers and [...] victims. (Focus Group 6)

The focus groups were asked what they thought the percentage of people fraudulently claiming disability benefits was; responses varied from 10% up to 70% with 40% the most common. When asked to justify their claims, participants cited newspapers as their primary source and all participants were genuinely shocked when told the official figures.

The emphasis on fraud found in 2010/11 is different to that found in the earlier sample. In the later sample public perceptions for responsibility for what are perceived to be high levels of disability benefit recipients falls on claimants rather than on health service professionals, government policies, labour-market problems or economic policies, as described above. By emphasising fraud and describing individual cases the stories are, to quote Cohen, ‘taken as confirming the general theme’ (1972, 81); and they are interpreted as part of a wider sequence, in this case, of massive benefit fraud. Almost all of the participants in the focus groups, for example, claimed to know lots of people committing benefit fraud and felt that it was widespread. Participants felt that it was easy to commit fraud and that many people had ‘learned the system’ and that there were ‘loads of people scamming it’, and that ‘tens of thousands’ were falsely claiming benefits:

There are the thousands, tens of thousands who are not entitled to it; they’re robbing the people who are disabled. (Focus Group 2)

Cohen identified one ‘highly effective technique’ of symbolisation of a folk devil as being the use of ritualised and dramatised interviews with individuals involved (1972, 42). Although the use of such interviews was present in both time periods, ‘undeserving’ portrayals increased in articles during 2010/11. They are likely also to have had greater impact as this increase was accompanied by a decrease in sympathetic accounts of disability and articles focusing on the ‘deserving’ claimant during the period.

Fairness to the ‘genuine’ disabled

A tendency for newspapers to make small concessions for what were seen as ‘deserving’ claimants in articles (often from politicians and journalists) was found, although this was not a central theme of the articles. Indeed this concept was often used to separate the ‘deserving’ from the ‘non-deserving’ and to further emphasis the idea of ‘fraudulent claimants’. ‘Deserving claimants’ appeared as a minor theme in 8.5% of all tabloid articles in October–January 2010/11, rising from 3.6% in 2004/05. For example, a *Daily Mail* article entitled ‘75% of Incapacity Claimants are Fit to Work’ included a statement from the ‘Taxpayers Alliance’ that:

It’s really not fair on taxpayers or those who are *genuinely ill*. (27 October 2010; emphasis added)

In *The Express*, the ‘deserving’ claimant, as a brief aside in its articles, moved from 4.1% in 2004/05 to 10.9% in October–January 2010/11; a time when only 1.1% of articles in the paper had a dominant ‘deserving’ theme.

The source of many of the claims being made in the sampled articles and the statistics quoted can be traced back to government sources. For example, an article headed ‘75% of Incapacity Claimants are Fit to Work’ in the *Daily Mail* claims that:

Out of about 840,000 who tried to obtain the £95-a-week Employment and Support Allowance, 640,000 were told they were fit for work, or withdrew their applications before they took the tests – suggesting they were ‘trying it on’. (27 October 2010)

The claim was justified by quoting government sources and official statistics:

The *disclosure by the Department for Work and Pensions* raises fresh questions over how many of the 2.6 million people on the existing incapacity benefit are really incapable of being employed. The figures suggest that if they were tested to the same extent the number would fall as low as 650,000. (27 October 2010; emphasis added)

Chris Grayling, the relevant Minister is also directly quoted:

With over two million people trapped on incapacity benefits, these figures underline how important it is that we make sure everyone who has the potential to work gets the right help to move off benefits and into a job. (27 October 2010).

These figures whilst not being manipulated are being misrepresented. They do not refer to people who are currently in receipt of incapacity benefits but to only new applicants.

The idea that disabled people were at risk from these new tests was also dismissed, suggesting that those in real need will not be affected. An *Express* article entitled ‘Incapacity Benefit Tests will Pose no Threat to Disabled’ presents a heavy undeserving claimant attack throughout, yet briefly concedes: ‘There are, of course, people who are genuinely incapable of working and it is right that the state should support them’ (*The Express*, 12 October 2010). Another vitriolic article in *The Sun* states that:

How would you like a £91.40 inflation-linked ‘grant’ every week for the rest of your life, just for sitting on your backside? You’d need a £200,000 Lottery win for that sort of income. Yet, more than 1.6 Million people in Britain today have won the jackpot by ‘going on the sick’. *Some are genuinely unable to work*. But countless thousands are having a laugh at the expense of Sun readers and others who do get out of bed, turn up for work and pay taxes to fund the £12.5Bn bill for their feckless lifestyles. (*The Sun*, 4 April 2011; emphasis added)

Such concessions were less common (3.6%) in articles from 2004/05, and appear to be a result of high-prominence ‘deserving’ claimant articles being ‘squeezed out’ (these fell from 3.8% of tabloid coverage in October–January 2004/05 to 1.6% in October–January 2010/11 (see Table 4).

This concept was also picked up in our focus groups with participants describing how disabled people had nothing to fear from these changes. Disabled people they felt would be protected as:

I don’t know any disabled people who are, I just know able bodied who are frauding.

In justifying major changes to the benefits system, *The Sun*, *The Daily Mail* and *The Express* have sought to reassure the public that ‘genuinely’ disabled people would be unaffected. They have also, at the same time engendered a public anger aimed at undeserving claimants or ‘cheats’ and have created a feeling that such ‘cheats’ are far more numerous than they are in reality.

The new folk devil

Whilst a lot of the articles talked about disabled people in general, our analysis suggests that some groups of disabled people were more likely to be labelled as ‘undeserving’ than others. In the small number of articles that described disabled people as deserving they were far more likely to refer to people with a physical or sensory impairment. This was true in both periods (17/25 in 2004/05 compared with 28/30 in 2010/11). In articles where triumph was the central theme, people with a physical impairment were again the most prominent (68/77 references to physical disabilities alongside ‘triumph over adversity’ in 2004/05, and 82/100 during 2010/11). In contrast, mental health was associated with ‘deserving’ themes in only 8/25 of such articles in October–January 2004/05, which fell to just 2/30 in October–January 2010/11. The corresponding number where mental health conditions were mentioned with ‘undeserving’ themes increased dramatically from 39 in October–January 2004/05 to 58 in October–January 2010/11. People with a mental health problem along with people with other ‘invisible’ impairments such as chronic pain became prominent in the emerging new category of folk devils.

‘Depression’ and other conditions where the severity cannot be visually demonstrated were often portrayed as unworthy of benefit, particularly in *The Express* and *The Sun*, where one article singled out:

the ones who use fake backaches, drug dependency and fantasy depression as excuses to sit around with their hands out. (*The Sun*, 4 April 2011)

The Daily Mail, in an article attacking ‘benefits Britain’ and its ‘something for nothing culture’, presented as its evidence the ‘£1.8 Billion’ of the incapacity budget that went to people ‘with stress, depression and anxiety’, calling it ‘the biggest growth area for claims’ (28 December 2010). Such coverage skirted over details about a claimant’s background in order to make ‘scrounging’ seem ubiquitous and encompass disability cases into other categories. Our focus groups again reflected this reporting that it was ‘easy to fake symptoms’ like a ‘bad back’ or ‘depressions’ and that these made up the majority of claimants. Those with obesity and addictions were also regularly vilified as undeserving claimants in the focus groups:

a large number of drug addicts get money under these categories and I don’t think they public believe them to be disabled. (Focus Group 4)

Again here newspapers justified these claims by reference to politicians and government officials and their voices were a dominant feature of many such articles. Those disabled claimants that were quoted in these articles were presented unambiguously, without important contextualising information, in order to construct them as ‘undeserving’ or of poor character.

All of the media commentators and journalists we spoke to were clear that there had been a change in the way that disability was being reported. One described what he called 'a change in the rhythm and the tone' while another talked about 'the demonizing of disabled people'. This view was also shared by our disabled focus groups, one of whom commented on how 'certain sections of the media have taken great delight in finding one case – the one legged roofer syndrome – and because they find one person who is a cheat, then all people are cheats'.

Conclusion

The analysis presented above provides a strong body of evidence to suggest that there has been a significant change to the way that disability is being reported in much of the press in the United Kingdom in 2010/11 compared with 2004/05. The content analysis clearly demonstrates that there been a large increase in the number of articles in which disability is the key theme, and that this has been accompanied by a shift in the emphasis and in the way that the articles are being reported. Whilst some of these changes are only minor in terms of numbers, they all move in the same direction. This change in the frequency, content and tone of the articles in 2010/11 when compared with a similar period in 2004/05 marks a new approach to newspaper reporting on disability. These findings are also supported by the audience reception analysis and many of the themes that we picked up in the content analysis were replicated in the focus groups. Evidence suggests that many disabled people are being marked out as a new folk devil; putting disabled people at the front of the queue of people bearing the brunt of recent austerity measures. Much of the source for these changes can be laid at the door of the Coalition Government's attempts to cut welfare benefit, justified in part as a response to the world economic crisis and designed to meet the targets of the OECD (2009).

There is, however, still a great deal of public sympathy and support for disabled people, as was made clear in the focus groups. The government is therefore reluctant to state that it must make cuts to the amount of benefit disabled people receive, something that would be politically and publicly unpopular. Fraud levels are low, so in order to make cuts it must reclassify disabled people as non-disabled and challenge their previously legitimate entitlement to support. There is now clear evidence that the government is engaged in such activities and is actively manipulating statistics to meet its own needs (*The Guardian*, 1 May 2012).

Just as Stone (1984) highlighted how the state has historically used disability as an administrative category to distinguish between the deserving and the undeserving poor, so too are the current UK government and the media. Disability is a social construct and is unlike other categories such as childhood, old age and parenting, which are 'totally independent of the will of the individual' (Stone 1984, 28). It is historically contingent and 'linked in the public consciousness with the possibility of deception', and this connection means the category of disability requires 'a mechanism for distinguishing the genuine from the artificial' (Stone 1984, 32). Thus the very definition of who is disabled is linked to the means by which benefit entitlement is controlled. Since disability is always socially constructed in this way, in changing disability benefit benchmarks the government is attempting to change its disability categories and redefine who is and is not entitled to claim support. In essence it is attempting to reclassify some disabled people as non-disabled people who are pretending to be disabled. Once this is completed the state can then act to

withdraw their benefits without fear of retribution. This change, justified by reference to the deficit and the current economic crisis, marks a significant change in the structuring of welfare benefits (Taylor Gooby and Stoker 2011). It signifies a redrawing of the disability category with the state redefining the extent of its responsibilities.

The new and recently introduced Fitness to Work tests, which are designed to 'reactivate' disabled people, have raised the threshold of 'ability' and many of those previously classified as disabled are now seen as being fit for work. Those previously classified as disabled are described in the popular media and in political discourse as people who have taken illegitimately from the taxpayer and cheated 'genuine' claimants. This is in turn being used to fuel claims for even tougher tests to push people off benefits. Rather than the responsibility bearing on the state to ensure demand in the job market for disabled people and inclusive employment practices, disabled people are themselves being blamed for their perceived failure to secure employment (Garthwaite 2012, 370). A recently released survey carried out by the MS Society (2012) claims that one in four people believe disabled people exaggerate their impairments.

This moral panic is affecting not only perceptions about disabled people but also the self-perceptions of disabled people, many of whom feel threatened by both changes to their benefits and changes in reporting. The increased use of pejorative terms accompanied by misrepresentations of the levels of fraud runs the risk of increasing the already high levels of hostility directed towards disabled people (EHRC 2011). We can see that the rise in media coverage is directly linked to the promotion of a political policy. The creation of widespread concern about fraud and misclaiming follows from deliberate political interventions.

Cohen identified the strong role of political influence in determining what form the 'inventory' or process of media interpretation/response takes, naming two inter-related factors that determine this 'the institutionalised need to create news and [...] the selective and inferential structure of the news-making process' (1972, 45). Three of the newspapers surveyed are strong supporters of both the Coalition Government and the cuts introduced as part of their austerity regime.

We found a clear hierarchy of opinion in much that we covered. Cohen argues that 'the media adjudicate between competing definitions of a situation and these definitions are made in a hierarchical context – agents of social control are more likely to be believed' (1972, 46). These newspapers are constructing what is and is not news and are, as Cohen argued, selecting stories to fit with their pre-existing themes (1972, 47). The media have used government-supplied statistics to make the case that:

- (1) there is a disability benefit crisis;
- (2) this was due to incapacity benefit becoming a 'lifestyle choice' for the lazy, enabled by New Labour,;
- (3) unscrupulous people are taking advantage of this; and
- (4) this lies at the heart of the UK's economic crises.

The failure of much of the media to explore how the cuts are affecting disabled people, the reluctance to criticise government policy, and the frequent representation of some disabled people as undeserving of benefits is a highly damaging situation, compounding the material effects of the cuts themselves. The constant repetition of

words like cheat, scrounger and workshy in articles on disabled people and their entitlement to benefit creates new forms of word association, in the same way that 'bogus' has become associated with 'asylum seekers' (Lynn and Lea 2003). There is already evidence to suggest that the public attitudes toward welfare provision are changing, with the most recent British Social Attitudes Survey suggesting that only 28% of people agree with the statement that 'government should spend more on welfare' (Park et al. 2012). This contrasts with other recessions where the number of people agreeing with that statement actually rose (Lanchester 2012). For many disabled people this is even more stark for, as Haller (2010, 29) points out, due to the barriers that disabled people still face to ordinary participation in much of social life 'interpersonal contact between able-bodied and disabled persons is still limited', meaning mass media images are still the foundation for wider understandings of disabled people's lives. There was a great deal of concern among the disabled participants about the effects of benefit changes on their quality of life, their ability to participate and also on their acceptance by non-disabled people.

Great progress has been made in the way that society treats disabled people; with disability now part of the new Single Equality Act 2010, disabled rights are recognised equally and protected alongside other groups that face discrimination. But the tenuous and contingent nature of the progress experienced by disabled people suggests these gains can be easily lost. There is as a substantial body of evidence that shows the influence of media messages on the construction of public knowledge (Lynn and Lea 2003; Philo 2008). Equality, as our focus groups have suggested, is seen as being 'old news' for the media, with press attention having swung to praise for the Coalition and tales of 'scroungers'. There is a danger that the marking out of a section of disabled people as a new folk devil for media attacks could lay the groundwork for removal of some of the support structures and processes that are currently in place. By unquestioningly reproducing the government's position on disability and benefits without considering contesting perspectives, the partisan approach of much of the tabloid media has the danger of furthering the oppression disabled people experience.

Notes

1. The changes include tests on people who receive Employment Support Allowance carried out by ATOS (introduced by the previous administration and continued by the current one). The introduction of a 'Universal Credit' benefit, the change in indexation of uprating benefits from the higher Retail Price Index to the lower Consumer Price Index, changes to entitlement to Disability Living Allowance and a range of other benefits and service cuts will all impact adversely on disabled people.
2. Duplicates, pictures, stories relating to Republic of Ireland and weekend editions were filtered from the sample, which included news items, features, opinion, reviews, sport, and letters.
3. The political leanings of the papers is based on the party they supported in the last UK General Election.
4. Number of documents after filtering.
5. Interestingly, disability benefit reciprocity rates, while high, have remained pretty stable for the United Kingdom since the 1990s, whereas in many countries, including the United States, France and Germany, rates have increased (OECD 2009, 14).
6. Numbers in *The Guardian* were too small for analysis.

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