Media Consumption and the Future of Public Connection

Report
March 2006

Media Consumption
and the Future of
Public Connection

NICK COULDRY   SONIA LIVINGSTONE   TIM MARKHAM

THE LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE

20 MARCH 2006

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND KEY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Media consumption matters. Media consumption (of old and new media) contributes importantly to people's possibilities for public connection and engagement in the democratic process. Yet important recent research gives limited emphasis to media consumption's specific

Specifically we have tested two widely made assumptions about democratic politics:

First, 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*);

Second, that this public connection is principally sustained by a convergence in what media

2. Research Design and Methodology

How did we set about finding evidence of citizens' public connection?

Research design

As already noted, our notion of public connection involves an orientation to a space or world where things or issues regarded as of shared concern, not purely private concern, are, or at least should be, discussed or addressed. We do not equate public connection with regular attention to 'politics' in the traditional sense: people's understanding of what constitutes politics may be changing, just as in a digital world the media landscape that potentially sustains public connection is also changing.

Our working assumption has been that the public/private boundary remains meaningful in spite of many other levels of disagreement over the content and definition of politics. This working assumption was confirmed in our fieldwork; while the distinction's abstractness may sometimes cause difficulty, all diarists understood how how public issues might be distinguished from private issues. But our treatment of the public/private boundary was not 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 are media involved, or not, in sustaining that connection?

From the beginning we tried to respect the complexity of such questions and of people's reflections about them. We wanted through our fieldwork to approach this from multiple angles. If, as some argue, the current media environment is fragmenting the public sphere into a mass of specialist 'sphericules' that no longer connect as a shared public world, then we need to know not just about people's media habits, but about where and how they discuss what they watch or read, and with what consequences for their actions. We wanted a methodology that could register individual reflections, as they developed over an extended period, while public events and media coverage changed around them.

Methodology

The key methods of our study were as follows:

mid-income suburban London, poor inner city South of England, prosperous suburbs of two

3. The Public Connection Diaries

What is media's role in sustaining public connection, and what factors (not all, perhaps, media-related) limit media's contribution? We quickly found that 'public connection' was registered in everyday experience, and was more than an academic concept. Take for example Jonathan, a 23 year old university administrator, who clearly looked for a world beyond the purely private:

> I'll always watch the news…I'll always watch it. I think the day that I stop watching it, will be the

mediated public connection, regardless of whether or not diarists are active internet users: Andrea was not an internet user while Janet was, but neither saw politics as connected with their media use or their social exchanges at work:

> I'm not very hot on politics, to be honest ... it 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. (Andrea, 25, paediatric nurse, Midlands rural)
> I'm not the politics girl unfortunately. (Janet, 29, airport administrator, Northern suburb 2)

Both were oriented towards media as a social and collective space, but away from politics.

It would be a mistake, however, to see public connection as tied only to politics, or as shaped exclusively by gender (or other demographic factors, such as class). Two diarists, Kylie and Crystal, were in their 20s, both single mothers and unemployed (although Kylie managed to find part-time work after the diary period); they also uwarce6tricand

actually is... . There seems to be a domination of negative journalism ... Although some (possibly most) of the reporting maybe true, it does make you sceptical and, at times, reluctant to update your knowledge and interest in the media.

Jonathan was concerned here with the way media rewarded his engagement, but he felt also that his engagement isolated him from others:

I've never spoken to anyone about politics. I think that's one of those taboos … sad state of affairs … it's quite scary to see how people are disinterested in it, particularly this generation.

Jonathan found that his interest in politics fitted poorly into his daily work/ social routine, even as he looked for something larger:

I don't know, going out, going out at the weekend, going on holiday ... I just think to myself, is that all it is? Is that all I'm interested in?

This sense of pointlessness extended to his view of British democracy: 'I've become disenchanted because I've just felt as though well what use is the political system that we're in at the moment'. For him, the decision to go to war in Iraq (which he opposed) was a turning-point in his engagement with politics 'because you kind of feel as though like people are just banging their heads against a brick wall'. While Kylie, in spite of her mediated connection to a public world but like a majority of working-class women in their 20s, saw no point in voting ('can't change anything, can I?').

So it is clear right away (see also 3.5 below) that the experience of mediated public connection in contemporary Britain may be shaped, *even among the most connected*, by the absence of other links – between their own engagement and the apathy of others, between their own attention to public matters and the political system's lack of attention (as they saw it) to them. This means that media consumption, while important, is only one of many factors whose relation to public connection must be understood.

3.3 Overall patterns

We return to our diarists' detailed voices later, but what general patterns emerged?

(1) Media World Connectors v Public World Connectors

A key distinction is between people whose mediated public connection is primarily shaped by a strong pull towards media consumption (valued for its own sake), versus those whose

10

I start off [the day] with Radio 2 ... and I'm reading [the papers] by that stage while I'm breakfasting ... And then because I catch the [bus] into work and there's a local free paper that

STRONG ATTRACTION to
media connection/action

STRONG ATTRACTION to
public connection/action

Clear MPC

Weak MPC

No MPC
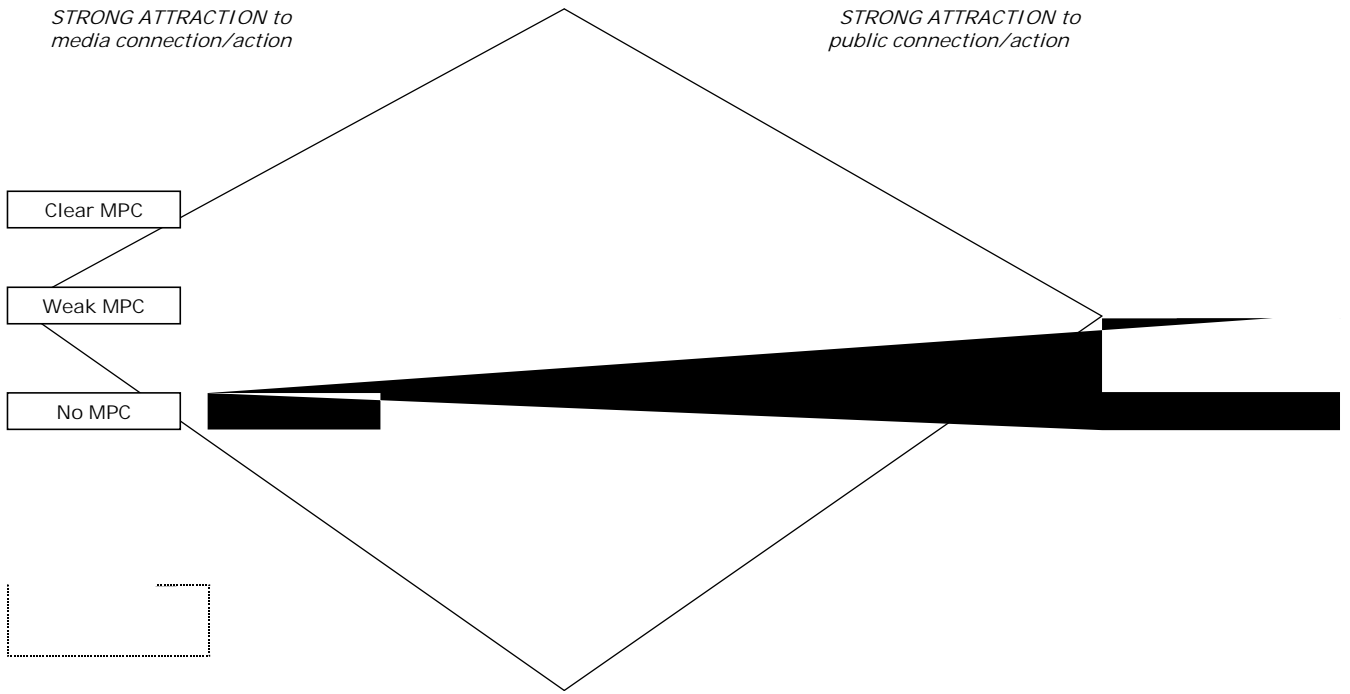
Figure 1: Diarists' Mediated Public Connection (MPC)

People's enjoyment of media culture may, of course, take many forms. For some diarists, particularly women, celebrity culture was important alongside reality TV and/or soaps. Sometimes this is, effectively, the other side of diarists' complete disengagement from politics (for example Andrea and Janet, already quoted):

> Yeah ... I enjoy reading gossipy stories. Everyone enjoys reading gossipy stories (Andrea)

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.

Another exception was an issue that celebrity culture regularly raised: a concern with the ethics of media's coverage of celebrity's private lives. For a few weeks during the diary period, two major stories vied for press attention: global security issues (the Madrid March 2004 bombings and the security situation in Iraq, including the revelations from Abu Ghraib jail) and allegations that David Beckham had had an extra-marital affair. Many diarists were uneasy that some media gave prominence to the latter over the former. But these are evidence, once more, not of connections between celebrity culture and broader public issues, but of many diarists' sense of the clear separation between them:

> Why do we (the public) need to know what the Beckhams do with their private lives? (Lesley, 39, secretary at education college, Midlands rural)

> I don't understand why the private life of the England Coach should have anything to do with anyone but him. Private business is just that – between him and his partner – and so what if it's his secretary? (Josh, 23, architecture student, Northern suburb 2)

Our diary data therefore suggests that media culture may orientate people away from public issues as well as towards them, and that apparent links between celebrity culture and broader public issues are minimal: in Part 4, we find that our survey data points in the same direction.

(3) Dynamics of connection/disconnection

What underlies a strong and stable sense of mediated public connection, or its absence? Specifically, what reinforces or undermines the two components of mediated public connection, regular media consumption and public orientation?

encouragement to public orientation was work-related: diarists whose paid work, or post-retirement voluntary work, specifically required a knowledge of the public world.

We also looked for evidence of 'feedback loops' that helped reinforce the links between media consumption and public orientation. These could be social (most diarists had opportunities to talk about their media consumption, if not about public issues: see 3.5), but another important feedback loop was internally focused: a sense of individual value, particularly the value of 'keeping up with the news' found, as noted before, across genders, ages and classes.

We also asked how someone's public connection (or lack of it) might fit into their overall orientation to the world. A number of diarists seemed quite relaxed about not following the public world, so it was important to see if, from their perspective, there were positive reasons for this 'turning away'. We traced the overall frame of reference which occurred most prominently in each diarist's account of themselves. There were a number of distinct frames, and some diarists used more than one: social, family and work were the most common, but important also were education, ethnicity, the local/civic and more explicitly public orientations (politics, religion, and sport) and non-social orientations such as personal routine.

When we relate this to our preceding type-analysis of diarists' public connection, the results are striking. Taking diarists with weak or no mediated public connection, the majority (7 out of 11) have social and/or family as their orientating frame. As to the 6 diarists who are weakly connected in our overall model, only one was orientated principally to public institutions, but this is not because such diarists were necessarily isolated 'individualists'. For three of the six weakly connected diarists appeared strongly motivated by family. The nexus of social and family (which generally would be viewed as positive) emerges, paradoxically, as important in explaining both low mediated public connection and a 'weak connection' to both media and public worlds. By contrast, the absence of social and family as principal orientating frames seems associated with a tendency towards mediated public connection.

While the complexity of our data makes this analysis necessarily tentative, it suggests there may be important positive reasons (family, social networks) associated with not having mediated public connection, while the absence of social networks may sometimes be associated with high mediated public connection (because media consumption compensates). This both complicates any social-capital model of public engagement and rules out seeing the absence of mediated public connection as crudely a 'lack' or 'deficiency'.

3.4 Media literacy

What type of media users were our diarists?

The first contextual point is that the diarist sample mirrored national trends in terms of access to different media. Unsurprisingly, all diarists had a television and radio; 57% of our diarists had some form of access to the internet, in line with the 2004 ONS figure of 58%[7]. Of those diarists with internet access, six had broadband access (16% of all diarists). This was a little under the then UK average, which in 2004 passed 40% of those households with internet

---

[7] http://www.statistics.gov.uk/CCI/nugget.asp?ID=8&Pos=&ColRank=1&Rank=374

access (23% of overall population), and had reached 50% of houses with internet access by 2005 (32% of overall population).[8]

Levels of media use among the diarists varied considerably, but most diarists had a consistent pattern of consumption. There were 14 diarists who were classified as 'heavy' television consumers, meaning that they watched three or more hours per day on average. At the other end of the spectrum, there were 11 diarists classified as 'light' television consumers, watching less than an hour per day. 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.[9] For our 2004 diarist sample at least the traditional media – television, radio and the press – were overwhelmingly the key means of sustaining mediated public connection, even though the sample had broadly typical levels of online access.

Turning to quality of media use (which we were able to track extensively from diaries and follow-up questions in interviews), an important distinction was between people who use media in a *directed* way (either having a general purpose in mind - to get information about certain broad areas - or a specific purpose - to find out about a particular issue) and those who use media in a *non-directed* way, absorbing whatever media material reaches them and reacting to it. Directed use may be implicit, guided by a preexisting interest in, and position on, issues or (more rarely) it may be explicit as here:

> If I see something at a glance, then I might go on the Guardian site and see if the story's been headlined on there, find the names or the key words and there's somebody else on-line's probably reported it, I can chase it from there. Usually Reuters have got stuff on it. Yahoo, I think they link quite closely with Reuters so if you follow a story, chances are that's where it came from cause I guess they're the biggest news agency. (Josh)

But explicitly directed media use requires time and also a specific motivation, and so in the everyday run of things is relatively rare.

The less-directed media user is ready to follow whatever the media throws up and such use is generally too habitual to be commented upon. Beccy was unusual in reflecting on the non-directed nature of her media use:

> I log on to BBC news and I get distracted by something that looks a bit more entertaining or a bit more like something I would read, from the local or the business section, or shamefully, from the entertainment section, and then I think I've been on the Internet too much and I go back off to do some work again.

Non-directed diarists were subject to two contesting pressures. First, the 'pull' of exceptional news events when their use became, as they recalled it, more directed (the start of the 2003 Iraq war, the Madrid bombing of March 2004, the Soham murder case): 'when the Iraq war started that was the first thing I did every morning, was put the telly on for the news' (Jane). Second, the 'push' of events which become too painful or tedious to watch or read. Many diarists, male and female, found daily coverage in 2004 of the aftermath of the Iraq War

---

[8] Office of National Statistics, June 2005 (www.statistics.gov.uk)
[9] This contrasts with a recent US survey in which 24% of people name the internet as a principal news source. See Pew report "Public More Critical of Press, But Goodwill Persists", June 2005 (http://people-press.org/reports)

difficult to keep following, while some felt the same also about the Beckham allegations:

> Not listened to Radio 4 today, but had [name] our local radio station on instead, many because the world news is too depressing. So I had daft and light entertainment today. (Christine, 46, events coordinator, Northern suburb 2)

> Have avoided newspapers, because as I predicted they are full of the Beckhams and real news is taking a back seat! (Abby, 45, local government officer, Urban South London)

For some diarists, this caused them to switch off from news media more generally during the diary process, while for others it was a temporary factor that did not destabilise their mediated public connection overall.

Already implicit in such reactions is a reflexive attitude towards media which is part of media literacy, even if not fully articulated. We were interested in finding among in our diarists detailed evidence of media literacy that went beyond the common but clichéd response ('don't trust anything I read in the paper'). Here it is important to distinguish between different levels of questioning, some widespread, others rarer.

First, many diarists questioned media's news values. We have already noted one example (Beckham or global security issues?) which became a theme for a number of diarists Nr2etru91g1g1g1g1g1g1

the and atng this 11-67(is 10824 alsa)-104(the)-111(ysa)-904(atng)-11Spa1(he)--96oehis 1-22tlsa the

It is worth here looking more closely at two particular diarists who reflected on media in much greater detail than any other.

Sheila and Bill both came from our Midlands rural region. Sheila was 47 and worked as a senior public health nurse, a role in which, as she put it, she had 'come up literally against media',[10] whereas Bill, aged 61, was a retired managing director with considerable experience of working abroad, who had constructed a post-retirement career in many roles including magistrate and school governor.

Both became troubled by the standards of media in covering important news. Bill was concerned at the intersection between media and processes of government, for example cases where a newspaper's news priorities might work to suit particular political interests:

> when [media] becomes actively involved in pursuing a particular policy, a particular agenda, to me, it's starting to smell of a corrupt society. It's getting a bit ... pravda like.

Sheila's critique of media drew directly on her work experience. Not only did she have to deal on a regular basis with the consequences of media reporting of health issues (as relayed to her by anxious patients and parents, for example in relation to the MMR vaccine scare) but she also began to assess media's evidence standards in terms of those prevailing in medicine:

> I think they should have the responsibility of the truth. I say they should have cause I don't think that they do and I think sometimes they knowingly tell untruths. But that's very difficult for me to say that that's right... . But I suppose at that time [of the diary] I thought, well yeah, I guess that's how it is but I don't know. I don't have evidence of that and coming from an evidence-based area of work, I like to see the evidence before I can pass a comment if you like. But for me, the media ... should be truthful and honest and trustworthy. Sadly, I don't think that they are ... (Sheila, 47, senior health protection nurse, Midlands rural)

Both Bill and Sheila had mediated public connection, but their practice as citizens/media consumers was in some tension, because of their doubts about media.

For Sheila the doubts became acute as she wrote the diary, which she stopped after 6 weeks. The point at which she stopped writing, she reflected later, was the point at which she could no longer resolve the tension between her doubts about media and her sense of dependency upon media, particularly in relation to the dangerous but distant events in Iraq.

Our diarists then exhibited a wide range of media literacy, which at times, in the particular context created by the diary process, developed into sophisticated reflections on media's relationship to democracy. We come back to these reflections at the end of this Part.

3.5 Talk and Action

It is clear, then, from our diary data that for many people media consumption is an important means for sustaining their orientation to a public world: this applies across all ages, classes, genders and ethnicities and covers many distinct forms of mediated public connection, some

some oriented to traditional politics and others not. In only two cases was diarists' public orientation unconnected to their media consumption.

We wanted however to go further and explore how mediated public connection was linked both to everyday contexts of talk and to possibilities for action on public issues. Most accounts of civic culture, after all, are premised on at least the possibility that an orientation to the public world is articulated to both deliberation and action.

All but four of our diarists indicated at some point that they had talked about the types of issues raised in their diary, although perhaps surprisingly in only one case were these discussions online:

> I take part in a number of Internet discussion forums, where people from any part of the world can meet in what some call 'cyberspace' to discuss matters of mutual interest ... When I take a short break from work I can get a cup of coffee, check what's happening in one or two forums and if there's something I find interesting or important chip in with a comment or a question. A great way to learn from other people (Eric, 47, computer analyst and lay preacher, Urban South London)

This sparse evidence of online discussion calls into question the everyday relevance for most citizens of online forums, let alone blogging (to which there was not a single reference by any diarist), however much their significance is predicted in academic and journalistic debate.

Nonetheless talk by diarists about public issues was subject to various constraints.[11] Sometimes this is the strict gendering of talk about news issues, with men taking up a dominant role, as here:

> No, I mean as soon as I sit down to read the paper, like I say, my partner reads it at work and

and family, many others reported lively debate. Enid was one of the main organisers of a local women's group in West London while once or twice a year held a discussion evening based on the newspapers people brought in:

> We have a discussion night. We do it twice a year ... you're all in your little groups of maybe eight people, here are all the papers and you're supposed to have a good look and say ... did you think that in this story that was right, that was wrong and you discuss it

Two of our research team were able to attend one of these sessions; to be clear their purpose was principally social, as there was no intention of communicating any conclusions from the meeting. As part of an informal public sphere, however, such discussions are notable.

On balance, then, our diary data does not support the conclusion either that a spiral of silence (in Noelle-Neumann's term)[12] closes down debate on public issues or that people lack general opportunities for discussion (compare our survey data on talk discussed in Part 4). While not everyone has such opportunities, it remains the case that, when they occur, such opportunities can be valuable in reinforcing mediated public connection.

What was striking however is the almost complete absence in our data of evidence of a connection between talk and action: we only once found evidence of discussion leading to action, when Christine reported resolving with her friends at a party to start a local recycling drive. This is certainly not because diarists lacked opinions or were broadly apathetic. The key issue therefore may be not so much constraints on talk as the usual absence of any practical context that might articulate talk to action. Yet political science generally sees public engagement, deliberation and practical involvement as mutually reinforcing. Do we have instead here signs, if only negatively, of the same decline in genuine deliberation and political consultation in the UK that the authors of a recent study of citizenship in Britain

> ... whereas ... I'm very involved in my mum's neighbourhood. (Christine, 46, business events coordinator, Northern suburb 2)

In expressing this activist value so explicitly, Christine was exceptional in our sample.

The reasons why people justify action or inaction are complex and may, of course, involve a considerable element of rationalization. Once again, however, two absences were striking:

- First, there were only limited traces of online communication providing an action context, even among our younger diarists: one diarist used web-sourced information to base her campaign against an unwanted tree in her street but Eric's online discussions appeared unlinked to opportunities or mobilization for action.

- Second, we found few, if any, traces of the local civic sphere as a context enabling action. The only exception was Christine's environmental activism at street level, and Christine was exceptional also in having a worked out rationale for action. One apparent counter-example, Abby who enjoyed taking part in a Citizens Forum in her South London borough, made no link to any action opportunities.

Not only did we find almost no signs of a supportive context for public action - whether locally or nationally -[14] but even those already active in one important respect – that is, civically active – could draw a sharp line between this and any active involvement in politics.

Here we should return to Edward who was one of the most civically active of our diarists, serving as a local magistrate in his retirement. For all his cynicism about politicians, his principal concern was not so much with not being listened to by politicians, but that the active experience of him and others 'on the ground' in an area crucial to government policy was not being taken into account in the formulation of government policy. The latter from his perspective (rightly or wrongly) was too concerned with matters of short-term presentation

> It'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,

21

3.6 Satisfied distance or troubled closeness?

Mediated public connection (whether present or absent) is, we acknowledge, only one dimension of people's lives, whatever arguments we may make for its importance as a precondition of democratic engagement. We have tried throughout our research to be sensitive both to the varieties of public connection and also to the possibility that mediated public connection may matter much less to some diarists than to us as researchers! This is why we have paid attention also to the category of 'weakly connected', and argued earlier that the absence of mediated public connection may from some perspectives be associated with positive values (friends, family), rather than being a 'lack' to be remedied.

On the one hand, some diarists, like Jonathan with whom we began Part 3, found it difficult to imagine not being following closely a world of public issues, for example Josh:

> I don't like being uninformed … I don't know whether it's just because I don't like being in the situation like – where I was asked about the Euro and I didn't know. I felt stupid, although, you know, it's one thing out of many things that I get asked about. Um, and I just hated, to not know. And I think that's the answer. I just don't like not knowing.

It was difficult for Josh to understand those who felt differently:

> even down to my girlfriend actually and I can try and explain things to her not because I want her to think the same way as me but ... because I try to form these opinions that are informed by fact not just because that's the way I feel when she doesn't listen to me, or because she doesn't care, or she hates me watching the news, it bores her to tears ...it frustrates me that people don't care what's going on around them.

This concern was reflected by a number of both younger and older diarists (Crystal, Bill, Edward). As Bill put it: 'I do think there are a growing number of people and not unintelligent people who do distance themselves from the media'.

On the other hand, some diarists were clearly at ease in their distance from a world of public issues. Andrea enjoyed what she called 'trashy' magazines and soaps, but also took in news on a regular basis; her diary responded to issues of the moment but without any longer term consideration of issues. She expressed more explicitly than any other diarist a sense of traditional politics being remote from her life:

> Yeah, I think it 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. You know, they make the decisions, it doesn't matter you know, obviously they consider the consequences but other things sometimes generally happen. So and it seems like we're a long way away from it you know, and if you are going to reap any benefits, it takes a long time for it come through so yeah, I don't generally have much faith or anything in the government really. (Andrea)

This disconnection, as noted earlier, had a clear gendered context and was in conscious contrast to both her partner and her father. She also sustained her distance from public action at work.

> Yeah, I am in a [nursing] union but I wouldn't ... I suppose if everyone had the same view as me, then nothing would happen anyway but I wouldn't generally go along to a meeting cause ... I've always kind of been in that mind, don't get involved ... if I did, I don't feel it would make any difference. Cause ... there's a wider issue there you know, with money and the government ...

all relating back to political issues. (Andrea)

She could imagine possibly getting more involved in local issue as she got older, but for now she saw democracy as being distant and largely irrelevant, even if she retained a sense that this distance was something she held in common with a large section of the 'public'.

Beccy also expressed her distance from a world of public issues but from different, more explicitly individualistic perspective:

> 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

3.7 Doubting Democracy

We want to end Part 3 of our report by turning to a discussion in our Midlands Rural focus group where two diarists quoted previously, Bill and Sheila, found that their misgivings about the current state of British democracy overlapped.

We do not claim any statistical relevance for these reflections of two individual diarists, even if they were among our most reflexive diarists. But when those as civically active and engaged with the world of public issues as Bill and Sheila show such concern at the workings of British democracy, it is surely important to listen to what they say:

4. The Public Connection Survey: Key Findings

In this section of the report, we review the key findings of the Public Connection Survey conducted on our behalf by ICM Research over the weekend of 3-5 June 2005. First, we summarise in sections 4.1-4.2 the main findings under three headings (public connection;

Orientation to the public world

Asked what they 'generally follow or keep up to date with', the most common answers were the environment (70%), crime (67%), health (66%) and events in Iraq (63%) (up to 3 responses were permitted). One in 5 (21%) named Big Brother or other reality television programmes, more than named trade union politics (17%).

Men tend to follow Iraq, the UK economy, sports, Europe, international politics, Westminster politics and trade union politics more than women, who are more likely to follow issues relating to health, fashion, celebrity and reality television.

Older people are more likely to follow the environment, crime, Iraq, third world poverty, the UK economy, funding for local services, local council politics, and Westminster politics. Younger people, on the other hand, are more likely to follow issues relating to fashion, celebrity, reality television and popular music.

Issues also vary by socioeconomic status. 50% of middle class respondents follow international politics compared to 28% of working class respondents; middle class respondents are also more likely to follow issues relating to health, the UK economy, Europe and Westminster politics.

Just over half the population (especially younger and middle class people) talk to others (mainly friends, then family and, for around half, people at work) about the issues that matter to them. However, nearly half rarely if ever do so.

What's on people's minds?

When asked, in an open ended question, to identify a recent issue of particular importance to them, 72% of people named an issue, the top issues being Iraq (13%), crime (12%), health (7%), the election (5%), Europe (5%), and poverty (4%).

Women were more likely to identify health, education and poverty; men were more likely to name Iraq, Europe and the environment.

Predictably, younger people followed education more, and older people pensions.

Middle class people were more likely to name Europe, working class people taxes.

Nearly half said they considered the issue they named to be of national importance. 38% said it was an international issue, while 12% said it was of local importance.

For the most part, they got their information about this issue from television (65%), though the press (50%), local paper (27%), radio (24%), other people (24%), personal experience (22%) and the internet (21%) also played a role.

From interest to action?

For the issue of importance to them, the survey asked whether they had taken any action. Of those who named an issue 55% had taken some form of action. Those who did not blamed lack of time, the perception that it would not make any difference, and the view that they are 'not that kind of person'.

Nearly a third (31%) of those who named an issue had signed a petition, 21% had contacted an MP or councillor (higher among those 55+), 19% had gone to a local meeting, 11% had made a personal protest (such as boycotting a company), and 10% had joined a local group.

4.2 Media consumption

Overall media consumption

Television is the most widely engaged with medium (watched each day by 96% of the population). It is also the most time-consuming medium (occupying, on average, 1-3 hours of people's daily leisure time).

Radio, though listened to by 4 in 5 people, takes up just half an hour, a similar amount of time being spent on newspapers (by 3 in 4 people) and reading for leisure (by 2 in 3 people).

However, media use is strongly stratified, with television watched more by older and working class people. Middle class people report spending more time with radio and reading books.

Reading (but not broadcasting) is also stratified by gender, with men spending longer reading newspapers and women spending longer reading books for leisure.

Despite widespread attention to the participatory potential of the internet, half the population does not access it at all, and those who do are much more likely to be younger and middle class.

Of those who do go online (in their own time), most spend between half an hour and one hour, with men spending slightly longer online than women.

The media are used for multiple purposes, with the most popular forms of entertainment being documentaries (more older people), comedy (especially men and younger people), and music (especially women and younger people), closely followed by sport (mainly men) and drama (more women).

News is ranked sixth in genre preference, just ahead of – in rank order - soaps, history, action-adventure, sci-fi, crime and reality television.

News consumption

When it comes to specifically seeking out the news, television is again the most common news source (89%), though 71% listen to radio news (higher for men, and middle class people), 61% read the national paper (higher for men and older people) and over half (56%) read their local newspaper.

Only 23% use the internet to access the news, and this is strongly stratified – more men, younger and middle class people.

Although men report having more disposable leisure time, as do older and working class people, this seems an unlikely explanation for these differences.

70% of the population considers it a duty to keep up with what's going on in the world, especially older and middle class people.

Indeed, 81% claim a pretty good understanding of the main issues facing the country (more men and middle class people).

On the other hand, 23% (more older and working class people) consider there's no point watching the news as it deals with things they can do nothing about, and 61% feel that politics is so complicated they can't really understand what's going on (more women and working class people) or that it doesn't matter which party is in power since things go on much the same (55%).

Social expectations are important, though they vary. More than half consider that their friends (66%) and people at work (54%) expect them to know what's going on in the world – men and older people particularly experience such expectations.

Further, most people say that they follow the news both to understand what's going on in the world (90%) and to know what other people are talking about (76%).

Thus most people (80%) have made watching the news a regular part of their day, even though nearly half the population (44%) considers that politics has little connection with their own life.

Media trust and literacy

People can be not only disengaged from politics but also from the media – 40% said the things the media cover have little to do with their lives, although 66% trust the media to cover the things that matter to them.

For the most part, however, people are fairly trusting of news reporting – on television (69%), press (40%), and online (36%).

Working class people tend to be both more disengaged but also more trusting, while middle class people are more likely to be critical (or media literate).

Thus, middle class people are more likely to say that difference sources of news tend to give different accounts (85% middle class vs 75% working class).

However, there are no SES differences in the practice of comparing across news sources (59% overall, though men report this more than women).

4.3 Linking public connection / media consumption (key regressions)

Research strategy

A range of factors have been hypothesised as possible explanations of political participation, and this itself can be framed and measured in different ways. The Public Connection survey asked a range of questions (see Appendices 2 and 4), designed to mirror those asked in other national and international surveys (for comparability) while also linking these to questions about media consumption (the present focus). While often neglected as irrelevant to public connection, there is increasing interest in research and policy debates regarding the positive or negative role of the media (particularly the debates growing out of aspects of Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* thesis). Usually treated generically (as 'the media'), their role has been hypothesised as distracting (time displacement), undermining (dumbing down) or iniquitous (knowledge gap). To enhance understanding of the media's role, the survey disaggregated media consumption, news consumption, news engagement; it also asked separate questions about television, press, radio, internet.

The findings from a series of multiple regression analyses are briefly summarised below: further information is given in appendix 3, section 8, and for a full analysis see Chapter 7 of Couldry, Livingstone and Markham *Media Consumption and Public Engagement: Beyond the Presumption of Attention* (Palgrave, forthcoming, 2007).

What predicts voting?

Age (older) and SES (higher).

Also those who are higher in political interest, political trust, social capital and political efficacy.

In sum, voting is explained both by structural (age and class), social (social capital/local involvement) and socio-motivational factors (interest, trust, efficacy).

What predicts interest?

Age (older) and SES (higher) – as above.

Also social capital, political efficacy, social expectations (unlike for voting), but not trust.

As expected by the research literature, political interest derives from a particular mix of structural (age and class), social (social capital/local involvement, social expectations) and socio-motivational factors (efficacy).

Does media consumption make a difference?

Findings show each type of consumption is not necessarily correlated with others; hence they need to be examined separately. Particularly, overall media consumption does not translate automatically into news consumption.

Nor does time spent watching television correlate with time spent with other media – we found no overall high-low media consumption measure.

Those already advantaged by gender, age and class are the most likely to seek out – and presumably benefit from – the news. In short, media use, and news consumption, is stratified, as proposed by the knowledge gap (or 'virtuous circle') hypothesis. This suggests, in turn, that mediated public connection is also stratified.

We found no overall correlation between television viewing or newspaper reading and voting. But political interest is correlated with media and news consumption.

Interestingly, the relation between television consumption and political interest is curvilinear. So, for light viewers: more viewing is associated with more interest, but for heavy viewers: more viewing is associated with less interest.

This suggests that for light television viewers (and the majority of average viewers), Putnam's time displacement hypothesis is not supported, although it is supported in the specific case of heavy television viewers (who are also more likely both to be disengaged and to be of lower socioeconomic status).

4.4 *The role of other media factors (further regressions)*

News engagement

When we add media use into the multiple regressions predicting voting and political interest, the findings show that news engagement, reading newspaper (a negative influence, suggesting a 'tabloid effect') and listening to radio each make a modest addition to predicting voting, controlling for other factors.

The composite variable (news engagement) is crucial here; details of its components are given in Appendix 3, section 8B. Consistently with the project's overall approach to the

Further, the more one is middle class, politically interested, politically distrustful and politically efficacious, the more actions one takes.

So, media consumption plays no role in predicting the amount of action, but it does play a role in predicting whether or not one takes action, with media literacy associated with action and media trust associated with inaction.

Particularly, those who did not act were also more likely to watch television news, but less likely to listen to the radio or read, showing again how different kinds of media consumption encourage or undermine political participation, some therefore displacing or distracting people from effective practices of public connection.

Sources of disconnection

Using a scale to measure how disengaged people are (for details, see appendix 3, section 8D), those who are more disengaged are lower in socioeconomic status, older, and lower in political interest and political efficacy.

Media consumption also contributes a little to disengagement, this being associated with more reading of the local paper and less reading of books. The more disengaged, the more people watch television also.

In sum, some media are more associated with engagement (reading books and, correlated with this, the internet, radio and the national press) and others are more associated with disengagement (reading the local newspaper and, correlated with this, watching television).

Summary of regressions

Of the hypotheses outlined earlier on possible relations between public connection and media consumption, the findings show that media consumption does contribute to public connection and so should be included in future research surveying various forms of political participation among the population.

However, different media contribute to different forms of public connection in different ways, making a simple summary of 'the media's role' inappropriate. There are some signs that particular types of media consumption (heavy television viewing) are associated with lower news engagement and public participation, giving limited support to the 'media malaise' thesis, although socioeconomic status may be an important underlying explanation here. There are also some signs that certain types of news consumption may reduce participation – through a possible tabloid effect of the press, and for those who are low in media literacy (or too trusting of media coverage).

There are more signs, however, of the ways in which the media, particularly the news media, support and stimulate participation – this including television news, itself closely related to news engagement, radio and online media sources. Those more engaged by the news are more likely to vote and, particularly, more likely to be interested in politics. This finding seems to hold both for the mainstream political news agenda and for single issue politics, but not for celebrity or popular items on the news agenda.

News engagement – though, importantly, unrelated to socioeconomic status or gender, suggesting that there are many routes to news engagement available across classes and genders – seems to contribute to a virtuous circle by which the already engaged become more

informed, engaged and active; the other side of this however is a vicious circle by which the less engaged become more disengaged and inactive. Certain media – notably the internet –

Our cluster analysis allows people to be grouped according to the types of theme that they tend to follow. Identifying clusters is initially difficult because there are some issues that everyone apart from those with low interest is likely to follow to some extent, including health, the environment, crime, sport and events in Iraq. Other themes, however, mark some groups of people as distinct from others in what they track. The cluster analysis identified four distinct groups:

Traditional: these people follow the mainstream issues mentioned above, but also more specialist topics such as European affairs, local politics and trade union issues, as well as the 'issues' topics mentioned below. They are more likely to be male (57% are), they are older than the other clusters (average age 43 years) and are more likely to be middle class. They have higher social capital, higher levels of efficacy, and spend more time with newspapers, radio and books. They tend to use a broad range of media, and have more leisure time to do so. Their news engagement, unsurprisingly, is high.

Issues: this group has slightly more women than men, and close to average class and age. They tend to follow issues such as third world poverty and funding for local services as well as the mainstream themes. Interestingly, they tend to have low trust in

5. Overall Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

We want finally to pull together the main findings of the diary- and survey-based phases of our research, and to draw out some policy recommendations. The latter are aimed particularly at policymakers concerned to reverse the apparent disengagement with democratic politics in Britain - the most urgent context in which we write.

5.1 Media consumption matters

Our research has established that media consumption (both old and new media) contributes importantly to people's possibilities for public connection and engagement in the democratic process. Long-established news forms (the television news bulletin, the daily newspaper) remain important, as do non-news forms in traditional media such as the television documentary or the radio phone-in. Our diaries illustrate the multiple forms of mediated public connection, while our survey shows news engagement contributes significantly to explaining political interest, which in turn is a major predictor of voting.

This argues for a greater emphasis in debates about political disengagement on understanding

Related policy recommendation: In considering media's role in reversing political disengagement, <u>traditional</u> media must be given as much weight as new media, particularly media formats associated with habits of news consumption that have been stable and socially recognised for a long time.

In addition, habits of <u>news-oriented</u>

Our diaries offered disturbing evidence of civically active people who doubted whether their experience was being taken into account by policymakers, while our survey found a gap between people's sense of being informed about civic issues and their sense that they were able to influence local decisions. Important here

Appendix 1: The Public Connection Diarists

Number	Pseudonym	Region	Age	Gender	Family Status	Profile (SES)	Ethnic	Diary Medium
1	Harry	Suburban London West	69	M	Married, Adult children	Retired Bank Information Systems Manager (B)	White	Written
2	[Non-Completer]							
3	Pavarti	Suburban London West	51	F	Married, Teenage Children	Shop Owner (C2)	Asian	Written
4	Jonathan	Suburban London West	23	M	Lives With Parents	University administrator (C1)	White	Email
5	Angela	Suburban London West	29	F	Married, no children	Teacher (B)	White	Email
6	Gundeep	Suburban London West	48	M	Married, Adult Children	Garage Manager (C2)	Asian	Tape
7	Kylie	Inner City South London	24	F	Single Mother	Unemployed (E)	White	Written
8	Eric	Inner City South London	47	M	Married, Teenage Children	Computer Analyst (C1)	Black	Email
9	[Non-Completer]							
10	Sherryl	Inner City South London	39	F	Single	Unemployed (E)	Black	Written/Tape
11	Crystal	Inner City South London	22	F	Single Mother	Unemployed (E)	Black	Tape
12	Abby	Inner City South London	45	F	Married, Teenage Children	Admin Officer (C1)	Mixed	Email
13	Nigel	Rural Midlands	54	M	Married, Adult Children	Premises Officer School (C2)	White	Email
14	Marie	Rural Midlands	34	F	Married, Young Child			

Appendix 2: Survey questions

Q1   In a normal day, on average, how many hours do you spend doing each of the following? Watching TV, Listening to the radio, Reading a newspaper, Reading a book for leisure, On the internet or sending emails for yourself rather than for work.
Response values: 1: No time, 2: Less than 15 minutes, 3: 15-30 mins, 4: 30 mins – 1 hour, 5: 1-3 hours, 6: 3-6 hours, 7: 6-12 hours, 8: More than 12 hours

Q2   Do you do any of these things at least 3 times a week on average? Read a local newspaper, Read a national newspaper, Listen to the radio news, Watch the television news, Go onto the internet for news

Q3   In a normal day, on average, how many hours would you say you have for yourself? By 'time for yourself' we mean leisure time you can spend as you want.
Response variable values: 1: No time, 2: Less than 15 minutes, 3: 15-30 mins, 4: 30 mins – 1 hour, 5: 1-3 hours, 6: 3-6 hours, 7: 6-12 hours, 8: More than 12 hours

Q4   Please say to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements: You generally have enough time to do what you want in the day; In general you are satisfied with your life at the moment

news, because it deals with things you can do nothing about; It's a regular part of your day to catch up with the news; Politics has little connection with your life; You have a pretty good understanding of the main issues facing our country; It doesn't really matter which party is in power, in the end things go on pretty much the same; Sometimes politics seems so complicated that you can't really understand what's going on; You often feel that there's too much media, so you need to switch off
Responses: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree

Q13   To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the media? By media, we mean television, newspapers, radio, internet, etc.
The things the media cover have little to do with your life; Different sources of news tend to give different accounts of what's going on; You trust the television to report the news fairly; You trust the press to report the news fairly; You trust the internet to report the news fairly; You trust the media to cover the things that matter to you; You generally compare the news on different channels, newspapers or websites
Responses: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree

Q14   Now thinking about politics, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
You feel that you can influence decisions in your area; You know where to go to find out information that you need; People like us have no say in what the government does; You trust politicians to tell the truth; You trust politicians to deal with

Appendix 3: Detailed Findings from the Public Connection Survey

1. Political Engagement

Table 1: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
(5 point scale from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree)

	Gender		Age			SES		All
	Male	Female	18-34	35-54	55+	ABC1	C2DE	

3.   Public Orientation

Table 3A: Which of the following things, if any, do you generally follow or keep up to date with? (%)

Table 3F: Still thinking about the issue you have just mentioned, have you done any of these things in relation to it? (%)

	Gender		Age			SES		All
	Male	Female	18-34	35-54	55+	ABC1	C2DE	
Signed a petition	31	31	30	34	28	32	29	31
Contacted an MP, councillor, etc	21	22	15*	21*	28*	21	23	21
Gone to a local meeting	21	18	18	21	19	21	18	19
A personal protest(e.g. boycotted product, worn a slogan, left a meeting)	12	11	12	12	10	13	8	11

Table 3G: If not, why have you not taken any of these actions regarding the issue?

	Gender		Age			SES		All
	Male	Female	18-34	35-54	55+	ABC1	C2DE	
No time	28**	19**	35**	26**	12**	26*	20*	23
It won't make a difference	25	21	23**	21**	26**	22**	24**	23
Not that kind of person	11	7	2**	14**	8**	10	8	9
Don't know anyone who has	4	9	8	6	7	7	6	7
Not interested	7	8	4	8	9	7	8	7
Other reason	30	35	33	26	40	33	31	33
Don't know	5	10	10	5	9	5	12	8

Base: N=351. *=significant at p<0.05; **=significant at p<0.01

4.   Media Consumption

Television is the single most useful source of information for almost a third of respondents,

40% say that the things the media cover have little to do with their lives

When asked about their attitudes to the media, 40% of people said that the things the media cover had little to do with their lives, while 51% disagreed or disagreed strongly. 79% agreed that different sources of news give different accounts of events, while 59% actively compared different sources. More people trust television to report the news fairly than any other media: 68%, versus 40% for the press, and 36% for the internet. Working class respondents are more likely to find the media irrelevant to their lives, while middle class respondents are more likely to agree that different sources of news give different accounts. Men tend to compare sources more than women.

7. Other findings

Table 7A: In a normal day, on average, how many hours would you say you have for yourself? (%)

		Gender**		Age**			SES**		All
		Male	Female	18-34	35-54	55+	ABC1	C2DE	
1	No time	3	7	6	6				

Mirroring the overall number of hours that respondents said they had to themselves, more men than women, more older than younger, and more working class than middle class respondents said they have enough time for themselves. Overall, 64% of people thought that they had enough time, while 32% did not. When asked if they were satisfied with their lives at present, 82% either agreed or strongly agreed, while 13% disagreed. 89% of those over 55 said they are satisfied, compared with 79% of those under 35.

Table 7C: How safe do you feel living in the neighbourhood you live in now?
(4 point scale from 1=not at all safe to 4=very safe)

Gender		Age			SES		All
Male	Female	18-34	35-54	55+	ABC1	C2DE	
3.33	3.31	3.26	3.35	3.34	3.36**	3.25**	3.32

Base: N=1017. *=significant at p<0.05; **=significant at p<0.01

91% of people said that they felt either very or fairly safe in their neighbourhoods, and there was little variation by demographic. The groups most likely to feel unsafe were those in the C1 socioeconomic category (14%) and those aged 18-24.

8.   Regression Analysis of Key Drivers: Voting and Interest in Politics

Table 8A: Regression equation, predicting voting and political interest

	Voting	Political interest
Political interest	.243 ***	N/A
Age	.286 ***	n.s.
Political trust	.085 ***	n.s.
Social capital (local involvement)	.060 *	.102 ***
SES	-.059 *	-.117 ***
News engagement	.091 **	0.371***
'You know where to go to get the information you need'	.066 *	n.s.
Time spent reading a newspaper	-.077 **	.093 ***
Time spent listening to the radio	.060 *	n.s.
Whether listen to radio news regularly	n.s.	.075 **

these dependent variables. Age (older) and socioeconomic status (higher) predicted 10% of the variance in voting – gender played no part. Age (older), SES (higher) and gender (male) accounted for 7% of the variance in interest in politics.

In the next step, measures of trust, efficacy and social capital were added to the equation, and political interest was added to the predicting factors for voting. This doubled the variance for predicting likelihood to vote: higher political trust, interest in politics and social capital are all key driving factors in people's propensity to vote. Social capital also predicts interest in politics, but, interestingly, political trust plays no role.

- Binary Logistic, predicting for action taken in regard to issue named:

	Social expectation	Media Trust	Political Trust	Radio overall	Reading books	Television news	'You can affect things by getting involved'	'You know where to find the information you need'	Interest in politics	Compare news sources
B	0.199	-0.251	-0.196	0.08	0.12	-0.573	0.142	0.17	0.205	0.181
Sig.	0.007	0.008	0.008	0.029	0.006	0.012	0.037	0.018	0.001	0.002

8D: Disengagement scale

- Using a scale to measure how disengaged people are, those who are more disengaged are lower in socioeconomic status, older, and lower in political interest and political efficacy.*

- Media consumption also contributes a little to disengagement, this being associated with more reading of the local paper and less reading of books. The more disengaged, the more people watch television also.*

Appendix 4: Measures used in the survey analysis

A range of factors has been identified by the research literature as possible explanations of political participation – including political interest, trust, efficacy, social capital and social norms. The Public Connection survey found that these are themselves all interrelated in complex ways. Additionally, the survey measured media consumption (hours per day), regularity of news consumption, and a range of other media-related variables.

The key variables were measured in the survey as follows (overall findings and main demographic differences have already been noted above).

Factor	Question	% pop
Voting	You generally vote in national elections	82
Political interest	You are generally interested in what's going on in politics	65
Political trust	You trust politicians to tell the truth	21
	You trust politicians to deal with the things that matter	45
	You trust the government to do what is right	43
Social capital	You play an active role in one or more voluntary, local or political organisations	18
	You are involved in voluntary work	28
	Being involved in your neighbourhood is important to you	62
Media literacy	You know where to go to get the information that you need	82
	Different sources of news tend to give different accounts of what's going on	79
	You generally compare the news on different channels, newspapers or websites	59
News engage-ment	You follow the news to understand what's going on in the world	90
	You follow the news to know what other people are talking about	76
	Its your duty to keep up with what's going on in the world	70
	Its a regular part of your day to keep up with the news	80
	You have a pretty good understanding of the main issues facing our country	81
Media trust	You trust the television to report the news fairly	68
	You trust the press to report the news fairly	40
	You trust the internet to report the news fairly	36
	You trust the media to cover the things that matter to you	65

Appendix 5: Sampling and Survey Methodology

Recruitment

On our behalf, ICM carried out a national (GB) quota survey of 1017 people by telephone during the weekend of 3-5 June 2005, which asked questions about media consumption, media attitudes, political attitudes, local involvement or efficacy, specific issues currently being followed by respondents and actions taken in relation to these issues. The context was one month after the UK general election, the same weekend as the French vote on the EU

Appendix 6 Where to find out more about the Public Connection Project

The project's website is

www.publicconnection.org

This contains recent papers and the texts of public presentations of project results.

A full book-length report on the project's findings will be published by Palgrave in 2007 as:

Nick Couldry, Sonia Livingstone and Tim Markham, Media Consumption and Public Engagement: Beyond the Presumption of Attention.

Published and forthcoming journal articles and book chapters on the project include:

Nick Couldry, Sonia Livingstone and Tim Markham (2006, forthcoming) 'Connection or Disconnection? Tracking the Mediated Public Sphere in Everyday Life' in R. Butsch (ed) Media and the Public Sphere. Palgrave.

Nick Couldry and Tim Markham (2006, forthcoming) 'Public Connection through Media Consumption: Between Oversocialization and Desocialization?' in P. Simonson (ed) Politics, Social Networks and the History of Mass Communications Research. Sage/ Annals of the