



‘Public Connection’ and the Uncertain Norms of Media Consumption¹

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Our book “Media Consumption and Public Engagement” aims to disrupt the apparent divide between consumption and citizenship. In this paper we seek to advance that general move by examining the role of one term that lies hidden but crucial on both sides of the citizenship/consumption divide: media. The result will be, we hope, to open up an area of normative and empirical uncertainty about an often, but not always, ‘banal’ area of consumption - media consumption - and to consider its contribution to the maintenance of democratic legitimacy. This points to some interesting implications for just what is at stake in the consumption/citizenship divide, itself much more than a matter of academic precision.

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Media as Consumption and/or Citizenship?


It is difficult at the outset to see where exactly media fits into the discussion. Starting with consumption, Colin Campbell argued a decade ago that the sociology of consumption should not extend to the 'use of intangible goods and services' (1995: 109-110). He meant media,² though this could of course cover many non-media items such as professional and knowledge-based services, but the reason for this exclusion was somewhat unclear. At the same time, however, the very diversification of media and communications goods - particularly in terms of personalized and mobile media - meant that many came to acknowledge media on the map of 'ordinary consumption': see for example Longhurst, Bagnall and Savage (2001) on radio and du Gay et al. (1996) on the personal stereo.³ Perhaps this was simply a matter of official definitions of 'consumption' struggling to catch up with actual research (media consumption has of course since the 1940s attracted a huge diversity of social science research), but we suspect there is more involved than questions of definition.

For there *is* something *relatively* distinctive about *much* media consumption - namely, its intrinsic informational or narrative content. Of course, wearing a particular item of clothing or drinking a particular brand of coffee can be a sign of something else, or be associated with certain types of attitudinal statement (or at least suggest a willingness to be associated with those statements by others). But many acts of media consumption are linked to information and narrative in a different way: watching TV news *is* the act of consuming a particular narrative, a narrative that aims to communicate certain claims about the world directly through that act of consumption.

The distinctiveness of media consumption is important, and this is not overridden by either the uncertainties of information transmission/ audience interpretation or the semiotic richness of material objects, important though those are. Roger Silverstone has captured the heart of this distinctiveness through his notion of double articulation (1994). Media, Silverstone argues, always have a double aspect: media as material objects (the television or walkman), that is, technological objects consumed in particular spatio-temporal settings. And media as texts (the news bulletin, the soap opera), that is, symbolic messages located within particular socio-cultural discourses and interpreted by audiences. Most (but not all) practices of media consumption are therefore *defined* in part by the direct exposure to informational claims or narrative intents that they involve. Presumably this is why, for all the banality of many practices of media consumption and their settings, 'media' have been so readily co-opted to the other term of the binary, citizenship.

² His particular target was Silverstone and Hirsch (1992), which discussed domestic information and communication technologies.

³ See also generally Miller (1987), Mackay (1997) and Murdock (2005).




However, media's relationship to citizenship itself needs further examination. From Hegel's famous comparison of reading a daily newspaper at the breakfast table to a ritual performed to the nation, media have been claimed to belong to that special class of habits inseparable from having a stake in a wider polity. John Dewey argued that communication is already, from the outset, implicated in the question of how polities can be built and sustained. 'Communication', as Dewey put it, is 'the way in which people come to possess things in common' (quoted in Carey 1989: 22). That argument is important, and has been often drawn upon to ground specific research into media's public role (Williams 1961). But media consumption remains also an aspect of 'the material culture of politics' (Hilton and Daunton 2001: 12). If, however, we assume this is all media are, we also miss part of the complexity by co-opting media automatically to the other side of the consumption/ citizenship binary. Media are not only relevant to citizenship. Media are part of everyday pleasure, entertainment and the practical information flows on which the conduct of our lives depend. Indeed it has been strongly argued that an over-politicised reading of media consumption forgets media's contribution to everyday unpolitical life (Scannell 1996). In addition, recalling Silverstone's notion of double articulation, media use involves in part the consumption of goods (from DVDs, to newspaper subscriptions, to satellite dishes), which it makes no sense at all (contra Campbell) to exclude from the notion of consumption. Like other goods too, they are also the product of a market, subject to the same logic of innovation, diffusion and competition.⁴

To sum up the argument so far, media as goods and technology are properly part of consumption, and do not *per se* raise questions of citizenship, although the lack of certain media goods may cut across the preconditions of effective citizenship (the digital divide debate, its precedents in the universal service obligation, and its recent developments).⁵ However, media - as content - do inherently raise questions of citizenship and have, in this regard, been widely addressed by media and communication scholarship. But it would be misleading to say that media contents only raise issues of that type since they are just as likely to raise non-political questions concerning identity, pleasure and belonging in the way that other forms of consumption do.⁶ Indeed, media, and popular culture in general, raise some difficult questions that are precisely at the boundaries of citizen practice (for example, the recent debates around

⁴ Yet the grounds for regulatory intervention in this market are often framed in terms of citizen interests - universal service obligation, broadcasting codes, journalists ethics, and so forth (Livingstone et al. 2007).

⁵ See Couldry 2007.

⁶ Though this is a difficult distinction to maintain: see Corner's distinction between the scholarly analysis of 'public knowledge and that of popular culture' (1991). For further discussion, see Livingstone 2003.



celebrity culture)⁷ questions about the nature and substance of citizen practice which our research outlined in this paper has aimed to investigate.

The Public Connection project

The ambiguities about the practice to which acts of media consumption belong are now increasingly difficult to resolve, not just for the reasons just given but for other broader reasons which link to a crisis in the sphere of citizenship itself. Our starting-point in this paper is that it is far from obvious whether the everyday practice of consuming media (something all of us do) is, or even should be, orientated towards a sphere beyond the private, what we might call a ‘public world’. We will explain our own normative position on the term ‘public’ later, but it is above all the empirical resonances of this question with which we have been concerned in our recent project ‘Media Consumption and the Future of Public Connection’.⁸

In ‘mature’ democracies we cannot avoid questions about what our media consumption ‘amounts to’, what are its purposes and guiding values, and to what extent it sustains a clear relationship between individuals and a wider polity on some scale or other. This is not just an academic uncertainty, we believe, but a practical quandary that matters for citizens in their daily lives. It is a quandary that Alain Touraine captured vividly, if rhetorically, when he wrote:

Part of us is immersed in world culture, but, because there is no longer a public space where social norms could be formed and applied, another part of us retreats into hedonism or looks for a sense of belonging that is more immediate [...] both individuals and groups are therefore less and less defined by the social relations which until now defined the field of sociology, whose goal was to explain behaviour in terms of the social relations in which actors were involved. (2000: 5-6)

Leaving aside the wider issue of sociology’s future which Touraine raises, a pragmatic question for every citizen in intensely mediated societies is: what is the wider space to which I belong? In what way, if at all, does the media I consume sustain that belonging?

Put another way, our project has aimed to investigate what are the traces in citizens’ everyday experience and reflections of the following two assumptions

⁷ See especially Corner and Pels (2003).

⁸ October 2003 - March 2006, funded under the ESRC/ AHRC Cultures of Consumption programme (grant number RES-143-25-0011), whose financial support is gratefully acknowledged.

which, we would argue, constitute the bottom line of most political science, political theory and media sociology:⁹


1. *that in a ‘mature’ democracy such as Britain, most people share an orientation to a public world where matters of common concern are, or at least should be, addressed (we call this orientation ‘public connection’);*
2. *that this public connection is partly, even principally, sustained by a convergence in what media people consume, in other words, by shared or overlapping media consumption (so ‘public connection’ is mediated).*

These assumptions are detachable from each other. Some believe the first without the second, because they argue public connection is unlikely to be served by people’s use of media (Robert Putnam’s (2000) well-known *Bowling Alone* thesis takes that position in relation to television). Generally however it seems to us that many writers assume both, even if only tacitly. Our concern has been: can we find evidence for those assumptions (and for ‘mediated public connection’) in UK citizens’ own practice and their reflections upon it?

The first assumption is important because it underlies most models of democracy: informed consent to political authority requires that people’s attention to the public world can be assumed, or at least that one can assume an *orientation* to the public world which from time to time results in actual attention. When in this project we talk of ‘*public*’ connection, we mean ‘things or issues which are regarded as being of shared concern, rather than of purely private concern’, matters that in principle citizens need to discuss in a world of limited shared resources.¹⁰ We have been careful not to assume that a decline in attention to ‘politics’ in the traditional sense means lack of attention to ‘politics’ in general, let alone apathy. People’s understanding of what constitutes politics may be changing (Bennett 1998), at the same time as the *media* landscape is growing ever more complex. Leaving aside possible changes in the definition of ‘politics’ and the ‘public world’, our working assumption, then, is that the public/private boundary nonetheless remains meaningful in everyday life. But our understanding of the public/private boundary has not been prescriptive. The point of our research has been to ask people: what makes up *their* public world? How are *they* connected to that world? And how

⁹ This point is fully argued in Couldry, Livingstone and Markham 2007a, chapters 1 and 2.

¹⁰ The word ‘public’ is notoriously difficult, since it has a range of conflicting meanings (Weintraub and Kumar 1997): see further Couldry, Livingstone and Markham 2007a, chapter 1; Livingstone 2005; cf. Geuss 2001 and Elshtain 1997.



are media involved, or not, in sustaining that connection to a public world (as they understand it)?

These are the questions we aimed to explore: first by asking a small group of 37 people across England to produce a diary for 3 months during 2004 that reflected on those questions; second by interviewing those diarists, both before and after their diary production, individually and in some cases also in focus-groups; and finally by broadening out the themes from this necessarily small group to a nationwide survey (targeted at a sample of 1000 respondents) conducted in June 2005. The survey provided data on media consumption, attitudes to media and politics, and public actions, and also the contexts in which all of these occur.¹¹

Our primary emphasis has been on obtaining multi-perspective data on citizens' reflexive sense of themselves as publicly connected, or otherwise, including some data produced without us as direct interlocutors (diaries). We have tried to register citizens' own stories of connection or disconnection, both explicit and implicit, while also through our survey contextualizing those very particular stories among broader nationwide patterns. In this paper, we explore the implications particularly of our qualitative data for understanding how, and under what conditions, a form of banal consumption (media use) might contribute, or not, to the preconditions of effective citizenship.


Mediated public connection as a 'dispersed practice'

We have introduced the term 'public connection' to capture a thread that may run through much of what we do in daily life: an orientation towards a public world beyond matters of purely private concern. We talk of 'mediated public connection' where that orientation is sustained principally by our practice of consuming media. 'Mediated public connection' (and 'public connection') are each a 'practice' in the specific sense clarified recently in social theory, that is:

a routine type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, "things" and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge. (Reckwitz 2002: 249)

While a practice is made up of many heterogeneous elements, it is their routine interconnections, or articulations, as a practice that helps to structure social life itself (Reckwitz 2002).

¹¹ For details of our diary and survey samples, see Couldry, Livingstone and Markham 2007a, appendices 1A and 2B.




Practices may be ordered, according to Theodor Schatzki, in various ways and to different degrees (1996: 89). Schatzki distinguishes usefully between ‘*dispersed* practices’ (such as the general practice of ‘describing’, which is linked by shared understandings alone) and ‘*integrative* practices’ (cooking or going swimming, which are held together also by ‘explicit rules’ and ‘ends, projects and beliefs’). Given that media - and our media uses and their contexts - are so various (as are forms of public involvement), we would expect the object of our inquiry - mediated public connection - to be more like a dispersed practice than an integrative practice. Certainly it has no explicit rules, although it may involve ends, projects and beliefs, that is, motivating values. The concept of practice (particularly that of dispersed practices)¹² is important for mapping areas of life only partly codified in language, yet crucially connected as practice.¹³

We wanted to track evidence of an orientation towards a public world sustained through media consumption across the huge range of diarists’ language, covering both accounts of daily practice and direct or indirect evidence of that practice. Here there is a similarity with Peter Dahlgren’s recent reworking of Almond and Verba’s original (1963) notion of ‘civic culture’ in terms of a six-moment circuit of civic engagement (Dahlgren 2003): values, affinity, knowledge, practices, identities and discussion. In a move that echoes T. H. Marshall’s insistence on the multidimensional nature of citizenship, and its complex historical embeddedness, Dahlgren (2005) challenges the oversimplifications not only of Almond and Verba but also of the Habermasian public sphere ideal, which implies that formal public deliberation in itself is enough to ground effective democracy. Civic culture for Dahlgren is neither a single attitude, nor even a set of attitudes, nor a unified cultural condition, but rather a six-point circuit or process in which causal influences may flow in more than one direction. ‘Mediated public connection’, although not specifically included in Dahlgren’s circuit, is clearly relevant to it and itself is a complex practice, involving at least two dynamic components: media consumption and public orientation.

Because of this complexity we would not expect to find a single ‘ideal type’ of mediated public connection, and tracking the varieties of mediated public connection was a key part of our research. In fact there are more than two elements that potentially are articulated in the dispersed practice of ‘mediated public connection’; first, ‘public orientation’ breaks down into at least two types, an orientation to traditional politics and an orientation to a broader world of public issues; second, there are, as discussed shortly, negative and positive factors which may sustain or undermine either media

¹² cf. Couldry and Langer 2005, discussing a pilot for the Public Connection project.

¹³ For an extension of these ideas to media research, see Couldry 2004. This was in part inspired by Alan Warde’s presentation to a methodology seminar of the Cultures of Consumption programme, Birkbeck College, October 2003: see now Warde 2005.



consumption or public orientation; third, there are feedback loops which may sustain the links between media consumption and public orientation; and fourth, there are public actions (for example presiding as a magistrate, attending a school governors' meeting, going on a protest) which may in turn provide a context for further public connection.

Keeping up to date with news

How can we start to understand the processes which sustain or destabilize people's practice of orientating themselves towards a public world through media?

First, we found that the 'media consumption' component of mediated public connection is less likely to be destabilized than the 'public orientation' component. This is because the sources of media are varied and available across many linked formats, so people are normally able to establish over time what they consider to be a sufficient media flow; cases where levels of media access are disrupted suddenly (as when a school sixth form diarist moved to university) are rare. But there are rather more factors which may affect 'public orientation': whether *negatively* (factors such as specific political disillusionment, general alienation or lack of efficacy, or indeed a view of what matters in the public world which runs counter to dominant views, for example a principal emphasis on the arts or creativity) or *positively* (factors such as a family history of political practice, work-related opportunities to display knowledge about public issues, work that is directly affected by public issues, as well as particular grievances which provide an individual incentive to public action).

Second, feedback loops which stabilize *the link between* the two basic components of mediated public connection can be of different sorts: some social and processual (talking at work, or with friends, about what you've seen in media), some individual and value-based (having a sense that you should keep up with the news, indeed that you're the sort of person who does that). Clearly some overlap between the two types of feedback loop is possible. Here we want to concentrate on the way *values* can stabilize the practice of mediated public connection. Values may under certain circumstances serve as a 'bridge' between private and public worlds¹⁴, reinforcing links between habits of media consumption (essentially a matter of private choice) and a broader orientation to a world beyond the individual. Many diarists, both men and women, recognized a duty to keep up with the news, for example:

Yeah, I've always felt that anyway that you need to know what's going on all over the world. If you can't, even though you can't always make a difference, but you try and do something and if you can't, just realise how lucky you are. (Kylie, 24, unemployed)

¹⁴ cf. Bauman 1999.



single mother, Inner City South London)

The value of keeping up with news may be expressed, in negative form, through shock at *others* who lack that value:

what I find quite astonishing really that most people I know really just don't care about what's going on. They're focused on their own thing and as long as they know that David Beckham's had a new hair cut and that they can go and get it done at the salon just like this [...] they just carry on with stuff. (Josh, 23, architecture student, Northern suburb)

Importantly we found this value across classes, genders, age-groups and types of media user.

This evidence of a duty to keep up with the news needs to be contextualized in two ways, first in relation to possible shifts in media use following the normalisation among some parts of the population of the internet¹⁵ and second in relation to how the 'public world' which diarists are concerned to track is understood.


On the first point, our diarist sample mirrored national trends in terms of access to different media. 57% of our diarists had some form of access to the internet (in line with the national figure of 60% in October 2004).¹⁶ Of these diarists, six had broadband access at home (16% of all diarists): this is also comparable with the then UK average for home broadband which in 2004 rose from 12% to 24% of all households.¹⁷ The salience of the internet for our diarists' news consumption, however, was much less than one might expect. Of 21 active internet user diarists, 13 used it principally for *personal* information and only 8 (22% of overall sample) used it at all as a news source or site of debate: there was only one diarist (Josh, quoted above) for whom the internet was the *principal* news source.¹⁸ For our diarist sample the traditional media - television, radio and the press - were overwhelmingly the key means of sustaining mediated public connection. We are not of course pretending that this mix is immune from change and it may well be that the growth in home broadband will generate major changes in media habits. What remains unclear however is whether such possibly imminent changes will involve new and stable habits of *news consumption*, a point to which we return.

¹⁵ Internet use and access still remains highly socially stratified according to our survey (and indeed most other research).

¹⁶ See www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget_print.asp?ID=8. Of those 60%, 86% said they accessed the internet at home, suggesting a lower figure for home internet access.

¹⁷ www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget_print.asp?ID=1367.

¹⁸ This contrasts with a recent US survey in which 24% of people name the internet as a principal news source. See Pew Research Center 2005.



On the second point, we have tried to recognize throughout the *contestability* of the term ‘public’, which underlies people’s sense of what counts as news. We mean more here than the important contrast between the public world as basically traditional politics and a more issue-based view of the public world (although our diarist sample provided more than one version of this contrast). Alternatively, someone might have a clear sense of engagement with a public world through media, but be oriented to something quite different from dominant definitions of ‘public concern’ (whether traditional politics or broader public issues). We were keen to register such alternative visions of the public world. One place to look, many would argue, is people with a strong engagement with celebrity culture and general media entertainment. We found plenty of evidence of such engagement with media as a ‘collective’ domain, but strikingly little evidence (even in diarists’ own accounts) of how such engagement might be linked to public issues, even as broadly defined.

One apparent exception was our diarist Ross, a 25 year old design student. His 12-week diary consistently covered only one subject, sport. Strikingly his diary account of sport shared language with dominant versions of the public world, for example the importance of arguing from facts and a sense of what is, and is not, an appropriate subject for that world:

This week the footballing world is again concentrating on matters that shouldn’t be the main focus of sport [...] I am slightly biased here because I support Arsenal but when you look at the facts I feel that I am being objective in my claims. (Ross, 25, design student, Urban south)


This alternative definition of the public world must be respected but what is striking, again, is not its potential connection to other types of public issues but the lack of connection.

Satisfied distance

What of diarists who *lacked* the value of keeping up to date with a public world, the value of public connection? The evidence for this was generally only implicit, and against the background of the acknowledged dominant value:

I read through the paper earlier and I read the headlines and I read the first few bits but and I know I should do, I always get told I should have more of an interest but I feel the people have such opinions of it and like I say, most stories are the government and things but it’s something that’s out of our hands. [...] I do tend to go past a lot of the stories. (Andrea, 25, nurse, Midlands rural - added emphasis)

While Andrea did have some regularity to her news consumption habits, those habits were in part dependent on others (her male partner who brought home the daily newspaper from work; her parents who read the local paper and



passed on information). Andrea justified her ability to maintain a distance from a public world in terms which suggest a group identification (of ‘us’ against a distant and unrepresentative ‘them’ in Westminster). This emerged generally and then when she commented on not getting involved in public action through her nursing union:

Yeah, I think it [politics] just seems like it’s a little bit of another world. You know, they’re supposed to be making decisions on behalf of all of us but it doesn’t generally seem that way. [...] it seems like we’re a long way away from it [...]

No don’t get involved in things like that but if I did, I don’t feel it would make any difference. Cause you know, there’s a wider issue there you know, with money and the government and you know, all relating back to political issues. (Andrea)

Paradoxically, she implies, it is the *presence* of a wider issue that encourages her to withdraw from action. This quasi-collective rationalization of distance from a public world clearly has complex roots in class, gender and the metropolitan domination of British politics.

It is quite distinct from the individualistic rationalization of public disconnection found in another diarist of similar age, Beccy. Beccy was 27, worked in marketing and lived in a comfortable northern suburb. She was also one of our most reflexive diarists and explored this issue on a number of occasions. She acknowledged that her attention to news was sporadic, but it was her self-defence that was most interesting:

I think there’s a hell of a lot of choice out there and I think [...] it’s up to me to go and find out and be informed. [...] I think everybody would have their own line. My cynical friend would say that you know everybody should be obligated to know about politics and everybody should use their vote responsibly because he’s really into that [...] Whereas me [...] I don’t know where my line would be because I know I look at a lot of celebrity news but that’s not important and I wouldn’t say people were obliged to know about that at all. But certain things in my head I think I should be obliged to know about I’m not. (Beccy)

Consumerist individualism, even if tinged with guilt, works here as an alternative ‘value’ that rationalizes the *separation* of media consumption from public orientation (note that she associated her friend’s ‘cynicism’ with refusing that separation), while acknowledging in a vestigial way the dominant value of ‘keeping up with the news’ (‘certain things in my head I think I should be obliged to know [...]’). Whether diarists’ sense of the social expectation¹⁹ associated with this dominant value led them to under-report this individualism

¹⁹ In our survey we found that social expectation to keep up to date with ‘what’s going on in the world’ was important in predicting news engagement, itself a factor in predicting political interest: see Couldry, Livingstone and Markham 2006.



to us is uncertain.

Also important here are the diarists we have called ‘weakly connected’ because they show a strong orientation *neither* to a media world *nor* to a public world independent of media. Here is one example:

Some weeks I think I really don’t know what’s going on in the world and you make more of an effort to switch the news on and other weeks, you think, oh, I’m not really interested (Marie, 34, p/t accounts clerk, Midlands rural)


Strikingly the weakly connected diarists (of whom we had six) were very far from being social loners; indeed they were *more likely* to be oriented overall by family and social networks than by anything else (from work to the local civic sphere to individual values). This brings out that the reasons for disconnection are complex and not necessarily, taken in themselves, negative.

Long-term shifts?

Discussion about democratic (dis)engagement in political science has often proceeded without interest in the details of media consumption, and even when it has noticed media consumption, this has generally been in a minimal way, as in the post-Putnam debate (where to put it crudely, the claim has been: watching a lot of TV is bad; reading a newspaper is generally good). Our research has tried to offer a more nuanced account, through both the diary- and survey-based phases of our project, of how, and under what conditions, *particular types* of media consumption may make a difference to democratic engagement. This is not the place to elaborate on the detailed differences between particular types of media use. Instead we want to make three points about possible long-term shifts, before moving onto some wider disarticulations which shape what kind of difference media consumption can make.

First, a common error in considering how media affect the conditions of democratic engagement is to think about media technology in the abstract, not necessarily in a deterministic way but simply in a way that ignores the long-term nature of the processes by which media technologies get embedded in daily practice. This point was made forcibly in relation to television and early home computers in the 1980s and early 1990s (Silverstone and Hirsch 1992; Silverstone 1994), but the point returns in a new form with the internet. It is *habit*, and the possibility of *new habits* of public-oriented media consumption, that offer the best route into thinking about how online practice might change the possibilities of public connection. If internet-related practices are to improve the general preconditions of democratic engagement, then internet-related habits must be articulated in a stable way with habits of political socialization (whether the latter remain stable or are themselves changing).

Clearly there are some grounds for optimism here, expressed for example in a



recent article by Tony Benn:

A combination of satellite television stations, Google and Yahoo, laptops and mobile phones have made it possible for the public to get an understanding of what is going on that is totally different from what they are being told. That is how the World Social Forum has come into being. (2006: 16)

But the question is how representative such possibilities are of the general conditions under which people become oriented towards a public world, or not. While online resources clearly create possibilities of accelerated and enhanced mobilization, these possibilities must be set against not only the continued social stratification of internet access and use, but against the highly individualized context in which online use is growing for most people most of the time. Here the overview of some of the most experienced of US Internet watchers is useful:


Even with higher band width and richer format, this mode [the internet] does not fit well with the way people get politically socialized. Rather, it is our view that the internet is a form of syntopia - an extension of but still heavily integrated with other face-to-face and mediated channels and processes. (Katz and Rice 2002: 150)

In other words the internet is primarily a space where individuals can better link together the various things they need and want to do *as individuals*, but not a space through which individual actions become socialized in new ways, in spite of early optimists such as Howard Rheingold (1994) who argued precisely that. Oscar Gandy put it more mordantly when he suggested that 'as a result of the aura of personalization that surrounds these new media, individuals may actually feel better about knowing less and less about the world around them' (2002: 452).

Things are not of course entirely closed. Take the increasingly widespread practice (among those lucky enough to have relatively unregulated access to the web through their work computers) of websurfing during work breaks. Websurfing in the lunch hour can have many uses, as our diary data brought out. Some people (for example, our diarist Jonathan, a 23-year-old university administrator from a West London suburb) used it for news-gathering:

Referred to the internet throughout the day (BBC / SKYNEWS) which had main stories on Oliver Letwin's new policy of cutting tax and public spending. Still hear echoing stories of WMD, Iraq and Hutton [...]. (diary, 16 February 2004)

Others (including Beccy, already quoted) used the internet to gather information for social diversion (for example celebrity news or music magazine websites: ananova or nme.com). Can we imagine any policy shifts that might



encourage the first type of internet use so that new social habits of online news consumption emerge that can replace the old but, perhaps, demographically threatened habits of watching the TV news or reading the daily newspaper? Perhaps we cannot yet, but our point is that it is the balance of such media *habits*, and their articulation (or not) with wider habits of *political socialization*, on which policymakers need to focus. In other words, media technologies only become effectively embedded in practices of political socialization when the practices that articulate one to the other become banal, taken-for-granted: hence the importance of practice theory in analyzing this process. We return to this point later.

A second key point concerns the scale on which the apparent disruptions to public connection are occurring. Touraine poses the general issue very powerfully, but he frames it only as a conflict between global media/ cultural flows and local sites of (in)action. But we would like to question whether the ‘global’ is as automatically salient for everyone as Touraine implies. Certainly one of our diarists, Kylie (a 24 year old unemployed single mother living in an inner city council estate in South London), exhibited vividly the clash between, on the one hand, very limited local possibilities of action - she tried and failed to get neighbours to sign a petition for a local child-care group - and, on the other hand, an intense emotional involvement in ‘distant suffering’ (Boltanski 1999) on a global scale, suffering about which she knew she had no possibilities of acting effectively at all.²⁰ But the more general picture emerging from our survey (see Table 1) was that, when people were asked to name an issue that had been of importance to them over the past 3 months and then say how they categorized that issue, the largest group (47%) described the issue they had mentioned as a national issue, with 38% saying it was an international issue and only 12% saying it was a local issue.²¹ This suggests not only that the international, in news terms, at least, remains outweighed by national issues, but that there is a different gap from Touraine’s between the scale on which people can act (still local) and the types of issues they follow (rarely local, but not necessarily global either).

²⁰ For more detailed analysis of Kylie’s situation as an example of the contradictions of the mediated public sphere, see Couldry, Livingstone and Markham 2007b.

²¹ Our survey was conducted in 3-5 June 2005 and the Iraq conflict was the single most-named issue by our survey population (13%), compared with the second-highest (crime) at 12%. It is clear that the last three years in Britain have been relatively exceptional in this respect, and this must be taken into account in interpreting the overall 38% who said their issue was an international one.



	Gender		Age			SES		All
	Male	Female	18-34	35-54	55+	ABC1	C2DE	
Local	12	11	11	12	12	10	13	12
National	46	48	46	45	50	48	46	47
International	41	36	39	41	35	39	36	38

Table 1. Would you describe this issue [the one you named] as...? (%; Base: N=789)

This may, however - our third point - simply illustrate that international comparison is here essential. While the issue of disengagement from democratic politics is almost universal among ‘mature’ democracies (Pharr and Putnam 2000), including the problem (if that is what it is)²² of falling trust in politicians, the dynamics of engagement may vary greatly between countries.

The picture now emerging from the US project that is twinned with ours²³ is very different. That study found evidence of much greater salience for internet use among the US diarists: many moved easily between old and new media to get the information they needed, admittedly in the intense context of a highly contested presidential election in November 2004. US diarists also appeared to have a stronger sense of having a local context for taking civic action, with religious organisations (almost entirely absent in our UK study) important here. This takes us to the wider context in which mediated public connection matters.


Wider disarticulations

Even if our diarists had mediated public connection (as we call it), and even if this was stabilized by socially reinforced values (the value of ‘keeping up to date’) or by everyday social talk, that does not mean they were any closer to becoming active in the public world. People’s public dis/connection is separate from, and its consequences more broadly shaped by, wider *disarticulations* of a supra-individual or structural nature. These are the gaps between talk and action, and between individuals’ interest in civic action and their possibilities of, indeed disengagement from, political action.²⁴

²² Some argue (Dalton 2000) that mistrust per se is a positive sign of more critical and sophisticated engagement with politics.

²³ This project, nearing completion, by Andrea Press and Bruce Williams of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, was funded by the National Science Foundation; it adopted our methodology, but unlike our study, was locally focused in central Illinois. More detailed comparative work will be published by us jointly in due course: for now, see Williams et al. 2006.

²⁴ For more detail, see Couldry, Livingstone and Markham 2007a, chapter 5.




First, on *talk*, our evidence was that most of our diarists had opportunities to talk about public issues (our survey data pointed to a similar conclusion). There were, as is well known, some social constraints on talking about politics and serious public issues, particularly at work and on social occasions. However many people talked about enjoying a debate, although there was a small minority of diarists who did appear to be constrained by not having friends or family willing to discuss public issues with them at any length (Jonathan was one of them). But in thinking about the wider context in which diarists' public connection operates, restrictions on talk were not decisive. More important, and more surprising to us, was *the almost complete absence of a connection between diarists reports of talk and any reports of action*. In fact, we found only one case of discussion leading to action: our diarist, Christine (a 46 year-old business events coordinator from a Northern suburb) who mentioned talking to her friends at a party about the lack of local recycling, and then jointly lobbying the council to start local recycling collections.

This is certainly not because most of our diarists lacked opinions on things where action might be taken, or were apathetic; nor, on the whole, were they reluctant to share opinions socially and subject them to disagreement. Indeed, many diarists reported having been involved at some time or other in at least low-level public actions. However, the fact remains that there is a near-complete absence of evidence in our data of talk leading directly (or, even, indirectly) to an associated active response, even though we met diarists on up to three occasions, and throughout expressed our interest in hearing about their everyday conversations linked to the issues they mentioned.

Clearly we are not suggesting talk and action are never linked! Indeed, the evidence of our survey complicates the picture.²⁵ A clear association emerged in our survey between having opportunities to talk about public issues, and taking at least some action on that issue. When we put this alongside our diary data, we conclude that what our survey shows is that it is general opportunities for talk (and the conditions that sustain them) that are important in facilitating public connection. However, this is not the same as saying that talk is directly or necessarily articulated to action in the way that notions of 'deliberation' in political theory propose: such evidence was singularly lacking from our diary findings, and this absence remains significant, insofar as political science generally implies that public engagement, deliberation and practical involvement are very broadly, or should be, mutually reinforcing.²⁶ The lack in

²⁵ See Couldry, Livingstone and Markham 2007a, chapter 8.

²⁶ This requires a link between discussion and effective decision-making (Cohen 1997). The basic threshold of deliberative democracy is that each citizen [is] able to initiate deliberation and participate effectively in it' (Cohen 1997: 333). Compare Cohen and Arato's account of civil society as the space 'in which individuals speak, assemble, associate and reason together on matters of public concern and act in concert in order to influence political society and, indirectly, decision-making' (Cohen and Arato 1992: 564).



diarists' reported talk of a link to public action, that is, to direct involvement in the public world, supports Pattie et al.'s (2004: 278) suggestion that there is a decline in Britain's deliberative culture.

Other disarticulations arise when we turn to *action*. Once again there is no space to discuss what types of action our diarists took, but most had taken at least some limited public action at some point, although only a small minority had done anything that involved coordination with others. It is worth noting in passing that we did not find consumer-type action particularly prominent among our diarists: perhaps the most striking cases were Christine's initiative against her local lack of a recycling service and three diarists' decision to stop buying the *Daily Mirror* in protest against its notorious front-page use of staged photos of alleged abuse of Iraqi prisoners by British soldiers.²⁷ We want however to concentrate on two other points.

First, we found almost no cases where diarists appeared to recognize *in their local situation* a supportive context for public action.²⁸ The only clear exception was, again, Christine, who likewise was the only diarist with an explicit philosophy of activism and a belief in the importance of getting involved; a diarist who had once been an exception was Patrick, previously a councillor (although he was now disenchanted with local politics). This absence of the local as an action-context in our UK study contrasts sharply with the evidence emerging from the linked Illinois study where a local civic context was present for many diarists. We can only speculate as to the reasons, but we cannot believe it has no link to the long-term war of attrition by central government against local government in the UK in recent decades.²⁹


Second, we found evidence of a gap between some diarists' civic activism (which was strong) and their cynicism about its possible linkage to the world of politics and policymaking. Particularly interesting here is the perspective of Edward (a 64 year-old retired chief executive of a financial services company, living in a wealthy Northern suburb). Edward, from a position of privilege, was one of the most civically active of our diarists, serving as a local magistrate in his retirement.³⁰ Leaving aside his all-too-typical cynicism about politicians, his concern was that the *active experience* of him and others 'on the ground' in an

²⁷ Our survey found some traces of consumer action: when asked which, of a long list of possible actions, respondents had taken on an issue they had named as of importance to them, 11% said they had made a 'personal protest' (defined to include boycotting a product) (Couldry et al. 2006: 45).

²⁸ Here, following our earlier discussion of the term 'public', we distinguish between 'public' action (actions in relation to potentially contentious issues) and civic action (where nothing contentious need be involved).

²⁹ cf. Mulgan 2006.

³⁰ For the class-based distribution of opportunities to do voluntary work see N. Burns, K. Schlozman, and S. Verba, *The Private Roots of Public Action* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001).



area crucial to government policy (penal policy) was not taken into account in the formulation of government policy:

[government's] all a top thing - it's not at the bottom at all. The reality at the bottom is still totally different. You still have the courts clogged up with police witnesses who have to wait forever in court for cases which don't go through for one reason or another. [...] You'll probably never see all of this, of course: nobody does. But it happens all the time. But that's of no concern to politicians. What the politicians are concerned with is that very top layer of presentation through the media of one sort or another to the public. (Edward)

The disjuncture here is not between an individual and a distant public world, but between an individual who *is already* civically active and the public world of government. If those who are engaged and active fail to see a wider public context in which their practice has meaning and value, then there is, potentially, a major problem.


A similar gap between existing practices of, or potential for, civic engagement and clear political disengagement has recently been noted by the report of the UK commission chaired by Dame Helena Kennedy QC (Power 2006). Their recommendations include greater citizen involvement in policy deliberation and implementation.³¹ Whether such recommendations can succeed, even if taken up by government, is uncertain but the report's value lies in addressing the fracturing of the wider context in which democratic engagement (like mediated public connection) can be sustained. **Again, as noted in the last section, this UK crisis must be placed in comparative perspective. The parallel US study, carried out admittedly at a very different point in a particularly contested electoral cycle, found US diarists did generally have a context in which to act out their public engagement. Important differences would also, we suspect, emerge from European comparisons.³² It is only through such comparisons that in the long-term we can grasp the subtle differences in how banal practices are articulated in different countries with very different histories of democratization.**

Conclusion

Media consumption, we have argued, has for a long time occupied an ambiguous position in relation to the consumption/ citizenship divide. We argued at the outset, first, that media comprise a distinctive type of consumption, because of the double articulation they involve and, second, that media consumption has links both with citizenship or public engagement and

³¹ The latter including an exercise in citizen involvement in budget-setting (Power 2006, chapter 7).

³² See Schröder 2006 and Dahlgren 2006.



with everyday non-political, non-civic pleasures. As a result, media do more than challenge the consumption/ citizenship divide. Nor can media be understood if we force that divide into a ‘consumer-citizen’ or ‘citizen-consumer’ couplet. These ambiguities are inherent to media’s contribution to contemporary societies,³³ and we have explored them in the realm of public engagement through our recent research. This has clarified how, by attention to the organization of everyday life - and the hidden articulations that link actions together into ‘dispersed practices’ - we can understand better the subtle role that ‘ordinary’ consumption plays in sustaining citizen engagement.


The consumer/ citizen contrast however still has its uses, pointing to crucial dilemmas in an era when, first, our sense of where, and in what way, we ‘belong’ is troubled and, second, as our fieldwork has brought out, crucial contexts for public action are atrophied, at least in contemporary Britain: contexts of deliberation and contexts for effective citizen participation in policy generation. The consumer/ citizen distinction reminds us of the only possible direction in which solutions to such uncertainties and fractures can be found: that is, by turning towards a broad notion of politics - wider than traditional politics but grounded still in a notion of publicness,³⁴ as the zone where issues that affect us in common are, or should be, addressed - and away from a narrow market-based vision of the ‘consumer’. As with our diarist Beccy, there is no difficulty in finding an individualistic rationalization of staying distant from a world of public issues, or expressing this in consumerist language. But such rationalizations ignore the key difference between politics and markets, as expressed by Jon Elster:

The notion of consumer sovereignty is acceptable because, and to the extent that, the consumer chooses between courses of action that differ only in the way in which they affect him. In political choice situations, however, the citizen is asked to express his preference over states that also differ in the way in which they affect other people [...]. This suggests that the principles of the forum must differ from those of the market. (1997: 10-11)

While he oversimplifies what is at stake in consumption, Elster at the same time expresses a fundamental point. Of course consumption practices may generate many issues for the ‘forum’, but they do so on condition that their status is transformed, from matters of purely individual concern to actions relevant to all of us as members of a shared public world where shared but limited resources are at stake. ‘Public’ as Josh, one of our diarists, put it, is ‘anything that doesn’t just involve one person’.

³³ For the ambiguities of the hyphenated ‘citizen-consumer’ couplet in current UK debates on media and communications regulation, see Livingstone, Lunt and Miller 2007.

³⁴ See Taylor 2004, chapters 6 and 7 on ‘public’ issues as those requiring collective resolution.



In sustaining such a distinction media consumption plays, we have argued, a vital role, but one we must keep always in context. Consider the wider explanation Beccy gave for her ‘consumerist’ solution to the quandary of public connection:


You need to be able to turn the tv off, as awful as it is [...] you do, in life you do have to do what you’ve got to do and if you’ve had a bad day at work you’ve got to do whatever [...] it takes [...] to make you go back there the next day [...].

There is a much wider space - not just the space of economic action but also the space where democratic possibilities are put into practice, or not, at work as well as at home - which shapes the meaning that following the world through media has.³⁵ If, as John Dewey argued, the idea of democracy, to be effective, must extend beyond interfaces with the state to include ‘all modes of human association, the family, the school, industry, religion’ (Dewey 1946: 143), then it is clear that media consumption, important though it is, can only be one part of the solution to contemporary citizenship’s problems.

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³⁵ See Morley 1999.

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