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Media consumption and public connection

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Chapter 2: Media Consumption and Public Connection

Why media consumption?

In Chapter 1, we reviewed the debates regarding the basis of the public's engagement with democratic politics. We observed that, while there are many explanations of the so-called crisis in democracy, these generally focus on changes in political institutions and social structures; much less often is serious attention paid to the media. Yet at the heart of many of these explanations lies a set of assumptions about people's 'public connection' – their lived relationship with public culture – which make little sense unless grounded in the material realities of people's daily lives. Firmly embedded in these material realities are the symbolic realities of the media (Couldry 2005a; Silverstone 2005).[1]

We also began to map out some key processes now shaping public connection, particularly the putative shift away from 'traditional' politics towards single-issue or life-style politics, the decline in public trust in democratic institutions, and the increasingly contested boundary between public and private. Media are highly relevant to each since so much that is 'political' or 'public' is presented through media. Indeed as Putnam (2000: 218) notes, 'newspaper reading and good citizenship go together', while according to the British Social Attitudes survey, alongside a 'gradual erosion' of trust in government through the 1990s, people's willingness to contact the media is the only form of political action that has increased (Bromley et al. 2004).[2]

Attracting and sustaining citizens' attention is a central challenge in modern democracies and a prerequisite for most political or civic action, from opinion formation or public discussion to voting or direct participation in democratic institutions. But how such attention is managed raises important questions, particularly since this attention is likely to be uneven, and perhaps also unequally distributed. This complexity is compounded by the contestability of the public/private boundary itself. We thus join with a growing number of scholars who are interested in how the transitions across boundaries (from personal to political, from opinion to action, from individual to collective) are mediated, in either direction.

This chapter will first argue against the position that simply blames the media for today's supposedly high levels of political apathy. We then examine the claim that media can, and in some ways do, sustain collective attention. We do not advocate the naïve view that media consistently act as a force for the public good. Instead, if, as Craig Calhoun (1992: 13) put it in relation to the public sphere, 'the public define[s] its discourse as focusing on all matters of common concern [and] the emerging public establishe[s] itself as inclusive in principle', we wish to ask: what are these matters of common concern, how are they engaged by the public, how does public engagement

relate to political participation, if at all, and how important are media in facilitating, shaping or impeding such participation?

The plurality of media

Any such analysis must start, however, from a recognition that media are plural in their cultural forms, modes of address, technological features and, hence, in their effects. We must disaggregate the generic term, 'the media', too easily reified in public, sociological and political debate.

One aim is to acknowledge the range of opportunities for people to use media to engage actively with civic concerns. Beyond 'the news' (the main, widely valued, means by which public connection is mediated) are various other, less obvious means by which particular media genres may open up new routes to public participation.

Another is to clarify what aspect of media is under discussion. Two frames are frequently confused in both popular and academic discussion. Roger Silverstone (1994) used the concept of double articulation to contrast the media qua material objects such as the television or walkman (i.e. technological objects consumed in particular spatio-temporal settings), with the media qua texts such as the news or the soap opera (i.e. symbolic messages located within particular sociocultural discourses and interpreted by audiences). So when, for example, research critiques 'the media' for undermining public participation, we need to be clear: is the target of this critique the media qua material objects – keeping people at home on the sofa, filling their ears so they can't hear conversation around them, distancing them from each other in time and space – or the media qua texts – infusing the news with commercial values, reinforcing normative perspectives through the soap opera, or replacing genuine debate with the managed show of the phone-in? Similarly, when the claim is made that 'the media' bring the nation together, is the claim that they do this because people simultaneously consume the same programme, and so can share experience over the water cooler the next day, or is the claim that people receive the same communicative content and so come to share a particular perspective on the world and a language for discussing it? The answer is probably 'both', but the analysis depends greatly on which aspect of media we emphasise.

Research must also disaggregate 'the audience'.[3] Murdock et al. (1995) identify three categories of resources – the material (income, space, etc), social (support networks and local expertise) and symbolic (educational and cultural competences) – which contextualise media consumption and which are differentially available. In charting the multiplication of media goods in the family home over recent decades, Sonia Livingstone (2002: 41–2) distinguishes between 'media rich' (online, digital television, multiple media options), 'media average' (computer, multichannel television), and 'media poor' (no computer, terrestrial television). While the precise combination of technologies continues to change, the principle of differentiation persists, since with each new market innovation, social stratification works to maintain class distinctions. Other kinds of differentiation – by gender, ethnicity, generation – are perhaps less predictable; in relation to media goods at home, the picture for gender is changing as early technophobia among women evaporates, largely because of the ubiquity of technology in the work- place (Wajcman 2002) though attitudes to other media may remain gendered (Gray 1987). The picture for ethnicity, at least in the United Kingdom, is complex, with some minority groups

being among the early adopters while others are disproportionately represented among the digitally excluded (Ofcom 2008).

Similarly research on how people interpret media texts has generated a thoroughly differentiated conception of audiences. Social class, gender, age and so forth all shape audiences' interpretative activities, and their ability to construct a meaningful world view that may accept but also re-interpret or resist media's often-normative encoding.[4] Research is now turning to the rather different tasks – increasingly framed as media literacy – implicated in making sense of new media, especially the internet.[5]

In addition, disaggregating audiences, and adjusting the broader narrative of mass consumption to take account of people's everyday responses to media, has tended to move audience research away from an overly media-centric approach. Being part of an audience is just one of many activities in daily life, and media just one of many sources of meaning and influence. The charge of media-centrism criticises at audience research for reifying its objects of analysis ('the movie-goer', the 'soap fan', 'the audience') and so blinds us to the diverse social and cultural contexts within which media reception is embedded. Various concepts have been proposed to counter this media-centrism: the 'embedded audience' (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998), the 'dispersed audience' (Radway 1988), the 'extended audience' (Couldry 2005), and the call for 'ethnographic' research (Drotner 1994; Ang 1996). These debates have opened the way to a more contextualised approach to people's everyday relations with media.

By opening up the black boxes of 'the media' and 'the audience', the empirical analysis of later chapters will explore how people's diverse, often contradictory participation in democracy is thoroughly mediated.

'The media' – legitimate object of blame?

Since the advent of broadcasting, opinion has been sharply divided between those excited by its potential to stimulate, engage and integrate, and those fearful of its potential to distract, disengage and fragment. Each new medium has attracted surprisingly similar public hopes and anxieties (Drotner 1992).

A commonplace, pessimistic discourse about media use is that the media, especially television, transform the public into a passivised, individualistic, mindless mass audience, sapping their motivation to get off the sofa and engage. This discourse – familiar through such well-worn tropes such as the couch potato or telly addict – reinforces a highly critical view of the media. The view that the media are irrelevant or even harmful to democracy, and political engagement in particular, goes back to elite models of democracy (Lippman 1922: 63; 1925). More recently, Jürgen Habermas (1989) argued that the media have played a key role in undermining the public sphere through the 'refeudalisation' of public discussion into the mere 'publicity' of a pseudo-public sphere. By contrast with face-to-face communication, where one can check whether communication is trustworthy, authentic and reliable, the increasing mediation of the public seems to open the door to the inauthentic, the motivated and the untrustworthy.

In the lively debate following Habermas' original thesis, many have judged the media to have 'undercut the kind of public culture needed for a healthy democracy'

(Dahlgren 2003: 151) by various means, including (1) keeping people at home and away from civic and community spaces, (2) distracting people by easy entertainment away from more demanding news and current affairs, (3) commodifying news into branded infotainment and dumbing down journalistic values, to the point where fact and fiction are indistinguishable within politics itself,[6] and (4) focusing attention on the activities of the traditional (privileged) establishment and silencing difference and dissent.[7]

A recent and influential version of those arguments is Robert Putnam's Bowling Alone thesis (Putnam 2000). Noting time-use data that shows most of Americans' increase in free time in the past decades has been taken up by television viewing, Putnam argues that high television consumption (television as entertainment, that is) is a major cause of declining levels of social capital and civic engagement. As he puts it, 'a major commitment to television viewing – such as most of us have come to have – is incompatible with a major commitment to community life'; consequently, 'just as television privatises our leisure time, it also privatises our civic activity, dampening our interactions with one another even more than it dampens individual political activities' (2000: 229).

Both Putnam's argument and his evidence have since been widely criticised (see Chapter 1). Nonetheless, blaming television remains a popular explanation for the apparent loss of civic engagement and Putnam's argument has been reworked theoretically in Henry Milner's argument that low civic engagement is associated with the high know- ledge dependency associated with high TV viewers (Milner 2002). Yet arguments such as Putnam's based on how we use our time, while they cannot easily be dismissed,[8] are far from straightforward. American research based on time-budget data (Robinson and Godbey 1997) has concluded that subjectively the US is a 'time-famine society', even though the average American actually had more free time in the 1980s and 1990s than previously. Gershuny (2000) argues that recent years have seen increasing convergence in time use by gender and class in the UK, like many Western countries, with time 'pressures' increasing not because of overall hours spent in employment, but because a growing range of activities impinge upon leisure time.[9] The relation of time to socio-demographics is therefore complex.

Reasons for blaming media are, then, multiple. The risk is that blaming 'the media' without disaggregating these different claims obfuscates the broader, complex and codependent relations between media and society. The critique too easily loses its force especially as, when expressed in its simplest form, it can be sidelined as a mere scapegoating of the media as a convenient target, motivated either by the covert desire to distract attention from other likely causes of political apathy (for example, failing political institutions) or by an elitist disparaging of 'ordinary' interests (a consistent pitfall of arguments around the Habermasian public sphere).[10] A more subtle and nuanced account of media's consequences for public life is needed.

Mediating a shared frame of attention

If, as in much liberal thought (see Chapter 1), the public world is taken to mean that which is both collective and accessible (or visible), then private experience can offer little scope for public connection, which obscures the potential fluidity of the public/private boundary. While not arguing necessarily that everything private has a public or political significance, we do argue against the idea that everything private

(i.e. inaccessible to others) is without public or political significance. Why? For our present purposes, the main reason is the crucial positioning of the media, linking the private and inaccessible realm of the home (where most media are consumed) to the public (visible, accessible) world beyond. That, many argue, is the point of the media; engaging with media at home, as part of a collective audience, has long been regarded by media and communication scholars as potentially a public activity.

So mediation may facilitate shared attention and, as Daniel Dayan (2005: 44) puts it, we need to 'pay attention to attention'. Dayan argues that collective attention takes many forms: the public, but also the spectator, the activist, the witness, the community and the crowd. If shared attention can be constitutive of the collective, media may also serve to divide, fragment, silence or exclude members of collectivities – a question that can only be resolved through empirical exploration.

It is widely assumed, however, that media constitute the public's sense of its collective identity and community. In Europe particularly, the classic public service vision of electronic media as connecting community, even building the nation, has long been influential. The BBC's manifesto for public service broadcasting in the twenty-first century proclaims that, to build 'public value', it must enable citizenship, strengthen social capital and connect communities (Grade 2004). Indeed, throughout the history of mass media,[11] nations have relied upon the assumption that media can and do play a key constitutive role, an assumption held in fascist as well as democratic states and long before the advent of broadcasting.[12] Paddy Scannell (1989: 155) has argued media play a role in the 'resocialization of private life', while Bird sees media as providing the 'cultural frame' for everyday life (Bird 2003: 3), notwithstanding questions about whether media really did play such an integrative role in nation-building as so often now taken-for-granted (Schlesinger 2000).

Many have agreed with this analysis but offered a much more critical reading of its consequences. George Gerbner's claim that 'television tells most of the stories to most of the people most of the time' (Gerbner et al. 1986: 18) pointed to media's ideological power to draw people into a normative mainstream, masking diversity and undermining dissent, whereas a more recent critique of (American) public service television challenges its distinctly middle-class vision of what it means to be a 'good citizen' (Ouellette 2002: 138).

As we move into a new media and information environment, characterised by convergent, ubiquitous and interactive communication, this now-familiar agenda has focussed on the internet (Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2006; Livingstone 2005a). The internet seems to some uniquely equipped to 'build' community, whether a social cosmopolitanism (Hannerz 2002) or an enhanced deliberative democracy (Bentivegna 2002). As one of Maria Bakardjieva's interviewees said, the internet offers 'a link to everywhere' (Bakardjieva and Smith 2001: 76), a statement reminiscent of Robert Park's comment, many years ago (Park 1984: 81, 85), that the newspaper provided a 'window on [the] world' for US immigrants seeking community in the modern metropolis.

A significant shift is suggested if we contrast these last two quotes: in both, the media are crucial to public connection, but in relation to the newspaper, the media do the connecting; by contrast, with the internet, citizens are the agents, for without their activity, the link exists only as a potential (Burbules 1998). However, if there are

expectations that the internet will simply 'take over' television's role in connecting community, history suggests otherwise, for rarely do new media replace old media (Marvin 1988); rather, the new 'remediates' the old (Bolter and Grusin 2001). We do not know as yet whether television's audience will further fragment (Webster 2005) or, perhaps, continue to provide the centre-stage for national culture, albeit an often mainstreamed and normative stage, leaving the internet to afford opportunities for the expression of diversity and difference.[13] Once again we will leave the implications of this point open until we examine our fieldwork.

From the collective to the public

Television seems 'to project its images, character types, catch-phrases and latest creations to the widest edges of the culture, permeating if not dominating the conduct of other cultural affairs' and yet it also has 'the powerful capacity … to draw towards itself and incorporate (in the process, transforming) broader aspects of the culture' (Corner 1995: 5). But, even if one accepts media's importance in attracting the public gaze and so setting the agenda of our shared attention, what are the implications of this beyond a collective experience? When is mediated connection also public connection? Is media consumption necessarily significant for democracy and the public sphere? Even if true in the past, can the media retain such a role, now the mass media that dominated the twentieth century are diversifying into the manifold interactive media of the 21st century?

One way forward is to argue that conceptually 'the collective' and 'the public' are one and the same. But this fails to capture the normative expectations held of the public, especially by theories of democracy (Taylor 2004: see Chapter 1 above). In seeking to distinguish the two, Daniel Dayan (2005) argues for a conception of the 'public' that goes beyond mere common experience. 'A public' must engage in actions that constitute a visible performance – it must take action, and it must be seen to do so. Further, it must be seen by itself to act, for a public (unlike, say, a crowd or a community) is reflexive: 'a public not only offers attention, it calls for attention'. Forming or joining a public takes commitment; it is not entered into lightly, for once joined, the public is imagined by its participants in the first person, as 'we'.

The publics in which ordinary people, in their daily lives, might participate – the 'we' that is open to them to join – include 'the general public' or 'the nation', but also various counter-publics, local publics or subcultural publics. These may not always meet Dayan's normative standards but they do, nonetheless, represent a range of ways in which people experience and enact a connection to the public. To allow for this range, our phrase, 'public connection', repositions 'public' as an adjective rather than a reified (or idealised) noun. Degrees and types of publicness may, thus, vary; indeed, the nature of public connection is, for us, an open question, inviting empirical exploration.

Developing Dayan's analysis also helps to reveal media's potential role. The media provide a means, perhaps the key means in late modern society, not only for offering but also calling for attention. Media are frequently reflexive and are engaged with reflexively by their audiences.

Media choices reflect a certain degree of commitment, as a form of identity display, not least to oneself, although as a corollary we must realise that media exclude as well

as include. As Mirca Madianou (2005) observes, in Greece the 'national' news presumes the public to be Greek, thus discursively excluding the Turkish-speaking minority in a manner strongly felt by that subsection of the audience who, in their turn, 'switch off', simultaneously switching on to an alternative form of news and, so, to a potentially subcultural public. Research indicates that levels of mistrust in media are much higher in UK certain ethnic minorities than the general UK population (Ofcom 2006a). More generally, as critical scholarship has long made plain, it is endemic to news discourse that it divides the world variously into 'us' and 'them'.[14]

That qualification aside, what grounding in democratic theory can be found for these claims that media sustain the public's attention? First, John Dewey's argument (Dewey 1946: 114–15) that tradition- ally, citizens' duties have been threefold – to vote, participate in the social life of the community and communicate, expressing opinion and discussing issues of the day, and so communications ('shared experience') provide the basis of democratic revival. Barnhurst (2000) however suggests that for young people in the early 21st century, these duties are perceived and enacted differently and now encompass various types of expressive and resistant identity, in which media are variously involved. T. H. Marshall's (1992: 44) argument, that citizenship relies on the 'extension of common culture and common experience', like Dewey's, makes no specific mention of media institutions, though Raymond Williams (1961) draws out Marshall's implicit assumption that media play a central role in sustaining a 'common culture', providing 'representations of what living is now like' (Williams 1976). Scannell (1989) emphasises the role of 20th century national broadcasting in generating a new 'communicative entitlement' for whole populations. However, with the notable exception of Habermas' (1989, 1996) initially negative and later more positive reading of media's contribution to democratic engagement, most political theory has given media limited explicit attention until recently.

It is much easier to find examples of the assumption of mediated political connection in political science,[15] even if the nature of media's role remains little explicated.[16] But if it has only become common recently within mainstream political science to be explicit about media's contribution to public connection, the sub-discipline of 'political communication' research, is premised precisely on the salience of mediated political connection;[17] we draw on insights from this field in what follows.

The traditional centrality of the news

For most people, the media are the main source of news about political matters (Electoral Commission 2008) and, notwithstanding the media environment's diversification, television remains 'the main source'[18] of news, cited as such by 2 in 3 British adults (Ofcom 2006). The same survey finds that nearly 4 in 5 trust television to provide fair and unbiased news, though interestingly those of higher socio-economic status are less likely to prioritise television news (preferring newspapers or radio).

In part, such high trust reflects people's acknowledged dependency on television news at times of conflict or crisis, especially international crisis.[19] At such times, people may have complex and ambivalent responses to media images of global suffering over which audiences have little control (Hoijer 2004), while also being critical of the coverage (Michalski et al. 2002).

Under more everyday circumstances, however, and notwithstanding generally high levels of public trust in the objectivity of television news, there are many uncertainties whether people accept, or even under- stand, the news. Research consistently shows that few can recall many of the news items watched just a few minutes before, and that many confuse, or misunderstand key aspects of the message content.[20] Key barriers to understanding include the use of technical terms, lack of context or explanation for events, the rapidly shifting news agenda, and mismatches between visual and verbal information. These are increasingly being raised in policy contexts as 'media literacy' questions, though this shifts responsibility from producer to receiver,[21] a problem when news is institutionally organised according to priorities that often do not match those of the citizen.[22]

Understanding presumably influences decisions over trustworthiness. The 2004 British Social Attitudes survey found that while 65 per cent of broadband users trust the internet as a source of news (the same proportion that trust newspapers), the balance is different among potential internet users and non-users who trust both the internet and newspapers less overall; in particular the internet is a much less trusted medium among non users (59 per cent trusting newspapers versus 19 per cent internet news) (Bromley et al. 2004). Pew (2004: 33) also reports considerable scepticism towards news sources among the American public, with 53 per cent agreeing that they 'often don't trust what news organisations are saying'. However, all this begs the question, does greater trust indicate higher or lower levels of media literacy? Is there a 'right answer' to the question: 'how much of the time can you trust newspapers'? One American study (Tsfati 2003: 65) found that: 'when people did not trust the media, they tended to reject the mediated climate of opinion. On the other hand, when people had faith in the media, they tended to consistently converge with the media's election predictions'.

Understanding and trust is not simply a matter of the public's 'media literacy'. In a survey for the BBC among 16–44 year olds, it was argued that not only does the public 'find it difficult to relate politics and its presentation to their everyday lives' but also 'more media, in all forms, can mean more coverage but less clarity', especially as 'many people do not have a grasp of the basics of on-going political and news issues … or even democracy's structure and workings' (BBC 2002: 4; see also Hargreaves and Thomas (2002: 4)). These reports suggest a failure of news media as much, or more than, a failure of the public. Further, when people distrust media representations, they may either seek out a wider range of information sources or 'dismiss coverage' altogether (Reilly 1999). The latter rejection is more characteristic of lower socio- economic status, ethnic minority and marginalised populations.[23]

In short, people's interest in news is shaped by whether or not they understand it, and understanding depends on the form of the news, and the ways in which it addresses people. Research shows that if audiences do not understand, they lose interest and become disengaged (Graber 2001). Hargreaves and Thomas' (2002) study identified 'a strong demand for clear direct explanations from journalists which cut through 'waffle' and 'spin' and which explained why these events were happening' (Philo and Berry 2004: 257). Greg Philo and Michael Berry also found that people were more engaged (and understood news reports better) if they could empathise with the people depicted, or there were common values in the news to which they could relate. But, recalling Putnam's argument, Ron Lembo (2000) has suggested the 'sociality' of TV

for many adults is comparatively 'disengaged', requiring the news to overcome such disengagement if it is to sustain public connection.

Yet far from media seeking to overcome disengagement, some research points to media institutions ever more motivated to communicate with themselves, and with society's elites (Raboy 1992: 142). Nick Couldry's work (2003a) sees the idea of media as socially integrative as a myth whose relationship to social reality cannot be assumed. Taking a different tack, Nina Eliasoph (1998) seeks to understand the role of apathy in everyday life, through the patterning of everyday talk and action, where people may want 'to create a sense of community, but [do] not want to talk politics' – precisely the problem in moving from the collective or civic to the political that we saw in another context at the end of Chapter 1.

For young people particularly, the internet is becoming an increasingly important source of news, raising new questions about people's skills in locating, comparing and critically evaluating an expanding range of news sources, many of which lack traditional gatekeepers or editorial quality checks. The 'UK Children Go Online' survey found that 24 per cent of UK teenagers read the news online (Livingstone and Bober 2004), while the Electoral Commission (2008) found that 25 per cent of 25–30 year olds turn to the internet as a major source of political and current affairs news, compared to just 4 per cent of those are 55 years. However, Pew internet surveys (2000, 2002a, 2004) suggest that young people's interest in the internet is insufficient to counter their generally lower levels of news consumption overall, though online news does now comprise a larger proportion of their news consumption than for older people. Reliance on the internet as news source may rise among the whole population during times of emergency such as the September 2001 attacks (Hamilton and Jenner 2003: 136). Other American research also suggests that the public is increasingly using the internet as a news source (Eveland et al. 2004), and this is a growing trend also in the UK (Ofcom 2004b). Online news appears to supplement more than displace traditional news sources (Althaus and Tewksbury 2000), and since many rely on the main news 'brands', the content thus obtained does not differ greatly from broadcast news (Tewksbury 2003). Research on the internet, however, is still in its early phases, and our research will make no a priori assumptions about the internet's importance for ordinary people in their daily lives.

Moving beyond claims that the public is irrational, news media simply irresponsible, or that the internet will solve the problems in the media- citizen relation, we need a complex account that relates media consumption to public connection in multiple ways.

Engaging with media in late modernity

The very factors that threaten the taken-for-granted centrality of traditional routes to mediated public connection may point, simultaneously, to new routes. Crucial here is the increasing individualisation in society, including the individualisation of media use, especially among young people. 'Individualisation' refers to a continuing process not a radical break, proposing that traditional social distinctions (social class, but also gender, ethnicity, region) are declining in importance, resulting in a fragmentation or undermining of the norms and values which have, hitherto, defined how people live their lives.[24] Regarded critically, this arouses popular fears of the selfish, 'me-generation'. More positively, it suggests new freedoms through self-actualisation and

intensified reflexivity.

In terms of media consumption, one may point to the gradual fragmentation of audiences for the main terrestrial channels in a multichannel environment (Webster 2005), to the multiplication of media goods and increasing independence of time-schedules within the household (Livingstone 2002), and to the gradual displacement of mass media (television especially) by the internet, mobile and digital media (UCLA 2003). Observers of recent media history predict that the long-term consequences of media will be further to stratify (Dahlgren 2001: 83), fragment (Lievrouw 2001; Sunstein 2001) or polarise (Jones 2002) lifeworlds, not integrate them. Alternatively more diverse media content, together with the rise in creative or user-generated content, may facilitate the project of the self.

However we resolve this, media's mode of address is clearly changing as we move from a mass mediated to an increasingly multi-mediated culture. Media have never addressed all parts of the population equally: the press never tried, television tried but failed for many decades though public service retains such an ambition (Grade 2004); while the internet is built on the assumption of diversity and heterogeneity. Audience research strongly suggests that audiences are, in practice, just as disaggregated as we already know media organisations, texts and technologies to be (Livingstone 1998). Even the exceptional case of a national or global 'media event' (Dayan and Katz 1992) – a coronation or royal funeral, a major football game, even the finale of Big Brother – may have audiences that are more heterogeneous, diverse, stratified than we first suppose (Turnock 2000; Couldry 2003a). Indeed, it is a standard finding that audiences – or media consumers – acquire, make choices about, and interpret media texts and technologies in a manner strongly shaped by their sociodemographic background (social class, gender, age, ethnicity) and individual life history. In this regard, media consumption is part of the broader analysis of mass consumption that seeks to understand the complex ways in which people choose, interpret and appropriate goods within their daily lives (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1990: 139).

In any case we are concerned in this book with more than convergent national habits of media consumption, even if to some extent they persist. For such convergent consumption may not be focused on media that link to the world of public issues. What if media connection is mainly used by most people for entertainment genres, not news, so that the presumption of 'public connection' is unfounded (Morley 1999: 139, 152)?

When addressing such concerns, the research literature often finds itself challenging the boundaries of the political. A case has been made, across a wide range of entertainment genres – the soap opera, the talk show, music and, most recently, sports – that these too may provide a basis for what we are here calling public connection. The argument is not, generally, made in terms of a shared knowledge of political facts, but rests on claims regarding identity and life-politics (gender, ethnicity, age), on mobilising shared emotional connection, and making visible the lived reality of ordinary people (especially the poor, the marginalised and those usually denied a voice in traditional political formats).[25] We take such arguments seriously: now that the public agenda is preoccupied by contentious issues once considered private, 'such as affirmative action, abortion, and the rights of sexual minorities … issues about which large publics are either disinterested or unalterably divided' (Bennett 1998),

who is to say that the treatment of such issues in a soap opera is any less influential than its treatment by the news? But the empirical question remains: how effectively are such genres linked to 'the political' in the broadest sense (that is, the world of public deliberation and public action)? For public connection is more than a matter of expressing belonging to a specific community (see Chapter 1).

One area of entertainment where, in principle, we might expect such links to a broader public agenda is celebrity culture. Celebrities, we are often told, are role models for millions, especially younger citizens; the detailed narratives of celebrity lives – their struggles over identity, sexuality, giving birth, performing in public – certainly fascinate many of us. And celebrities are increasingly involved in, and used by politicians to further, political narratives, as part of a general blurring of the boundary between news and entertainment (Delli Carpini and Williams 2001). From here, some have made a stronger case, that celebrity culture is an essential component of public debate about the issues which require public resolution, whether as part of an increasing personalization of politics (Corner 2003), or as part of a broader narrativisation of democracy that includes a wider section of the public (Hartley 1999; Lumby 1997). This contradicts a longer negative tradition which sees celebrities and the mediated events constructed around them, as pseudo-personalities and pseudo-events (Boorstin 1961). But such is the proliferation of celebrity culture (Rojek 2001; Turner 2004) that it can no longer simply be dismissed as external to the world of public issues. We have taken an open view on this question: we asked our diarists to talk, as they thought relevant, about celebrity and other aspects of popular media culture, and then looked for any connections they made with issues of public contention.

In contemporary large-scale democracies, it would be absurd to ignore media's potential contribution to democracy as both information sources and foci of public attention and orientation. But the key question is: how are such possibilities enacted and embedded within the broader structuring of daily life, and how are such possibilities perhaps now being transformed?

New and emerging sites of mediated public connection

In the face of voter apathy and the supposed decline of civil society, we are witnessing a range of initiatives to engage audiences in public fora, often aided by new technological forms of interactive and participatory media. The familiar, mass communication model – with its centralised organisation, elite gatekeepers and established relations with institutions of power – no longer has a monopoly, with new opportunities emerging for the public to communicate, connect and deliberate online (Delli Carpini and Williams 2001; Lievrouw and Livingstone 2006). Following Habermas' later work, Sara Bentivegna (2002) argues that the internet is 'democratic' in that, while each of its features (interactivity, facilitated horizontal communication, disintermediation, reduced entry costs for small groups/individuals, and increased speed and flexibility of transmission and circulation) are not intrinsically new, when combined they enable the internet to introduce a qualitative shift in the potential for democratic communication.

Governments appear optimistic that civic or political participation can be thus revitalised, supporting a variety of mediated initiatives in relation to cultural citizenship, political socialisation, participatory deliberation, e-democracy, the digital

divide, citizen engagement, and so forth (Bentivegna 2002; Coleman 2005; Livingstone 2005b). At present, however, evaluations of these initiatives are less than optimistic (Liff and Stewart 2001; Phipps 2000). An American survey of 15–25 year olds found that the internet to be even less effective than traditional means of engaging disaffected young people though very effective at mobilising the already-interested (Levine and Lopez 2004) while a survey of UK teenagers (Livingstone et al. 2005) found that those from more privileged homes, and with higher quality internet access, were better positioned to take up civic information available online (see also Ofcom 2009).

It is important here to avoid polarising the (passive, mass) audience and the (active, collectivist) public. After all, they may be the same people, and such a binary opposition blinds us to the complexity of people's relations with media and, so, to ways in which media consumption may sometimes work for the democratic cause. The growth of borderline public/private phenomena across both traditional and new media are important complications here, whether talk shows (private issues aired in the public television studio), internet chatrooms (publicly visible discussion accessed from private bedrooms), or voting in media contests or commenting on the news via text message (participation at a distance);[26] the BBC's Action Network[27] was another interesting development. Without overstating their consequences, these new genres at least 'create a space for us to understand each other. Such understanding stops short of real political efficacy. But it does contribute to democratising the discourse of news' (Lewis et al. 2005: 89).

There is evidence also that citizens are challenging more established media for the right to interpret public discourse, particularly through citizen-created online magazines or the much-vaunted 'blogs' (Boczkowski 2004). In the US particularly, bloggers have been influential in, for example, securing the resignation of Republican Senate majority leader Trent Lott (Cornfeld 2005; Drezner and Farrell 2004a; Regan 2004). Some have suggested that they constitute a new kind of governing institution, a 'fifth estate' that 'keeps watch over the main- stream media' (Drezner and Farrell 2004b), while the argument that computer-mediated communication provides intrinsically new possibilities for the general public and specialised groups to connect and debate is at least a decade old (Rheingold 1995). Yet there are good reasons to be cautious in the face of such optimism. One American survey found that only 17 per cent said online news led to them being exposed to a wider range of political opinion (Pew 2003). The 'blogosphere' may in large part be an elite phenomenon: in the US there is evidence that media elites including leading editors, publishers, political reporters and influential columnists all read blogs, and when 140 editors, reporters, columnists and publishers responded to a survey about which blogs they read, the top 10 blogs were responsible for 54 per cent of the citations, and the skew was even more marked among 'elite' publications (Drezner and Farrell 2004a). The authors caution that:

> To the extent that blogs become more politically influential, we may expect them to become more directly integrated into 'politics as usual,' losing some of their flavor of novelty and immediacy in the process. The most recent evidence of co-option was the decision by both major parties to credential some bloggers as journalists for their nominating conventions. (Drezner and Farrell 2004a).

Commentators on the many experiments in e-democracy (Tsagarousianou etal. 1998)

similarly observe that it appears easier to attract the already-interested or politically active than draw in new initiates to democratic deliberation: consequently, initiatives directed at the marginalised risk instead further advantaging the privileged.

One must ask not only about whether online information will improve the quality of public connection but also, more broadly, about the prospects for civil society online (and, indeed, offline). Steve Jones (1997: 25) suggested some time ago that the internet contributes to the fracturing of social realities, while Pippa Norris (2000: 277; Norris 2001) argues that the internet is likely to intensify the 'democratic divide' between 'those who do and do not use the multiple political resources available on the internet for civic engagement'. Thus Michael Bimber (quoted in Lievrouw and Livingstone 2002: 54) fears that the internet is producing the 'democratisation of elites'. Meanwhile James Katz and Ronald Rice (2002: 150)[28] conclude in their survey of the internet's social consequences that:

> even with higher bandwidth and richer format, [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 media channels and processes.

All this is without taking into account the online strategies of existing power groups: Robert McChesney (2000) charts the growing power over the internet of dominant commercial players, reducing the diversity of voices that get heard online, while Anthony Wilhelm (2000) complains that online politics takes the form of monologues, not dialogue. This is echoed by young people when they complain that online they are invited to 'have their say' yet rarely are listened to (Livingstone and Bober 2004; Livingstone 2009). Interestingly, following the successful use of the internet in the 2008 US election, Pew internet reports that online citizens also expect to be active in the Obama administration (Smith 2008).

We return here to the suggestion at the end of Chapter 1: that even enhanced civic engagement and mediated public connection will mean little unless on a larger scale it contributes to people's possibilities of effective action, which means government responding to the conversation as well.

Conclusion

As throughout this chapter, the best response to such complexities and ambiguities about digital inclusion/ exclusion is further empirical research. We have tried to show that, notwithstanding many uncertainties and doubts, the idea of 'mediated connection' – that media consumption sustains, in crucial respects, the shared attention of whole populations within, and perhaps now, beyond, national borders – remains pervasive and important. But what empirical support is there for this idea? How is it enacted in people's lives?

In Chapter 3, we ask specifically: how can such broad questions be translated into an empirical programme of research?

[1] On most measures, media's role in our lives goes on increasing. For UK data on the acquisition of media goods over decades, see MacKay (1997), for US data on television viewing over recent decades, see Robinson and Godbey (1997). There are some exceptions, of course, notably signs that in the US time spent on the internet may be displacing time spent viewing television (USC 2004).
[2] Although it remains at a low level (3.9 % of population) (National Centre for Social Research 2006).
[3] Alasuutari (1999; Livingstone (2005a).
[4] Morley (1986); Press (1991).
[5] Snyder (1998); Kress (2003); Livingstone (2004); Jensen (2005).
[6] Delli Carpini and Williams (2001).
[7] McChesney (2000).
[8] See Hirschman (1982) on political scientists' underestimation of the time necessary for political involvement, Verba etal. (1995) on time as a key determinant of higher voluntary participation, and Croteau (1995) on the lack of time left over from work for working-class families.
[9] Cf van Frissen (2000) on dual income families' sense of living in the 'rush hour of life'.
[10] Calhoun (1992), Fraser (1990).
[11] Reith (1924: 219), Arnheim (1943), Rath (1989), Lacey (1996).
[12] Anderson and Levin (1976), Gellner (1983). Compare early 20th century accounts of sociality in the modern city (Park 1984).
[13] Contrast Bentivegna (2002) and Luke (2006).
[14] van Dijk (1988), Liebes (1992), Gamson (1998).
[15] See Norris' 'virtuous circle' argument (Norris 2000) and earlier research on the knowledge gap', namely, the more you already know, the more the media inform you, and vice versa (Ettema et al. 1983).
[16] Street (1994).
[17] Delli Carpini and Keater (1996), Cappella and Hall Jamieson (1997), Graber (2001).
[18] Robinson and Levy (1986).
[19] Ball-Rokeach (1985), Cohen et al. (1990), Sancho (2003).
[20] Graber (2001), Robinson and Levy (1986).
[21] Berg and Wenner (2004), Livingstone et al. (2008).
[22] Lewis et al. (2005).
[23] Croteau (1995), Hargreaves and Thomas (2002), Michalski etal. (2002), Morley (1992), Towler (2001).
[24] See, for example, the writings of Beck (1992), Reimer (1995) and Ziehe (1994). More critical positions regarding the individualisation of youth culture are developed in Lieberg (1995) and Pollock (1997).
[25] Livingstone and Lunt (1994), Hermes and Stello (2000), Costera Meijer (1997), van Zoonen (2001), Coleman (2003).
[26] Coleman (2005), Gamson (1992), Livingstone and Lunt (1994), Shattuc (1997). Cf. Drotner (2005) on the potential of mobile telephony generally.
[27] Previously called iCAN, this provided an online public forum and resource site for civic activism: www.bbc.co.uk/dna/actionnetwork.
[28] Castells (2001: 118) and Gandy (2002) on the instrumental nature of online use.