Institution: University of Glasgow
Unit of Assessment: 22 - Social Work and Social Policy
Title of case study: Bad News for Disabled People: Informing debate on media representations of disability

1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)

'Scrounger', 'cheat', 'skiver' – Disabled people are feeling increasingly threatened by how they are represented in the media. University of Glasgow research has provided strong evidence of this negative shift in media coverage of disability issues. The 2011 findings have received widespread attention, have critically informed public and political debate and have substantially shaped the work of NGOs and advocacy groups. They have provided organisations with clear research evidence to inform their campaigns by defining and quantifying misrepresentations in the media and the effects on audience perception of these issues, helping to support calls for change in public attitudes to issues of inequality.

2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)

In 2011, the University of Glasgow was commissioned by Inclusion London (a Community Interest Company promoting equality for disabled people) to carry out a study analysing changes in media representations of disability and the impact of these on public attitudes. The research was carried out by Professor Nick Watson (Chair of Disability Studies, Director of the UoG-based Strathclyde Centre for Disability Research, 2004-present); Professor Greg Philo (Professor of Communications and Change, Director of the Glasgow Media Group 1977-present); and Emma Briant (Research Associate, School of Social and Political Sciences, 2010-present). This study built on earlier bodies of work developed by Watson and Philo, including a number of projects, publications and research grants as directors of the Strathclyde Centre for Disability Research (SCDR, University of Glasgow) and the Glasgow Media Group (University of Glasgow), respectively.

Between 2001 and 2011, Watson had researched and written extensively on the social and cultural exclusion of disabled people from different domains of public life, including education, health and welfare, and the workplace. In 2011, Watson and colleagues from the SCDR investigated the implementation of the Disability Equality Duty, which requires public sector organisations in England to develop policies to promote equality for disabled people as staff members, consumers or visitors. Watson and his co-researchers found that, in spite of good initial efforts to implement the Disability Equality Duty, significantly more needed to be done within the culture of work and service provision in order to ensure equal treatment.

In 2008, Philo undertook a series of influential empirical studies investigating the role of media in relation to the development of social attitudes and beliefs. A common finding in this work was that although audiences have the capacity to question or respond critically to news stories, the influence of media does significantly shape public attitudes. In 1996, the Glasgow Media Group carried out highly regarded research which sought to investigate the representation of health issues (particularly mental health) in the media. The 1996 study also considered the impact of these representations on public beliefs and attitudes, and on carers and users of mental health services.

Thus the research project carried out by Watson and Philo on behalf of Inclusion London brought together long-standing concerns of their previous work. It sought to focus on inequality in light of changing depictions of disabled people in media, at a time when policies were being introduced to limit social welfare provisions for disabled people. The study compared and contrasted media coverage of disability in five papers in 2010/11 with a similar period in 2004/5 and ran 8 focus groups examining the reception of these stories, 2 with people who identified as disabled and 6 with nondisabled people. The key findings of the study were that:

- There had been a significant increase in the reporting of disability in the print media, with 713 disability-related articles in 2004/5 compared to 1,015 between 2010/11. This increase was accompanied by a shift in the way in which disability was being reported; media coverage of disability was increasingly politicised in 2010/11 compared to 2004/5;

- There had been a reduction in the proportion of articles which described disabled people in sympathetic terms, and stories that documented the 'real life' experiences of living as a disabled person had also decreased. Certain groups were less likely to receive sympathetic treatment, people with mental health conditions and other 'hidden' impairments were more likely to be presented as 'undeserving' of benefit support;
- Articles focusing on disability benefit and fraud increased from 2.8% (of the sample) in 2004/5 to 6.1% in 2010/11. Also, the recognition of this implicit connection was apparent in the audience research: when the focus groups were asked to describe a typical newspaper story regarding disability, benefit fraud was the theme which most frequently arose;
- This shift in coverage was impacting on views and perceptions regarding disability benefits. Members of focus groups all presumed levels of benefit fraud as much higher than they were in reality, with some suggesting that up to 70% of claimants were fraudulent. Participants predominantly justified these claims by reference to articles they had read in newspapers;
- There had been an increase in the number of articles describing the 'burden' of disabled people on the economy, and some articles went so far as to blame the recession on the existing level of incapacity benefit claims;
- Articles that explored the political and socioeconomic context of disability were rare, as were articles that explored the impact of proposed government spending cuts on disabled people. There was a reduction in references to discrimination against disabled people, and a general reduction in contextualisation of the issues reported;
- There had been a significant increase in the use of pejorative language to describe disabled people, including suggestions that reliance on incapacity benefit had become a 'lifestyle choice'. The use of terms such as 'scrounger', 'cheat' and 'skiver' were found in 18% of tabloid articles in 2010/11 compared to 12% in 2004/5. There were 54 occurrences of these words in 2004/5 compared to 142 occurrences in 2010/11.
- Disabled people felt threatened by the way in which disability was being reported, as well as the proposed changes to their benefits and entitlements. The research demonstrated that the shift in representation and the threat to support were seen as interlinked developments, with the former providing a moral justification for the latter.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

1. Philo, G. (ed.). (1996). *Media and Mental Distress*, Longman: Harlow. ISBN 0582292190 [available from HEI]
2. Davis, JM, and Watson, N (2001) Where Are the Children's Experiences? Analysing Social and Cultural Exclusion in 'Special' and 'Mainstream' Schools*. Disability and Society,* 16 (5). pp. 671-687. (doi 10.1080/09687590120070060) [*This Article has received 1140 online views*].
3. Philo, G. (2008) Active audiences and the construction of public knowledge*. Journalism Studies*, 9 (4). pp. 535-544. (doi:10.1080/14616700802114217).
4. Pearson, C., Watson, N., Stalker, K., Lepiniere, J., Paterson, K., and Ferrie, J. (2011) Don't get involved: an examination of how public sector organisations in England are involving disabled people in the Disability Equality Duty*. Disability and Society*, 26 (3). pp. 255-268. (doi:10.1080/09687599.2011.560370).
5. Briant, E., Watson, N., and Philo, G. (2011) *Bad News for Disabled People: How the Newspapers are Reporting Disability.* Project Report. Strathclyde Centre for Disability Research and Glasgow Media Unit, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK. [PDF link]
6. Briant, E., Watson, N., and Philo, G. (2013) 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'. *Disability & Society*, 28 (6). pp. 874-889. (doi:10.1080/09687599.2013.813837) [REF2]
   [*All articles (2;3;4;6) published in high-impact journals operating rigorous peer review*].

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Inclusion London, 2011. £23,800

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

University of Glasgow research has provided critical scrutiny of the media, identifying a particular shift in representations of disabled people. It has stimulated widespread public debate about the

relationship between this representation, proposed changes in the provision of state disability support, and the rise in disability hate crime. The 'Bad News for Disabled People' report (2011) was widely disseminated by a range of disability support and advocacy groups, cited by trade unions and parliamentarians in Westminster, the House of Lords and Holyrood. Many of these organisations have used the report directly to support their campaigns.

Informing political debate

This research ignited the political debate on media representations of disabled people. For example, on 14 November 2011, the report was directly cited by Dame Tanni Grey-Thompson in a welfare reform debate in the House of Lords as evidence of widespread misrepresentation of disabled people and disability benefits. Also in November 2011, the Shadow Minister for Disability Issues referred directly to the University of Glasgow findings in a House of Commons debate on disability hate crime. The report was also mentioned during discussion in the Work and Pensions Select Committee (February 2012), allowing the National Autistic Society and Disability Alliance to draw attention to 'the negative tone adopted in the media about wider disability issues'. The Committee Chair also used the research in the in the Committee's questioning of DWP Ministers concerning the changing attitudes to disabled people and the transformation of the language used to represent disabled people and disability benefits in the media. The research was cited in the Work and Pensions Select Committee's report *Government support towards the extra living costs of working age disabled people* and in a Westminster Briefing prepared by *The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology on Work Capacity Assessment*. The Committee Chair has also drawn from the research in the preparation of speeches and articles relating to the change of language used to describe disabled people since the 2010 General Election.

Informing public and media debate

The impact of this research on the wider public debate around disability issues was significant. The report formed the basis of three articles published in *The Guardian* (October-November 2011) and a full-page feature in *The Observer* (December 2011). Media coverage has included discussions of the stigma associated with a mental health condition, reports on the harassment of benefit claimants and wider representations of disability in public life. The Editor of the *Disability News Service* writes:

> *The research has been useful to me in my work and hugely influential… I have heard the report mentioned repeatedly at conferences, by campaigners, and in parliamentary meetings. I believe it is the piece of research quoted more than any other when campaigners are trying to provide evidence of the impact of negative media coverage on disabled people and their lives. What was most useful in the report, I think, was that it provided quantitative evidence of the shift in how disabled people were being written about by the media. That subsequently provided a powerful tool for disabled people to fight back.*

In particular, University of Glasgow findings led to critical assessment of the media construction of disabled people as fraudulent benefit claimants. In *The Observer* (December 2011), Ian Birrell refers specifically to the research and argues that 'It is grossly irresponsible for journalists and politicians to collude in this manner to create a climate encouraging hatred, hostility and abuse towards people for whom life is already so difficult. This would be true at any time, but especially at a time of such uncertainty, when people are fearful of the future and looking for others to blame for their misfortune. Those with disabilities should not be made scapegoats for other people's sins.' This article attracted over 450 comments.

The 'Bad News for Disabled People' report was also submitted to the Leveson Inquiry into Culture Practice and Ethics of the Press (2011-12), and omission of any significant reference to disability in the enquiry report only fuelled public debate further with *The Guardian* (May 2012) charging Lord Justice Leveson with *'ignoring evidence – in this case that some journalists, fed by unscrupulous politicians, are whipping up a perfect storm for disabled people.'*

Informing support groups, advocacy and campaigns

Finally, the research has had significant impact within the disabled community and among non-governmental organisations that support and campaign for disability issues. 'Bad News for Disabled People' has provided organisations with clear research evidence to inform their campaigns; by defining and quantifying misrepresentations in the media it has given weight call for changes in public attitudes towards issues of equality. Inclusion London states:

> *The research 'Bad News for Disabled People' has been of fundamental importance in not only Inclusion London's work but in the work of Disabled People's Organisations and disabled people led campaigns across the UK. Disabled people are very aware of the impact of media messaging on welfare and benefits on public perceptions of disability...Negative and hostile media portrayals need to be understood within this context in order to understand their full significance. Having solid research to substantiate our arguments and to support the anecdotal evidence we have from disabled people is absolutely invaluable.*

These findings were used in campaigning by organisations including Scope, Disabled People Against Cuts, Disability Arts in London, the Disability Alliance and I Spartacus. They have formed the basis of articles in *Disability Now* (January 2012), and on sites such as Disability Arts Online (December 2011). On the 17 November 2011, the research was cited by the National Union of Journalists in a press release 'Stop calling disabled people scroungers'. Disability Rights UK cited the University of Glasgow research in the development of their Disability Hate Crime Guidance (February 2012), launched online and by press release to a range of outlets. The guidance discussed a rise in hostile attitudes experienced by disabled people, questioning whether this type of coverage is encouraged by the government in order to justify an austerity agenda which includes disability benefit cuts.

This research, then, as well as informing public and political debate to a significant extent, has made an influential contribution to campaigns for social and cultural change; by providing evidence of the nature and extent of stigmatization affecting disabled people, it has allowed those campaigning around these issues to more effectively challenge these misrepresentations.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

Evidence of dissemination by advocacy organisations:

Statement from Campaigns and Communications Officer, Inclusion London [Available from HEI]
Equality & Diversity Forum (link to report, December 2011)
Disability Arts Online (editorial/blog on report findings, December 2011)
Disabled People Against Cuts (link to report, January 2012)
Disability Now (editorial/blog on report findings, January 2012)
Disability Rights Watch Submission: UN Universal Periodic Review, (13th Session-June 2012)

Informing political debate:

Email -- Chair of House of Commons Work and Pensions Select Committee [Available from HEI]
House of Lords – Welfare Reform debate, (November 2011) [Glasgow research report cited directly in Column GC161]
House of Commons – Disability hate crime debate, (November 2011) [Glasgow research report cited directly in Column 76WH and Column 94WH]
Work and Pensions Committee Report, (February 2012) [see para 55]
History & Policy Forum, (February 2012) [cited in 'Introduction' and 'Further Reading']
Ministers accused of causing fear for disabled people, (BBC News Website), November 2011

Media coverage/public debate:

Statement from the Editor, *Disability News Service* [Available from HEI]
The Observer, 4 December 2011 (link)
The Guardian, 30 November 2011 (link)
The Guardian, 18 October 2011 (link)
The Guardian, 25 October 2011 (link)
The Guardian, 8 May 2012 (link)