

Celebrating the National Disability Insurance Scheme?

Insights from News Media and Disability Advocates



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Abstract

The legislative framework to establish the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) was passed by the Australian Parliament in March 2013. The NDIS is expected to become fully operational in 2018-19 and to provide care and support to 410,000 people with a significant and permanent disability. This paper draws upon news media reports and commentary from disability advocates to highlight some salient themes and areas of tension in public discussion of the NDIS during 2012. It discusses the 2011 Productivity Commission report, which provided the most recent impetus for the scheme. The report was welcomed by the federal government and the opposition, both of whom have framed the NDIS as an achievement to make Australians proud. However, conflict between the federal and state governments with regard to funding the scheme became a focus of news media coverage as political leaders accused each other of putting politics before disabled people. This conflict was criticised by disability advocates who argued it amounted to treating disabled people as a political football. The NDIS has been widely welcomed and celebrated as a major social policy reform with the potential to improve the lives of many disabled Australians. However, this paper also identifies contested aspects of the NDIS that have received less attention, including the model of disability underpinning it and its market-based ideology. The social model of disability and previous work on disability policy in Australia and elsewhere provides the context in which these issues are discussed.

Keywords: NDIS; disability; news media; disability policy; advocacy

Introduction and Background

The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) legislation was passed by the Australian Parliament in March, 2013. The NDIS is expected to become fully operational in 2018-19 and to provide care and support to 410,000 people with a “permanent and significant” disability (National Disability Insurance Agency, 2013). Trials of the scheme commenced in selected sites around the country in July 2013. This paper draws upon news media reports and commentary from disability advocates to identify key themes and areas of tension that have emerged in public discussion of the NDIS primarily during 2012 when it received considerable media attention. In addition to what has been prominent in news media coverage, I also consider aspects of the NDIS that have received less attention. The paper discusses the NDIS and media reporting of it with reference to the social model of disability and disability policy in Australia.

The disabilities movement in Australia, as elsewhere, formed around the social model of disability (Newell, 1999; see also Oliver, 1986, 1990), which provides an influential counter to the individual deficit view of disability. The social model makes an important distinction between impairment and disability where the latter refers to the obstacles that social structures and systems create for people who have impairments. It represents, according to Jolly (2003), “an active resistance to one of the powerful political projects of the modern era: the disablement of individuals with accredited impairments or illness, and their

objectification as subjects of government and social welfare” (p. 515). In Australia, Goggin and Newell (2005) make a similar point:

In order to reform the care system, we need to move beyond disability as the failure of medicine, the site of care, and the deficit located within a deviant body or mind. This requires a fundamental recasting of how disability is constructed in health and welfare. (p. 52)

News media play an important role in framing disability issues for the public as well as providing a valuable insight into the problematic and taken-for-granted assumptions about disability that operate within society. Disability activists and scholars have long considered media representations of disabled people as both a source of disability and of attitudes that condone or legitimise the treatment of people with disabilities as ‘deficient’ or objects of pity (Goggin & Newell, 2003; see also Beckett, 2006; Ross, 2001). As Ellis (2009) argues, “The media has an integral role in both reflecting and reinforcing social disablement and imagining people with a disability as a vulnerable group” (p. 25). As well as reinforcing disabling attitudes, portrayals of people with a disability can also be catalysts for social change (see Nelson, 2000). But this is contingent upon policymakers and other social actors promoting models of disability that are not centred on individual deficit and medicalised understandings, making it important to consider how a range of sources conceive disability issues.

The idea of an NDIS was first considered during the Whitlam era in the 1970s but buried as a result of the political upheaval at the time (Soldatic & Pini, 2012). It was given renewed impetus during the term of the first Rudd Labor government, whose 2007 election platform included the development of a *National Disability Strategy* (2010-2020), and when it re-emerged as an idea in the ‘2020 Big Ideas Summit’ held in 2008. The *National Disability Strategy* reflects a commitment from all levels of government to a national approach to improving the lives of disabled people, their families and carers and to leading a community-wide shift in attitudes. The strategy draws on the 2009 *Shut Out* report by the National People with Disabilities and Carer Council, which suggested new funding mechanisms and service delivery models and is credited with building momentum within the disability community towards reforming the Australian disability landscape (Soldatic & Pini, 2012). The next major step was in November 2009 when Prime Minister Rudd announced a Productivity Commission inquiry into what was then referred to as a National Disability Long-Term Care and Support Scheme, with particular attention to a social insurance model. The inquiry began in April 2010 and released its final report in July 2011.

The Productivity Commission on the NDIS

The Productivity Commission’s over 1,000-page *Disability Care and Support* report said:

The current disability support system is underfunded, unfair, fragmented, and inefficient, and gives people with a disability little choice and no certainty of access to appropriate supports. The stresses on the system are growing, with rising costs for all governments. (Productivity Commission, 2011, p. 2)

The report provided details about the design and implementation of the NDIS and recommended that it be overseen by a single agency, the National Disability Insurance Agency. It said the care needs of some 410,000 Australians with “significant disabilities would be covered under the NDIS and that the benefits of the scheme would significantly outweigh the costs” (p. 2). Increased funding, choice and certainty were identified as key features of the scheme:

People would have much more choice in the proposed NDIS. Their support packages would be tailored to their individual needs. People could choose their own provider(s), ask an intermediary to assemble the best package on their behalf, cash out their funding allocation and direct the funding to areas of need (with appropriate probity controls and support), or choose a combination of these options. (Productivity Commission, 2011, p. 3)

This kind of language is characteristic of individualised funding and direct payments policies in other countries, with personalisation and individualised funding presented as predominant means of empowerment, inclusion and participation for people with a disability. The report identified as the preferred option that the scheme be entirely funded by the Australian government and for it to be rolled out in a few regions from mid-2014. It said the NDIS would aim to “ensure quality assurance and diffusion of best practice among providers” (p. 3). It also suggested an expansive, and perhaps more ambitious, role for the NDIS, including better linking the community and people with disabilities by using not-for-profit organisations and helping to break down stereotypes. However, detail is lacking about how the NDIS will achieve this and questions have been raised about its ability to do so (see Fawcett & Plath, 2012).

The much-anticipated Productivity Commission report placed the NDIS on the media agenda and in the public domain as both sides of politics sought to demonstrate their support for it. Certain aspects of the report were widely reproduced in media reporting and politicians’ comments about the NDIS, particularly its description of the current system, the number of people the NDIS is expected to cover and the cost-benefit rationale for it, including that it could encourage employment of people with a disability. The news value and framing power of the report was achieved by highlighting the current dire situation of people with a disability and selling the economic benefits of the NDIS and the idea that it will provide a safety net for all Australians because disability can happen to anyone at any time.

The NDIS appears to represent a major achievement and a step towards improving Australia’s poor record in its treatment of the reportedly 20% of its citizens with a disability, many of whom struggle to access the services and social supports they need in order, in some cases, to realise their basic human rights. Among the benefits attributed to the NDIS are that it will provide dignity to those with a disability currently unable to get the care and support they need, a sense of relief for ageing carers who worry about what will happen to their loved one when they are gone, opportunity for people with a disability, their carers and families to participate in the workforce, and a safety net (i.e. insurance) for all Australians that they will be looked after should they acquire a disability. Politicians, advocates and journalists have variously invoked these in their responses to the NDIS. In what follows I highlight some salient themes and areas of tension in mediated public discussion of the NDIS.

Political Ownership: Bipartisanship and Federal-State Conflict

The Productivity Commission’s report was welcomed by the federal government and the opposition, both of whom sought to frame the NDIS as an achievement that will make Australians proud. Both sides of politics emphasised that they were up to the NDIS “challenge”. In a front-page story in *The Australian*, headlined ‘Disability Plan to be Fast-Tracked – Budget Cuts to Bankroll Scheme’, the Treasurer Wayne Swan said:

A society that cares for people with disabilities, that engages their humanity and encourages their participation – this is a society that can rightly claim to be among the most successful in the world. Of course, the NDIS will be expensive and difficult, it will take time, but I believe we’re up to the challenge. (O’Reilly, 2012, p. 1)

In ‘Abbott Pledges Support for NDIS – Coalition Seeks to Share Credit on Disability Insurance’, the opposition leader used similar rhetoric in expressing his support for the NDIS, framing it as a matter of national pride:

I think we are up to the challenge of beginning and sustaining a reform that represents our country at its best and that might enable more Australians to feel proud of their parliament. (Franklin, 2012, p. 2)

Media reports show the Gillard government framing the NDIS as the latest in a long line of social reforms initiated by Labor governments, while the opposition linked the success of the NDIS to the government achieving a surplus, using it to emphasise its economic responsibility and credentials compared with the government. These were predictable moves in the context of bipartisanship on the NDIS and a looming federal election. However, they also signal the tendency for media reports about the NDIS to focus on the actions of politicians and political motives in a way that positioned disabled people as the (grateful) objects or recipients of politicians' goodwill and agendas. This was particularly evident in news media reporting of political conflict about funding for the NDIS, which was a key focus during 2012. It emerged most clearly in conflict between the state conservative governments and the federal Labor government, who accused each other of putting politics before 'the disabled'. The states' concern was that the Gillard government was making grand promises without providing them with the details necessary to make an informed decision about the NDIS, particularly with respect to funding arrangements. For example, in early April a front-page story in *The Australian* headlined 'Fast-Track Disability Plan a "Cruel Hoax"' reported in the lead that:

Julia Gillard and Wayne Swan have been accused by the Victorian government of perpetrating a 'cruel hoax' on disabled Australians by talking up a national disability insurance scheme before any funding deal has been put to the states. (Salusinszky & Ferguson, 2012, p. 1)

The states argued the Gillard government was creating expectations that it is unlikely to have the capacity to deliver as well as not wanting to share credit for the scheme. A spokesman for the Victorian government was reported as saying, "the federal government's promise of an NDIS risks amounting to nothing more than a cruel hoax on some of our neediest and most deserving citizens" (p. 1). In another story in May headlined 'States Fret Over Their Ability to Fund National Disability Scheme' the lead emphasised the political conflict:

State treasurers have accused the Gillard government of raising 'false hopes' with its National Disability Insurance Scheme, saying they may have trouble funding it. (Wilson, 2012, p. 6)

The main source was the NSW Treasurer who was quoted as saying he "can't think of a lower act in politics when you think of the sector" (Wilson, 2012, p. 6). Shadow Treasurer Joe Hockey repeated the "cruel hoax" accusation in a National Press Club address in May and also criticised the Gillard government for failing to properly engage with the states (Ireland, 2012). In July 'Macklin on Notice on NDIS' reported that NSW ministers planned to "ambush" Community Services Minister Jenny Macklin to demand direct negotiations on the NDIS rather than a planned teleconference. Macklin described her disappointment that NSW ministers "would rather focus their time and energy on political stunts than delivering for people with disability" (Salusinszky, 2012, p. 6).

Later in July reports focused on the Gillard government's rejection of a proposal from Liberal premiers for an increase in income tax to fund the NDIS. In its front-page story headlined 'Gillard Rejected States' NDIS Offer' *The Australian* attributed the government's rejection to fears that the opposition would seize on it as a "great big new tax" (Van Onselen & Franklin, 2012, pp. 1, 6). It also emphasised the Gillard government's departure from the recommendation of the Productivity Commission report that the NDIS be fully funded by the federal government. In its story headlined 'Labor Rules Out Tax Increase to Fund Disability Reform' the *Sydney Morning Herald* emphasised that the opposition leader also did not support the Liberal premiers' proposal to "resolve the stand-off over funding" (Wright, 2012). It made no mention of the "great big new tax" claim. Unlike *The Australian's* story it also gave considerable space to Prime Minister Gillard's and Jenny Macklin's criticisms of conservative state leaders for failing to commit funding to enable the NDIS trials to commence in their states. It quoted Julia Gillard: "All we are asking is for them to live up to the expectations they have raised in their own communities [about the NDIS]". Both stories quoted Tony Abbott: "The last thing that we would want to do would be to give people with a

disability and their families false hope that there will be an NDIS by allowing it to become bogged down in political posturing” (Van Onselen & Franklin, 2012, p. 1; Wright, 2012).

Stories such as these are revealing in as much as politicians on both sides all claimed to support the scheme, yet their disagreement about how it should be funded can be seen to have overshadowed discussion of the NDIS policy itself. Talk of disabled people and the disability sector as recipients of “cruel hoaxes” and “false hopes” tended to play upon and reinforce an image of disabled people as vulnerable and needy bystanders to the debate. This appeared to be how some commentators interpreted the political bickering.

Talking Back to Political Bickering

In addition to being a focal point for news reports, political bickering and point-scoring over the NDIS was criticised by some feature writers and columnists, in letters to the editor and online comments, and by disability advocates who emphasised the frustrations of disabled people, their families and the wider community. The following headlines give a sense of the tone of such mainstream media items: ‘Disability Scheme is Great, In Theory’ (Van Onselen, 2012); ‘Idea of a Fair Go Lost at the Altar of Politics’ (Clark, 2012); ‘The Politics of Procrastination Steals Time and Hope’ (Murphy, 2012); ‘Politicking on Disabilities Shames Premiers’ (Editorial, 2012); ‘Disability Scheming Trips Up Premiers Who Should Know Better’ (Grattan, 2012). These columns reveal a desire, also evident among disability advocates, for discussion about what the NDIS will actually deliver in practice above and beyond the political rhetoric and point scoring.

Stella Young, editor of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s *Ramp Up* website, which is dedicated to discussion and debate about disability, has sought to bring a rights perspective to the issue. In one contribution headlined ‘NDIS is Important, Let’s Take the Time to Get It Right’, she discussed with pride the rallies around the country that saw people with a disability and their families showing their support for the NDIS and for, as she put it, “better lives” (Young, 2012a). She emphasised that the NDIS is or *should* be about changing the way people with disability are treated in Australia. The following comment suggests her resistance to a managerialist discourse and I note her reference to “kind of choice”, a theme that is picked up later in the paper:

We need a National Disability Insurance Agency that responds to, rather than regulates, the needs of people with disability and our families. We need to make sure that we are at the heart of this system, and no longer at the mercy of service providers. We need the kind of choice and control over our own lives that we don’t have now. We need to make sure that this system we’re fighting for isn’t just another bandaid. (Young, 2012a)

This article generated 73 responses with some praising the federal government and others more cautious and concerned about its ability to get the NDIS right. Picking up on the concern Young raised about the need for people with a disability to be at the centre of the NDIS, one contributor alluded to the disability rights movement’s slogan ‘Nothing About Us Without Us’:

My main concern all along reading the media releases from the polities and keeping abreast of the activities via everyaustraliancounts is the creepy feeling that despite the positives of the Productivity Commission report that [the] issue is slowly being hijacked by the kind of people who think they know what’s good for us. (choirboy)

The ‘Every Australian Counts’ referred to in this comment is the campaign launched in January 2011 by the National Disability and Carer Alliance. During 2012 it initiated NDIS rallies around the country and used online and social media to promote the NDIS and the circumstances of Australians with a disability and their families. This includes providing on its website short video clips showing people’s stories and

enabling people to share their own experiences. At the time of writing, the campaign's website showed that almost 157,000 people had indicated their support for the NDIS (Every Australian Counts, 2012).

In another contribution to *The Drum* Young (2012b) said it is disappointing that the premiers are using people with a disability as a "political football". She took issue with the focus on funding at the expense of what this actually means for people with a disability and their families who do not necessarily think about the cost in monetary terms. Included among the 152 responses to this article were comments that touched on the way politicians are happy to be disability friendly when it suits them: "I suppose that when a disabled athlete wins a medal the hypocritical bastards [Liberal premiers] will be the first to line up for a photo shoot" (Malcolm). This gives some indication of the passions inspired by the action/inaction of politicians in relation to the NDIS.

On Language and Tactics

The use of language has been another area of concern and some debate about the NDIS. For example, John Walsh who served as the associate commissioner of the Productivity Commission inquiry identified problematic aspects of the NDIS legislation, including the passive language it uses to refer to people with a disability (Radio National, 2012a). He said people with disabilities continue to be the *recipient* rather than the *leader*, things are done to and required of the person, and they are *involved in* rather than *controlling*. Into 2013 the new name given to the NDIS was also a source of debate as doubts were raised about whether the views of people with a disability were taken into account. In one contribution to *The Drum*, headlined 'DisabilityCare: A Bad Name But a Good Direction', Stella Young (2013) quoted Minister Jenny Macklin as saying, "The name has been chosen based on consultations with people with disability, their families and carers, peak organisations and the general public". But Young quoted the head of the Australian Federation of Disability Organisations, Lesley Hall, who said: "Using the word 'care' perpetuates the myth that people with disability are passive and in need of help. It is support people want – not charity, not welfare". Young said she was unable to find an individual or organisation who was consulted who liked the name. She also said the disability sector is no stranger to terrible names, referring to the DisabiliTEA events that have been part of the Every Australian Counts campaign and criticised by some activists, including Young, as being patronising and condescending (Larsen, 2012; Miletic, 2012). Of this, Young (2013) said:

It's all terribly cute while doing approximately nothing to address the paternalistic attitudes we fight so hard against.

We've tolerated this condescending language in the disability sector for too long now, so perhaps we're all partly to blame for DisabilityCare. We haven't been talking about rights enough.

What is interesting about the differences of opinion about the DisabiliTEA events is that they point to tensions within the Australian disability and carer community about the most desirable means of achieving better lives for disabled people and harnessing public support to that end. On the DisabilityCare name, as identified in some responses to Young's article, there are those who see it as simply a word and care little for what it is called so long as the NDIS is implemented effectively. The name may have been adopted for its sound bite quality or to align the NDIS with Medicare. However, the fact that key disability organisations objected to the use of the word "care" raises questions about who was actually consulted about the name. Further, the President of People with Disability Australia was critical of the government for closing the 'Your Say' thread on the NDIS website, which included many criticisms of 'DisabilityCare' (Palenzuela, 2013). While the coalition reverted to the NDIS name when it came to government in 2013, the naming issue is perhaps emblematic of wider concerns about whether people with disabilities have been placed at the centre of thinking about the NDIS and whether there has been enough discussion of redesigning the system in such a way as to ensure greater control for disabled people (Leipoldt, 2009; see also Soldatic & Pini, 2012).

Concerns about the NDIS

Writing online in 2010 prior to the release of the Productivity Commission's report, Erik Leipoldt and 'Towards Good Lives', an independent network of people concerned about the NDIS process, raised concerns about the inquiry's terms of reference and called for amendments. Leipoldt (2010), a disability advocate and academic, criticised the inquiry for not adhering to a social model of disability and instead being couched in a medical/economic model. In 'Framing Disability Through the National Disability Insurance Scheme' on the *Ramp Up* website Leipoldt (2011) argued:

A disability movement that backs this market-based NDIS initiative is confusing our need for more individual choice, and independence, where admittedly we come from a very low base, with that of the self-interested kind of consumer choice and competition that is the market.

Like Stella Young's earlier article there is a cautionary tone about the kind of *choice* the scheme will facilitate. Leipoldt's article was met with support from 'Vern' who argued that politicians lack both the knowledge and the will to challenge "the NDIS marketing push", fearing that if they scrutinise it they will be accused of "lacking in compassion". But such views were not shared by others who interpreted Leipoldt's article as resting on unnecessary binaries and "abstract" concerns. For example, Sue O'Reilly suggested there are many flaws in Leipoldt's argument and implied that his views are detached from the real world of people with a disability who do not have "heads full of academic theory and post-modernist waffle". She argued:

... [Leipoldt] wilfully seeks to confuse the need to change and improve social attitudes and values (which is of course essential), with the pressing need that also exists to totally overhaul this country's currently shambolic, wasteful and cruelly rationed disability 'care and support' system. Why is this an either/or, as Erik keeps insisting? Can't we pursue both totally worthy goals simultaneously?

Elsewhere, in response to an article about the NDIS in *The Monthly*, Leipoldt emphasised "fundamental contradictions between the disabling market-based ideology that drives this NDIS proposal and the needs for people's genuine social inclusion" (see Manne, 2011). He suggests there is no evidence that service provider competition for the disability dollar will drive a better system.

The Productivity Commission's report and advocates for the NDIS emphasise that choice and control will be shifted to the individual disabled person to decide on the services that best suit their needs, rather than them being beholden to the often inadequate services on offer. But a counter-frame was provided by Doron Samuëll (2012) in a feature in *The Australian* headlined 'Disability Scheme Must Avoid Mistakes of Medicare':

The scheme's detractors have been preoccupied with what it will cost. The question of funding is important, but such a narrow debate risks obscuring a more important issue: whether the NDIS will improve services for people with disabilities and what it will mean for the disability service sector. (p. 12)

An indication of the consensus opinion built up around the NDIS, he broached the possibility of his commentary being (mis)construed as undermining "the legitimate need for increased funding, or the frustrations with the existing disability support system" (p. 12). But he questioned whether the NDIS will solve these problems or add to them and what the changes will mean for the quality of services, given that the model is assumed to work on the idea that the exercise of consumer choice will ensure that good providers are rewarded, thereby driving up the standard of services. He suggested the proposed scheme would actually disadvantage community-based service providers as large-scale commercial enterprises squeeze them out of the market. Samuëll made the same points in an interview on Radio National (2012b), in which the host introduced him as adopting a "controversial position" in suggesting that the free market model encouraging individual choice and control is not necessarily to the benefit of people with a

disability. He suggested the scheme constitutes a shift away from paternalism to what is actually an *illusion of choice*. He said the Productivity Commission has no data on which to base its confidence and assertions that a market-based model works. Such critical views were for the most part absent from news media reporting during 2012.

Discussion

The NDIS is underpinned by a ‘personalisation’ narrative that some suggest may be an impediment to recognition of the disabling social barriers that affect all disabled people and could have the effect of obscuring alternative policy agendas (Dodd, 2013). Dodd writes that it can “prevent the imagining of any collective vision beyond the good of increased individual autonomy and choice” (p. 265). It is difficult to dispute the importance of choice and control, which are emphasised in the Productivity Commission’s report, particularly when they are presented as the keys to improving what has been described as the ‘lottery’ of care that characterises the existing disability services system. This might explain why there has been limited scrutiny of the NDIS in these terms and when such contributions have emerged they have been treated as outlier views. However, as such views highlight, choice, control and personalisation are not above scrutiny as means by which to overcome the kinds of attitudes and assumptions about disability that may limit the choices available to disabled people and inhibit social inclusion. Indeed, the celebratory tone surrounding the NDIS has in some respects overshadowed concerns about it as well as views suggesting that the human rights and social inclusion agenda of the disability movement has been absorbed within a neoliberal economic discourse in order to sell the NDIS.

In his critical report *Designing NDIS: An International Perspective on Individual Funding Systems*, Duffy (2013) identifies several flaws with the NDIS, including that it creates another level of centralised bureaucracy for disabled people to deal with. Duffy, who has over 20 years’ experience with trying to design individualised funding systems in the United Kingdom, argues “The current design is in conflict with human rights and lacks any basic trust in the competency of Australians with disability to make their own decisions” (p. 10). According to Duffy, the plan that disabled people will be asked to complete in conjunction with a facilitator in order to be able to receive funding under the scheme “imposes upon the person a set of restrictions and invasions of privacy” that are inconsistent with the United Nations’ *Declaration of Human Rights* (p. 18). He also says there is a risk that the NDIS will lead to indirect forms of rationing by not being clear about entitlements. Others too note that, within the NDIS, power to define one’s needs and levels of support required to meet them resides with professionals using standardised tools (Fawcett & Plath, 2012). These authors also suggest the NDIS has the potential to further alienate marginalised groups who experience structural disadvantages that limit their capacity to deal with individual budgets (see also Glendinning, 2008 on problems with the individual budgets system in the UK). Fawcett and Plath argue that the NDIS is grounded in an individualised view of disability where consumer purchasing power and choice are presented as means to empowerment. This brings with it the risk that the market will not deliver the required services.

During the Howard Government years (1996-2007) social movements struggled to develop repertoires of contention to engage the public and attract media attention, which led some to incorporate neoliberal ideology and neoconservative discourse as a way of furthering their cause in an otherwise hostile political climate (Maddison & Martin, 2010; see also Lantz & Marston, 2012). Soldatic and Chapman (2010) have described the increasing marginalisation of the disabilities movement within the political opportunity structure and the growing stigmatisation of the disabled identity under the Howard government. They also argue, “Formally recognized disability advocacy groups’ agency to resist and stand outside the bureaucratic structures had been largely overtaken by the necessity to move to the ‘inside’, even with the possible risk of complicity” (p. 148; see also Galvin, 2004). Soldatic and Pini (2009) suggest the way in which people with a disability were emotionally positioned within welfare-to-work debates created consent for the Howard government’s agenda, rendering critical debate largely absent from the public arena. This highlights the need for caution with respect to policies that appear to be implemented and

celebrated with little critical debate. For example, we might consider whether politicians as well as disability and carer groups have been constrained in their ability to criticise or raise doubts about the NDIS because doing so would be politically detrimental.

Disability advocates have been calling for policy reform and better services and models of support for decades and governments have commissioned numerous reports, yet the Productivity Commission's recommendation of the NDIS has been particularly powerful in attracting the attention of politicians, the media and, in turn, the wider community. In a climate of bipartisan political support as well as apparently widespread support within the disability and carer community for the NDIS and seemingly unanimous agreement about the urgent need for reform, those who have raised doubts or concerns have, on occasion, been accused of being uncaring, abstract or disrespectful. The Every Australian Counts campaign promoting the NDIS has been highly organised and active, whereas one has had to look much harder for substantive criticism and discussion of certain aspects of it, such as the model of disability underpinning it and its market-based ideology. In some ways, the celebration of the NDIS for what it is hoped and expected to achieve has constrained critical discussion of it.

During 2012 the news media played an important role in monitoring and reporting political responses to the NDIS, as well as the hopes and frustrations of people within the disability and carer communities. The 2012 Federal Budget and the looming 2013 election shaped the way journalists interpreted and reported the NDIS and political responses to it. In this context, it was perhaps not surprising to see politics and perceived political agendas at the forefront of news reporting and nor was it necessarily a negative feature in as much as it at least kept the NDIS on the public agenda. It may be that the news media's focus on political bickering helped to both generate and solidify public support for the NDIS against politicians being guided by short-term political interests and opportunism. The outrage directed at politicians might be seen as being consistent with a social model understanding of disability; evidence that people recognise that political game-playing may itself amount to a further form of disablement. However, in accusing each other of playing politics, politicians' references to cruel hoaxes and false hopes being inflicted on disabled people tended also to position them as vulnerable and passive objects or bystanders to the debate.

The visibility of disability issues in Australia has undoubtedly been enhanced by the prolonged attention to the NDIS in news media and as a result of the campaigning efforts of disabled people, carers and supporters throughout 2012. This paper has barely touched the surface of these efforts and nor has it sought to provide a comprehensive analysis of all of the news coverage, instead focusing on some salient themes and apparent tensions. Thus, there are several areas where further research would be valuable. As mentioned, the NDIS has been criticised for adhering to an individualised medical deficit model, which has been widely criticised by disability rights activists as one of the sources of disabling social attitudes. In this regard, the ability of the NDIS to reflect a social model of disability is uncertain (Fawcett & Plath, 2012), as is the extent to which the continued media reporting of it might help to advance community awareness of disabling barriers to social inclusion and participation. The extent to which these concerns resonate within the disability and carer community could be a focus of future research.

Certainly, discussion about the NDIS is ongoing as the trials are taking place. News media clearly have an important role to play in monitoring the successes, failures, impacts and inequities that appear. It will be interesting to see how media deal with the different experiences that emerge, especially around questions of eligibility and entitlements (i.e. determinations about what constitutes 'reasonable and necessary supports' to be funded under the scheme). Will they be presented as isolated cases affecting individuals in specific circumstances and with particular needs or will they be connected to pitfalls in the NDIS design or model itself? Further research could also look more closely at the role of the Every Australian Counts campaign in generating ongoing public support for the NDIS as well as the role of websites such as *Ramp Up* in monitoring the NDIS and using it as a platform to discuss wider disability issues. It would also be interesting to investigate views about the NDIS among the broader public to see what messages they have taken up and how these have influenced their attitudes about disability. While this paper has not attempted to do so, the concept of 'mediatisation' has been used to elaborate the relationships between news media

and policymaking processes (see Hjarvard, 2013; Lingard & Rawolle, 2004; McCallum, 2013) and this could provide a useful lens through which to conduct further research into the mediation of disability policy.

Conclusion

This paper has explored just some of the many dimensions of public discussion about the NDIS as it unfolded during 2012. It highlighted the influential role of the Productivity Commission's report in providing the terms in which the NDIS has been discussed, the apparent news value of conflict between the federal and state governments over funding, and some of the critical issues identified by disability advocates and other commentators. While not dealing directly with how people with a disability have been portrayed, the paper offered some suggestions about their positioning in the context of news stories dealing with the politics of the NDIS. The political conflict over funding tended to position disabled people as passive recipients of the political whims of politicians. On the positive side, the NDIS has generated stories about the lived experiences of disabled people and created the opportunity for people to challenge the view of them as primarily recipients of care and objects of bureaucratic programs. While the NDIS is certainly a major reform for people with a disability, there is a risk that the amount of attention given to it and the expectations about what it can achieve has diverted attention from issues of substance pertaining to the reform as well as other issues of importance to people with a disability. There is more to be done in terms of community attitudes towards disability and creating a society in which rights for disabled people are fully realised, and it will be interesting to see if and how the NDIS is able to advance such goals.

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