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“I hope you aren't becoming woke”: New politicised contours of online ableism in response to disability advocacy by 2022 Australian of the Year Dylan Alcott

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Abstract

Ableist hate speech regularly appears in online comment-enabled articles on social media, whenever disability-related topics enter public discourse. In 2022, Dylan Alcott's appointment as Australian of the Year as a person with disability was widely celebrated. Despite this progress, we identified new forms of politicised ableism in online responses to his disability advocacy in this role. This research considers readership responses to an April 2022 Facebook post by an Australian tabloid publication. The post editorialised Alcott's Twitter response to the then Australian Prime Minister's comments on feeling “blessed” to have children without disability. Enmeshed within the usual ableist imaginary—“why would any parent want to have a child with disability?”—were new justifications for ableism associated with political “wokeness.” We analyse this emerging contour of politicised ableism in contemporary Australia to consider the complex patterns of progress toward social justice for people with disability.

KEYWORDS

disability, politicised ableism, social media, woke politics

Raelene West and Belinda Johnson should be considered first authors.

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1 | INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Ableist hate speech regularly appears in online comment-enabled articles on social media whenever disability-related topics enter public discourse. Our research, in examining the complex patterns of progress toward social justice for people with disability, captured contemporary attitudes and perceptions of everyday Australians toward disability from within a Facebook discussion board. While undertaking this research, we identified a new contour of ableism in contemporary Australia—politicised ableism. This online discussion board event was triggered by real-world activities in the 2022 Australian federal election campaign, with the following timeline. During the federal election leaders' debate on the evening of 20 April 2022, then Prime Minister Scott Morrison, leader of the conservative mainstream Liberal Party, stated in response to a question on disability funding (in relation to a disability scheme which his government had intentionally diminished), "I've been blessed, we've got two children that don't ... haven't had to go through that" (BBC, 2022). Deflecting the policy question, this statement was widely interpreted as Morrison expressing relief to not have disabled children. This interpretation was contested; however, the comment was widely condemned as inappropriate by the disability sector and communities. The following morning, 21 April at 9.43am, Dylan Alcott responds on Twitter (<https://twitter.com/dylanalcott/status/1516925572386988032?lang=zh-Hant>),

Woke up this morning feeling very blessed to be disabled - I reckon my parents are pretty happy about it too. Feeling sorry for us and our families doesn't help. Treating us equally, and giving us the choice and control over our own lives does.

As the 2022 Australian of the Year with a visible physical disability, Alcott's response affirmed his status as a person with disability and disrupted the Prime Minister's implied meaning that "blessed" equates to those without disability being favoured. As a person with a disability, Alcott is a multiple Olympic medal winner in basketball, multiple Grand Slam winner in quad wheelchair tennis and a media personality. Alcott was a popular Australian of the Year appointment for the mainstream. However, within the Australian disability community there was tension with his appointment. He was viewed as a conservative choice because of his lack of previous political engagement and his previous focus on physical disability representation only. His appointment also followed on from the highly politically charged appointment of Grace Tame, a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, a fierce advocate on legislative reform in the field and a strong vocal opponent of the then Morrison government. In this context, Alcott's tweet critiquing the then Prime Minister and a tweet that was political in nature was therefore unusual. Shortly after 11 am that day, Alcott's tweet was editorialised by a mainstream media outlet in a post on its Facebook page, with an accompanying discussion board. Alcott's original tweet was shortened, removing the second and third sentences which contain more explicit political commentary. Approximately 2 hours later, around 1 pm, Scott Morrison publicly acknowledged that the comment had caused offence and publicly apologised to Alcott. The Herald Sun, which editorialised Alcott's tweet, is a conservative Australian tabloid newspaper owned by a subsidiary of the global News Corp. It has a mass readership with a combined print and digital audience of 4.4 million (The Herald Sun, 2022). We understand the discussion board contributors to be generally politically conservative, "middle" Australia: Herald Sun readers as well as Facebook users and likely Australian. As such, the terms "lefty" and "woke" would be considered insults from this reader base.

The Herald Sun discussion board comments following this exchange are the data source for this study. Social media content is recognised as useful data for analysing attitudes and perceptions of everyday people on various topics and social issues (Social Media Research Group, 2016). In Australia, approximately 82 per cent of the population are active users of social media (Genroe, 2022), circulating opinions, information and debate, with everyday people

producing this online content. Online public forums are a common site for the free expression of both positive and discriminatory views about people with disability. Online discriminatory expressions and hate speech about people with disability have been analysed in research by Burch in the United Kingdom (Burch, 2017, 2018, 2021) and in our own previous research in the Australian context (Johnson & West, 2021, 2022). Analysing the discourse on such online discussion boards can help us understand the dynamics of discriminatory viewpoints: What types of attitudes are held toward people with disability; what types of misinformation are being relied upon to uphold these views; and whether particular domains of social life are legitimising discriminatory viewpoints. Our previous research focussed on ignorant attitudes and hate speech toward people with Down syndrome. We highlighted discriminatory viewpoints and practices in the prenatal medical field, perceived challenges to eligibility for disability services and even the very right to exist.

Previous scholarship on ableist content in discussion boards also focussed on activist resistance narratives generated by the disability community, as a key tactic to counter ableism through presenting positive everyday lives with disability that challenge tragedy mythology (Burch, 2017, 2018; Johnson & West, 2021, 2022). Within this Herald Sun online discussion, however, relatively few attempts were made to challenge ableist sentiments and educate contributors. Without this discursive contest, our analysis focussed on the qualities of ableist expressions in this largely unchallenged space. While some comments were affirming toward Alcott and supported his challenge of the then Prime Minister's statement, around 75 per cent of the approximately 2900 posts were negative. These posts voiced ableist hostility, disbelief, discrimination and name-calling that verged into hate speech toward Alcott about his single, politicised tweet and exposed unexpected hostile, ableist expressions within a normative, everyday media setting. To note, we undertook this analysis work as critical disability scholars and lived expertise researchers. Dr West has lived experience of disability, and Dr Johnson parents a child who has Down syndrome.

This Facebook discussion occurs in a mixed landscape of social justice for people with disability in Australia, which combines progress and enduring challenges. Disability policy in the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) has progressive principles described as extending the “active citizenship” of people with disability (Earle & Boucher, 2021). Success in the social domains of media and creative industries (Hadley & McDonald, 2018) and elite disability sports (Legg et al., 2022) see increased dignified visibility and celebration of people with disability. Enduring discrimination and abuse, however, are laid bare in the Final Report of the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (2023). Intersectional disadvantages see greater levels of discrimination and abuse experienced by people with disability who are also Indigenous (Soldatic & Fitts, 2020), LGBTIQ+ (Amos et al., 2023), women (Dowse et al., 2016) and those with intellectual rather than physical disability. This intersectional lens is interesting for our analysis, with Alcott holding a more privileged identity as a white, cis-man with a physical rather than intellectual disability who achieved great success in the masculinised domain of competitive sport. While the domains of progress for disability justice can be celebrated, greater advocacy and political voice is clearly required to challenge areas of enduring discrimination. At the same time, this mixed landscape can suggest that gradual progress is being made for people with disability. We utilise a disability justice rather than a human rights framework, as proposed by disability activists. A disability justice framework values collectivity and recognises human interdependence and the intersectional differences between people with disability. This framing also values leadership toward liberation by those who know the most about oppressive systems through having lived its impacts (Berne et al., 2018). Our inquiry questions the assumed progress of gradually changing social narratives—that the mainstream is now tolerant and working toward improved inclusion for people with disability.

Ableism is a concept from critical disability studies that captures how people with disability are problematically imagined by the abled as being a lesser form of human than people who do not have a diagnosed disability, that is, those who imagine themselves as body-perfect and “species typical” (Campbell, 2008). Our research explores ableism within an online politicised landscape, a new contour and perspective of ableism as people with disability become more highly engaged in mainstream political arenas. We apply Campbell's (2009) “contours of ableism” concept to make sense of these new social circumstances. Campbell considers a range of ableist contours that generate oppression for people with disability, including the assumptions of the abled and internalised ableism. Feminist disability scholars identify dilemmas for disabled masculinity (Shuttleworth et al., 2012), another contour of ableism that supports the online ableist reaction to Alcott. The political contours of ableism that we identify are the ableist responses to a new social context where a person with a visible disability has been appointed to the Australian of the Year role and is engaging in widely publicised political discourse and disability advocacy. We envisage the complexity of ableism as a form of social imaginary (Taylor, 2004)—an ableist imaginary, into which we incorporate Ahmed's (2014) work on the emotional politics of discrimination. We also utilise Garland-Thomson's (2011) “misfit” concept to consider how people with disability are differently responded to in various social places.

In completing our analysis of this exchange, we sought to further understand contemporary ableism, its operationalisation and the foundational drivers of these negative attitudes. The benefit of using such Facebook discussion posts as research data is that it enables access to attitudes and explanations of people who are hostile or ignorant toward people with disability, as they express these views in a normative everyday setting. We consider the implications for a high-profile man, a former sports star with a disability responding publicly to an expressed ableist comment. We explore the broader implications of what such ableist discourse means for the current status of people with disability in Australian society, where progress in some domains can suggest a smooth trajectory toward equality. There is a sociopolitical need to interrogate and understand the dynamics of ableist, discriminatory views toward people with disability, especially as they change in new sociopolitical contexts. Disability communities can utilise this type of analysis to inform work on improving social justice for people with disability in all areas of social life. In identifying attributes of and around this new politicised ableist contour, we seek to inform strategies that can challenge and educate in response to the various forms of ableism and discrimination experienced by people with disability and to improve respect across Australian society toward people with disability.

2 | METHODS

Our internet research uses existing data from a public Facebook site. The 2180 (75 per cent) negative posts constitute the dataset for our analysis. The high proportion of comments against Alcott is important to note. However, our research is primarily qualitative, utilising critical discourse analysis that draws from reflexive thematic analysis techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and informed with the theoretical field of critical disability studies. We develop themes on ableist thinking in recurring attitudes and language within the data, with a secondary interest in tone of comment which is possible in this type of social media data (Thelwall, 2008, cited in Social Media Research Group, 2016). We manually scraped all data from Facebook into Word. Both researchers then coded using a shared Nvivo12 file, with researchers each coding several hundred posts consecutively in a code-and-return system. Our analysis produced 17 codes: 12 determined after initial review of the dataset with a further five added through iterative review and analysis of data. These codes were clustered into four key categories that structure the Findings and Discussion section of this article.

The project received ethics approval from an RMIT University Human Ethics Committee (#25544). The research was granted a waiver of consent as it was not practicable in this research context to contact user-participants for consent. Following Braithwaite's argument Braithwaite (2016), we hold that the beneficence of this research outweighs considerations for individualised consent within publicly available social media content. The Facebook discussion as data source is publicly available without requiring Facebook login or Facebook group membership, the most public category of Facebook sites. This Facebook page operates as social media activity rather than social networking, a distinction identified by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010). This means it is an online space for public media debate and for presenting individual opinions, rather than a setting for personal, social engagement. Considering these factors, we reasonably determine that individuals posting to this discussion board are aware that their data are public.

Our research data are contained to this one Facebook discussion thread with no exploration of other social media activities by user-participants. Researchers did not participate on the discussion board. Researchers have not previously encountered the usernames in the discussion thread. Facebook's Privacy Policy states that user posts may be used for research purposes (Facebook, 2022a). While not explicitly addressing university research, this policy suggests that Facebook users have broadly consented to their data being used for nonspecified research purposes. Our research also accords with Facebook's Hate Speech Policy, which stands against people being attacked on the basis of protected characteristics of who they are, which includes disability (Facebook, 2022b). Some moderation may have been undertaken of the discussion, as we did note the removal of some posts. While the data include negative and hateful attitudes toward people with disability, principles of dignity and respect underpin our analysis (NHMRC, 2007), which encompasses all user-participants. To protect user-participant anonymity, findings are presented as aggregated theme types. Facebook's application programming interface (API) blocks automatic searching of comments on a post, which must then be undertaken manually (Radford, 2019). This further reduces the possibility of published findings being attributed to a specific Facebook user. As individual user-participants in a public debate on a social issue, we envisage that the ethical expectation of individuals (Markham & Buchanan, 2012:8) is an accurate representation of their views. This accords with our intention to accurately capture various opinions and attitudes on disability expressed on the discussion board.

3 | FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Our analysis of ableist discussion board posts is structured around four thematic areas:

- Politicisation of anti-ableist advocacy
- Personal attacks on Alcott—ableism and hate speech
- Enduring negative assumptions about disability
- Normalisation of ableism

The first and second thematic areas address new contours of ableism not yet explored—that of politicised discrimination. The first section captures reactions to disability advocacy which politicises anti-ableist sentiment, while the second section focusses on the ableist attacks directed at Alcott for being the one voicing this advocacy. The third and fourth thematic areas explore further persistent contours of ableism from which these new politicised contours arise—"enduring negative assumptions about disability" and the "normalisation of ableism." These enduring contours unfold from an oppressive ableist imaginary where disability is assumed as lesser, an entrenched worldview that is strongly defended. This ableist imaginary

voiced throughout the discussion operates as a discursive tactic to ground and legitimise the new topical and politicised reactions.

In accordance with our ethics requirements, the findings and discussion are presented below in narrative form. Aggregated quotes and word clusters allow us to present the qualities of the data while obscuring the identities of discussion board contributors.

3.1 | Politicisation of anti-ableist advocacy

Alcott's anti-ableist advocacy was politicised in several ways. User-participant consternation that a person with disability has a political voice indicates that ableist worldviews distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable social spaces for people with disability. Breaching this ableist "truth" has consequences for how a person with disability such as Alcott is perceived. His disability advocacy was also politically dismissed as left-wing nonsense or through association with another disliked social justice advocate in Grace Tame.

3.1.1 | Consternation that the disabled may have a political voice

Alcott was constantly attacked on the discussion board for expressing a political opinion. This outrage toward his anti-ableist advocacy contrasted with his previously known and respected identity as a sporting champion. Comments aggressively directed that he should "stay out of politics," "let the politicians run the country," "stick to tennis," "stick to sport, champ" and to "pull your head in." He was warned against becoming involved in "political rubbish" and patronisingly told to "keep out of the political and media arenas"—considered not the place for a disabled former sports star. A narrative of disappointment was constructed of a disabled political figure. He was no longer the fun, successful disabled guy of sport where he had filled an acceptable role for a person with a disability. User-participants were now affronted with Alcott's one, brief, political comment. There were changed opinions toward him, admonishing him for voicing and challenging political opinion in the media such as Alcott was "no longer a decent bloke," "dude you used to be cool," "lost me mate!," "I have enjoyed following your journey, but sadly it stops today," "disappointing Dylan - I thought you were better than that" and "I used to like You Dylan ...now you're on the scrap heap for playing with words." Other comments suggested that Alcott should not have a voice at all, that "Dylan you should just have said nothing." Previously loved and admired, he was now seen as lacking credibility.

Disability sports are a social domain where bodies with disability are understood to "fit," enabling ableist acceptance and respect for success in this domain. Participant responses suggest that politics, however, is not considered an acceptable place for a person with disability. This shift in attitude toward Alcott reflects Garland-Thomson's (2011) "misfit" concept. This perceived "misfit" of Alcott's body and lived experience perspective in politics generated a backlash toward him.

3.1.2 | Political disability advocacy dismissed as "woke leftie nonsense"

Alcott's anti-ableist advocacy was dismissed by user-participants as unreasonable complaining, bundling disability justice with other disliked social justice issues under the title of "woke" and "left." These terms were associated with being irrational, self-indulgent and untrustworthy. Alcott's challenging opinion generated analysis that he was now "a raging LEFTY" and one of "the lefts virtue signalling drama queens!". They grouped Alcott with the "sad bunch of losers" who were viewed as "taking everything out of context and turning it into some kind of

discrimination or hate speech”—disruptive acts that were seen as “typical of the left.” These comments captured a refusal to consider whether their ableist thinking might be problematic. A knowing superiority over Alcott viewed him as having “taken the bait” in “going down the woke media road.” This dismissal again refused to acknowledge political opinion developed and held by people with disability. The discussion was patterned with judgmental comments about Alcott having a political opinion, followed by emphatic disagreement with his opinion. This derision weaponised further ableism related to cognitive function: “I hope you aren’t becoming woke, because that was not what Scomo meant. Those with even half a brain know that” and “too far left to understand the meaning of a short sentence.”

Instead of listening to Alcott’s message, user-participants mourned that this new political voice against ableism was further evidence that Australia was now in demise: “worse than it had ever been” because “we have the misfortune of living in” a “PC” society, “a world of political correctness and sensitivity.” Attitudes lamented that in “the world of today,” “people are offended with everything that is said,” described as an “Offence Culture” where people “love to be offended,” “pandering to minorities” which requires “having to walk on eggshells for fear of offending” the “snowflake agenda.” Australian society was described as having “gone mad,” of having become a “nation of nit pickers” which is “a shame” and “sad and depressing.” Current society was described as “soft” and “immature”—of needing to “grow up”—and of “lacking resilience,” Alcott’s response to Morrison seemed to reveal “what is wrong with Australian values currently.” Anti-ableist advocacy is dismissed as a further sign of a larger political disgruntlement for user-participants, rankled by progressive shifts against bigotry and discrimination in contemporary Australia. These contributors interpreted the Prime Minister’s comment as him feeling blessed for having children without disability—and endorsed this sentiment as the correct way to feel—so that Morrison had “said nothing wrong.” These user-participants lamented that expressing discriminatory views was free speech was being silenced by people such as Alcott.

3.1.3 | Stained by association with previous progressive Australian of the Year and lived experience advocate—“don’t be like that disGRACEful Tame”

Alcott’s advocacy was further dismissed through user-participants associating him with Grace Tame, the previous Australian of the Year who had been explicitly critical of Morrison and his Conservative government. Constant vitriol was unleashed toward Grace Tame (over 450 post references), a survivor of childhood sexual assault who advocated for increased transparency and improved response and reporting of this crime. From a researcher perspective, these comments were difficult to read given Grace Tame’s survivor identity. Alcott and Tame were connected by user-participants as voicing unwelcome political viewpoints from the Australian of the Year platform: “please WE DO NOT need another Grace Tame” and “we all respected this man for his achievements the way he lives his life but unfortunately, he is no better than Grace Tame.” Alcott was patronisingly advised to distance himself from “Grace Tame activities.” He was labelled another Australian of the Year “whinging about everything” and that the public had “had enough of that other one that should have kept her mouth shut” who had “turned into a pest.” Alcott and Tame were both derided as having faulty characters, “both tarred with the same brush” as “fake” and “just seeking personal attention.” Many comments descended into name-calling—“Grace Shame’s dead end road” and “another grace lame.” Through this derision, their political viewpoints and advocacy work were negated.

These discussions also raise questions around the expected role of the Australian of the Year. User-participants were affronted that through the appointment of Alcott following Tame, Australia was overpromoting social and political progress. Posts claimed that Tame had brought disrespect to the role, that she had not been a “*decent*” Australian the Year and

that Alcott was now progressing down the same path. In speaking up in one Twitter post, Dylan was now labelled as a “not suitable Australian of the Year.” One comment explicitly asserted that “...the last 3 out of the last 4–5 Australians of the Year were agenda pushers.” Alcott, like Tame previously, was now judged to be “undeserving” of Australian of the Year for having a progressive political voice. One post expressed that the Australian of the Year role should be “representing all people, not political.” Many comments viewed the politicisation of the role as “disrespectful” and suggested that the appointing committee should retract Alcott's Australian of the Year award “and also take Tame's off her as well.” While user-participants emphasised that the role should be apolitical, posts were political in supporting conservative politics, suggesting that “...a digger from our defence force would have been a much more worthy recipient of Australian of the Year.”

3.2 | Personal attacks on Alcott—ableism and hate speech

Substantial personal attacks were made on Alcott. Extensive name-calling transformed Alcott into an “object... of feeling” (Ahmed, 2014:11): “Alcott is a flog,” “bloody sook,” “won all titles competing in quad tennis when he is actually para,” “clown,” “jerk,” “a martyr,” “bit of a smartarse,” “stop spinning in your wheelchair Dylan,” “a goon,” “a prize pumpkin,” “a tard,” “a tool,” “a prize turkey!!!”, “a mug,” “a whiny loser,” “a pelican,” “get back in the bin Dylan,” “a pathetic so called leader,” “pathetic” and “a pest.” These responses show how emotions are not just “psychological states” but “social and cultural practices” (Ahmed, 2014:9) informed by “cultural histories” (Ahmed, 2014:7), in this case ableist ones, to inform these individuals' responses to another. The data included two clear hate speech comments: “back in spartan days they would of chucked him off the cliffs.... So yeah blessed u were born during this time period where every over sensitive smoking minority cries the poor me I'm offended card when it suits them - But scream to be treated equally every other day” and “this bloke needs to be pushed down a boat ramp.” While Facebook's Hate Speech Policy stands against people being attacked on the basis of protected characteristics such as disability, none of these comments were removed from the discussion board. This raises questions over the effectiveness of social media platform policy to address hate speech and discriminatory viewpoints, especially when these views are widely accepted in some social groups. As Ahmed (2014:49) describes, this type of hatred is an investment in power, endowing “a particular other with meaning ...by locating them as a member of a group.” These personal attacks on Alcott reveal the emotional dimension of ableism, which is an integral part of the “othering” process (Ahmed, 2014:1).

Highly ableist slurs sought to insult Alcott by suggesting he has an intellectual or learning disability—“so Dylan. You're saying you didn't actually understand what Scomo said? Ok” and “I feel Dylan's primary disability is intellectual - given how bad he comprehended Scott's words.” This deficit view of Alcott included parental views that he did not understand what it was to be a parent, “Dylan should know that ANY parent would never want their children to suffer.” Other comments criticised Alcott as “too sensitive” and “too precious” as a person with a disability, reflecting feminist analysis of how disabled men are envisaged as having diminished masculinity (Shuttleworth et al., 2012). Dylan was also viewed as “not behaving,” “just wanting attention,” and that he should be “reprimanded” and needed “a swift kick you know where.” These criticisms treated Alcott as a child, reflecting the common infantilisation of people with disability. These ableist tactics of intellectual diminishment, emasculation and infantilisation are used to diminish the human worth of people with disability and here discredited Alcott as a political voice.

Some attacks focussed on whether Alcott should speak for all people with disability, “HOW DARE he believe he speaks on behalf of all disabled and parents of disabled people who have had no quality of life, regardless of how much they love their child.” This criticism targeted

Alcott despite being his appointment to Australian of the Year being based on his disability activities. They voiced that he was unrepresentative of the disability community—“not all disabled become world champions tennis players. Some can't even move a muscle,” “another ‘personality’ believing his own ego... I do get tired of non-fully functioning people saying they'd never change a thing about their lives, particularly when they are as functional as Dylan is.” These derailing sentiments imply that disability advocacy is never possible.

Drawing again from Garland-Thomson (2011), hate and disgust became the psycho-political reaction to a “misfitting” person with disability expressing political views and occupying a political role. His career transition in having just finished his successful tennis career further fuelled these sentiments, with comments such as “Dylan trying every trick in book to get one more headline now not in limelight.” A small number of comments tried to position Dylan as having an “empty life [now],” and now “does not [have] enough in his life to keep him occupied”—that he just wanted his “name back in the news,” and that he was just “a headline chaser ...trying to stay relevant while there's no tennis on.” They posited that he deliberately took the comment “*out of context in order to get some publicity.*” The pile-on of negative comments and insults throughout the discussion exemplify that emotions become “attributes of collectives as shared emotional responses” and are part of what binds a social group together as a “sociality of emotions” (Ahmed, 2014:2–10).

3.3 | Enduring negative assumptions about disability

The new politicised contours of ableism illuminated in the previous two theme areas are anchored in enduring negative assumptions about disability. This section analyses key threads entangled into this broader and enduring ableist discourse that assumes people with disability are lesser human. These threads include “truth” assertions of disability as lesser without reason, disability being equated with ill health and reasons for positioning disability as lesser that rely upon disability-as-tragedy myths.

3.3.1 | Disability assumed as lesser without reason

Disability was constantly asserted by user-participants as a lesser way of being, with this ableist thinking understood as an unquestionable, universal truth. This ableist worldview was described as “a fact,” “honest,” “reality,” and “common sense” and “truly normal.” While asserted as rational, challenges to the ableist worldview were met with high emotion—disbelief, sarcasm, anger, annoyance and frustration. This dynamic reveals the ableist imaginary shared and enacted by many discussion user-participants, where disability-as-lesser is so deeply assumed into ways of thinking and feeling that it requires no justification. Intellectual disability—described in outdated and derogatory terms—was portrayed as a specifically lesser form of humanity and the most tragic version of disability. This ableist hierarchy of human worth was then weaponised, with intellectual disability used as a slur against Alcott as described earlier.

3.3.2 | Disability equated with lacking good health

Disability was problematically associated with unhealthiness throughout the discussion. Indeed, “healthy” became a “sticky word,” as theorised by Ahmed (2014:46) as a descriptor more steeped in emotion than truth, with the repetition of “sticky words” generating an affect, creating “impressions of others.” Sticky words “assign the other with meaning

in an economy of difference” (Ahmed, 2014:59). In this case, “health” as a sticky word assigned people with disability with lesser human status on illusory medical grounds. Neither Morrison nor Alcott referred to “health” in their statements. Yet, the persistent notion that people want “healthy babies” was expressed to defend Morrison (178 post references). A clear and irrational binary was produced that equated “healthy” to nondisabled children so that “unhealthy” and “disabled” were understood as the same thing. This simplistic binary narrowly viewed body differences as impairments or imperfections. This association is part of the delusional, ableist fantasy of species perfection (Campbell, 2008), dislocated from the known, everyday reality that all children become unwell at times, sometimes seriously. The assumption also defies the photograph of Alcott accompanying the *Herald Sun* post, which shows Alcott in his wheelchair looking extremely healthy as the athletic, former sporting champion. Further, associations were then attached to being healthy and non-disabled—such as “happy, healthy and normal,” “wonderful and healthy,” and “perfectly healthy” and “healthy and strong.” This delusional thinking of the collective “projects all that is undesirable onto another” (Ahmed, 2014:49) so that unhealthiness and body differences associated with disability become entwined. This assumption that equates disabled with lacking health reflects the medicalisation of disability. Medical professionals hold the authority for defining and diagnosing disability, which leads to the essentialising of people with disability to imagined or actual impairments. The social model of disability, where disability is understood to be generated by sociospatial rather than medical conditions, was seemingly unknown to these discussion user-participants.

3.3.3 | Reasoning for positioning disability as lesser

When reasoning was provided for positioning disability as lesser, user-participants drew from disability-as-tragic myths to imagine how disability might ruin your life. Negative impacts on others dominated this discourse—impacts on parents, siblings and family dynamics which were described as follows: “severe”; “strains marriages”; “challenge”; “unable to cope”; “workload”; “extra costs”; and “burden of work.” The associated emotions experienced by these parents named by user-participants were as follows: “heartache”; “sadness”; “self-blame”; and “stress.” To a lesser extent, user-participants also expressed what they believe are the negative impacts on people with disability themselves, asserting disability “ruins their life”; “don’t get the life they want”; “pain and suffering”; “denied normal advantages in every sphere”; “no friends”; “isolated”; “no normal life”; “struggles.” These claims were not backed with evidence of any kind, with some user-participants emphasising their opinion with “honestly” and “in reality.” These viewpoints reproduced discursive myths of disability as a universal tragedy. There was no recognition that people with disability have diverse lives and experiences and that most people experience difficult times in life regardless of disability. Differences between disabilities (e.g. in relation to impairment or pain) or circumstances (e.g. wealth or poverty) were unrecognised. “Disability” became an amorphous, frightening spectre that is always all of the imagined negatives.

3.4 | Normalisation of ableism

Enduring negative assumptions about disability in the discussion relied upon the normalisation of ableism. The idea that everyone-thinks-this-way gave confidence to user-participants to assert their ableist and discriminatory opinions. This collective normalisation of ableism laid the foundation for resisting Alcott's political disability voice.

3.4.1 | Everyone-thinks-this-way

User-participants asserted that children without disability were preferable to children with disability and their imagined suffering. Constant expressions were that “all,” “every parent,” “everybody,” “any woman,” “the vast majority,” “most people on the planet” feel this way, and “how could you not think this way?”. Some user-participants were incredulous another way of thinking was possible—“what parent on this planet,” “for crying out loud,” “as if.” Some expressed not being able to understand the issue raised by Alcott, “I can’t understand.” These statements assume universal agreement with their viewpoints, revealing the depth of the ableist imaginary. Some user-participants stated that a baby not having a disability is the only issue of concern for expecting parents, as “all everyone ever hopes for.” The disabled/nondisabled divide is reproduced, installing a distinct binary of two types of children—“there are disabled and nondisabled.” This binary is then presented as the only important factor in understanding who a child is.

The ableist imaginary both informs and is reproduced within this online setting. With the majority of respondents holding an ableist worldview, they are emboldened in seeing their views reaffirmed by the discussion: “look around and see that the majority of people share my opinion.” This statement exemplifies how “the more signs circulate, the more affective they become” (Ahmed, 2014:45). The sense of the ableist worldview as correct became more deeply felt. The ableist imaginary is historically reinforced in user-participants’ reference to “old sayings,” such as “as long as they have ten fingers and ten toes,” “as long as its healthy.” These sayings are presented as social truths and “the first thing a mother does,” presented as evidence for ableism as the correct worldview. These speech acts show the performativity of emotions, as they “depend on past histories, at the same time as they generate affects” (Ahmed, 2014:13). Similarly, some user-participants share their constant thoughts, “every day...grateful to have healthy children,” implying that the regularity of their ableist thinking means that it is the correct way to think. Occasional statements use the ableist notion of nondisabled children being “perfect,” such as “everyone prays their child will be perfect” and wanting children to be “100% fit and healthy,” “everything is in its correct place.” This speaks directly to critical disability studies analysis that the abled imagine themselves as species perfect so that children with disability can/must then be understood as diminished versions (Campbell, 2008). This idea then generates fantastical ways of thinking that children with disabilities have challenges, struggles and difficulties whereas perfect/nondisabled children do not.

3.4.2 | Parental viewpoints centred in the discourse

The “everyone” who “thinks this way” referred to throughout the discussion seemed to be restricted to parents who had children without disability. Parental fears and desires were centred throughout the discussion, while lived experience of disability was sidelined. This dynamic privileged the emotional fantasies of perfect, abled children and children with disability as tragic. Any disabled voice that sought to challenge enduring negative assumptions was discredited and shut down. One user-participant who identified as having a disability and expressed being offended by Morrison’s comment was dismissed as having “a huge chip on his shoulder.” The logic of the ableist imaginary was that this is a “rational,” “commonsense” and “very natural” way of thinking. Yet, this imaginary is deeply imbued with emotional dimensions that “loving parents” or “every good parent” wants nondisabled children, assertions compelled with certainty, “I’m sure.” Concessionary statements were made by parents about “loving the child anyway” if their child had a disability. This speculation indicates how a good person is imagined within an ableist worldview. The child would be loved despite their disappointing disability. The equal value of all children in their

diversity is not recognised. This discourse about good and loving parents is an emotional “reversal” from the discriminatory/hateful views being espoused about people with disability. This emotional reversal of the abled as being loving and thoughtful parents “does an enormous amount of work as a form of justification and persuasion” (Ahmed, 2014:42) of their discriminatory views. One moment of insight is presented where a parent acknowledges “us parents of non-disabled kids don't know how fantastic kids with disability can be.” This outlier comment suggests an understanding that ableist sentiments are likely due to ignorance in entrenching ways of thinking in an ableist society. This insight offered a rare moment of openness in the discussion focussed on majority ableist ways of thinking.

4 | CONCLUSION

Our research points to new politicised contours of ableism being expressed through public social media. Dylan Alcott's appointment as 2022 Australian of the Year signified progress being made within the Australian disability imaginary. Alongside other areas of progress such as increased visibility in elite disability sports (Legg et al., 2022) and in media and creative industries (Hadley & McDonald, 2018), Alcott's appointment suggested an increased recognition of the social value of people with disability and the importance of full and meaningful inclusion. However, our findings show that ableism is entangled with this progress into political domains. Alcott faced significant retaliation for expressing his political voice as the appointed 2022 Australian of the Year in a single Twitter post where he countered a clumsy statement by the former Prime Minister. The possible ambiguity of Morrison's comment and editorialising of Alcott's tweet are lesser issues to the ableism that ensued as a result of this exchange. Responses on an online tabloid discussion board showed that when the opportunity arose, a barrage of ableist sentiment was unleashed. The attitudes and emotional responses of everyday Australians revealed an enduring ableist imaginary, resistant to nondiscriminatory ways of thinking.

Our research has revealed a new contour of ableism—politicised ableism—within the political domain. Emotional and aggressive name-calling was directed at a person with disability for expressing a political voice while in a politically appointed role. This negativity contrasted with the admiration Alcott had previously received from these same people as the successful guy in elite disability sports. Utilising Garland-Thomson's (2011) concept of “misfit,” Alcott as a person with disability was understood to “fit” into disability sports but was seen as “misfit” in the political domain. Discussion board responses questioned Alcott's character, authenticity, cognitive capacity, right to voice a political opinion and right to political status as a person with disability. No longer considered a good guy for having a political voice, he was determined as no longer an appropriate Australian of the Year. This disjuncture indicates a complex patterning, that disability justice is not following a slow and steady forward trajectory. Instead, progress in some social domains can ignite ableist positioning in others, creating discursively policed boundaries to exclude people with disability from certain social landscapes such as the political.

Politicised ableism allowed for disability social justice issues to just be dismissed as underhand “leftie” and “woke” commentary, rather than as legitimate social debate. A strong discourse denied the negative impact of Morrison's comment upon the disability community, seeking to de-legitimise Alcott's disability justice advocacy. The pursuit of equal human status and meaningful inclusion for people with disability was unacknowledged, with the entire social justice discourse of disability justice dismissed. Disability justice was simply dismissed as the latest example of woke commentary, and people with disability characterised as immature and weak in not tolerating their discrimination.

Throughout the discourse, enduring ableism underpinned this new politicised contour of ableism. Assumed bodily superiority, of their own “species-typical” perfection (Campbell, 2008) made it impossible for user-participants to understand what might be offensive about Morrison's statement and their own concurring comments. Ableist worldviews were asserted to be rational and logical and portrayed as universal—that all good, sensible people think this way. Yet, the high emotionality of responses that refused to consider other perspectives reflected Ahmed's (2014) analysis that the more discourses circulate, “the more affective they become.” Inasmuch, the online discussion reinforced an existing ableist imaginary. The mainstream view of disability-as-lesser was reaffirmed with unsubstantiated assertions of disability as “the ruined life” and nonsensical binaries that equate disability to unhealthiness, highlighting the nonawareness of disability-empowering discourses. These dominant ableist worldviews were further propelled by mainstream parental fantasies on what sort of child they would prefer and statements of what “good parents” ought to think, which were given primacy over the experiences of people with disability themselves.

The progressive imaginary of Australia as a society striving for improved social justice and recognising the value of human diversity seems not as progressed as imagined. Our research demonstrates that rather than gradual steps forward in disability justice (such as Alcott's appointment as Australian of the Year), we are instead faced with new ableist challenges and reemerging forms of discrimination. The newly politicised ableism we identify in contemporary Australia is located in everyday tabloid media, which indicates that these attitudes are likely part of mainstream Australian social imaginaries. We note that a quarter of respondents did offer positive but mostly brief comments of support to Alcott. This suggests that ableist worldviews and understanding of disability justice by middle, mainstream Australians remain entrenched and contested. We were unable to determine from this single study whether these proportions supporting each worldview align with the broader population. Our analysis indicates that politicised ableism needs to be understood as a new barrier to social justice for people with disability and understood within the technological landscape of an Australian society where the majority of the population are users of online social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Enduring areas of disadvantage for people with disability, highlighted in the Final Report of the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (2023), makes political voice urgent for people with disability. The next challenge, then, is to work out how to respond to both these new and enduring contours of ableism as they arise in response to social progress for people with disability.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Raelene West: Conceptualization; investigation; writing – original draft; methodology; validation; writing – review and editing; formal analysis; project administration; data curation; resources. **Belinda Johnson:** Conceptualization; investigation; writing – original draft; methodology; validation; writing – review and editing; formal analysis; project administration; data curation; resources.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

None.

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