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## Media consumption and public connection: towards a typology of the dispersed citizen

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**MEDIA CONSUMPTION AND PUBLIC CONNECTION: TOWARDS A TYPOLOGY  
OF THE DISPERSED CITIZEN**

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# **MEDIA CONSUMPTION AND PUBLIC CONNECTION: TOWARDS A TYPOLOGY OF THE DISPERSED CITIZEN**

## **Abstract**

This paper explores the nature and extent of citizens' connection to public space through media consumption. It reports on a study of data from two qualitative sources: panel responses and individual in-depth interviews. Focussing on 'public connection' (people's orientation to a public world in a broad sense), the authors analyse, first, evidence of considerable disenchantment with politics and/or media, particularly among elderly people and individuals belonging to minority groups; second, even where that disenchantment is missing, time is a major constraint on public connection through media, and the interaction of time with other factors such as differential use of new versus traditional media is analysed; third, they find evidence of how individuals attempt to overcome such constraints and sustain some sense of public connection, even if it is not oriented towards national politics and is marked by considerable ambiguity and self-doubt. The conclusion links the findings with wider debates about the complex contemporary shifts in the nature of citizenship.

**Keywords: citizenship, public sphere, public connection, media consumption, time scarcity, the dispersed citizen**

**7686 words (inc notes and tables) + 679 references**

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## *Introduction*

There are many causes of disenchantment in contemporary societies, and politics and the media are two common objects of disenchantment. It is striking, however, that, if we look at theoretical or practical models of democracy which to different degrees all valorise participation of some sort – at least by periodically choosing a state’s leaders - they take for granted a certain level of enchantment, which may or may not be actual. More precisely, most debate about political participation shares two assumptions. First, that it is desirable for all citizens to be - to some degree - connected to society’s centre, particularly its political centre, and second that media have a crucial role in enabling that connection. Yet, despite widespread concern among policymakers<sup>1</sup> and academics in US and Europe (for example, Bauman, 1999; Beck, 2000; Touraine, 2000) about whether those assumptions still<sup>2</sup> correspond to a reality, we lack empirical work that substantiates or challenges them.

It is true, of course that much work in political communications has investigated aspects of how people’s media consumption contributes to their knowledge of politics (Delli Carpini and Keater, 1989; Graber, 2001; Neuman, 1986; Page and Shapiro, 1992) and how media content and style affects cynicism about the formal political process (Capella and Jamieson 1997; Patterson 1993, 2002). Most of this literature has used survey data rather than qualitative data and we would not wish to deny that quantitative data has an important role to play in analysing larger patterns of political communication (for an interesting recent example, see Lewis, 2001). Indeed survey data has been used to considerable effect in criticising one well-known pessimistic reading of television’s consequences for political engagement (Norris, 2000 and Milner 2001 criticising Putnam, 1995, 2000). Our concern in this paper is different

because it focuses on people's broader sense of engagement with politics and the public world as they experience it. Other strands in the political communications literature indeed have pointed to the need to pay close attention to how citizens themselves talk and think about politics (Neuman et al, 1992; Gamson, 1992), an argument that gains even greater force at a time of apparent disengagement from formal politics. Since the reasons for such disengagement in Western democracies remain uncertain and disputed (Pharr and Putnam, 2000), there is a strong argument for examining closely the texture of people's everyday engagement with a public world through media – if indeed that is the reality for most people – in order to increase our understanding of how people's sense of politics is constructed (Neuman et al, 1992: 3) and the role of the media in this process. We examine people's accounts of their everyday media use to gain a contextual understanding of the public connections that media enable within busy, crowded lives.

This article discusses two quite different types of data: replies written by the panel of the Mass-Observation Archive ('M-O A') coordinated by the University of Sussex in response to our commissioned questions; and individual in-depth interviews conducted in London with a small but contrasting sample (for the research design in detail, see next section). First, however, we need to explain some distinctive features of how we approached the vast question of mediated engagement with a public world.

We deliberately sidestepped disagreements over the definition of politics (important though they may be for particular people's engagement or otherwise with the politics on offer at particular times and places) in order to focus on a more general sense of orientation to some shared world of collective concern that underlies such disagreements. We will call this orientation 'public connection'. Public connection in this sense brings us to the sources of

civic engagement in general (as debated from Almond and Verba onwards)<sup>3</sup> and the uncertainties about where the roots of today's apparent disengagement lie. As Lance Bennett (1998), among others, has argued, there are likely to be many complex factors at play (cf within political sociology, Turner, 2001) including the changing nature of employment and the time-related and other pressures associated with that. As we will see, aspects of this question (particularly career and family-related time pressures) emerge from people's accounts of their everyday media use.<sup>4</sup>

By examining 'public connection' rather than people's specific engagement with formal politics, we wanted to explore a dimension of (dis)engagement relevant to people however they define politics. As we emphasise in a later section ('The Ambiguities of Participation'), our data is fully consistent with recent and much discussed understandings of 'life-style' and identity politics (Bennett, 1998; Corner and Pels, 2003; Hermes 1998; Inglehart 1997; Mulgan 1994); indeed it adds useful empirical support to those general positions in the literature. At the same time we uncovered constraints on public connection to 'politics' (however defined) which may be of wider salience than the working-class alienation from formal politics discussed by Gamson (1992) and Croteau (1995). Specifically, we found evidence of, first, a general disconnection from both media and political worlds, particularly among the elderly (and those with a strong sense of their minority status); second, a practical constraint amongst young adults and the middle-aged who still desired to be 'connected' but had limited time to do so effectively. Even so - a third point - we also found evidence of how, in spite of time and other constraints, people use their scarce resources to sustain some sense of public connection, although not necessarily to the national system of formal politics. None of these three points, we contend, can be grasped effectively without looking at people's own detailed accounts of their daily engagement with a public world through media.

Civic engagement is then subject to diverse range of constraints and limitations, even as media outlets and information sources multiply. We seek to capture this situation through the metaphor of the 'dispersed citizen'; since dispersed citizens' practice of engagement is complex and fragmented, it is all the more important to listen to their accounts of that practice closely (cf LeBlanc, 1999). Here, work within sociology and cultural studies on (dis)connection from social and cultural life may be a useful supplement to the political communications literature.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Research Design***

Our study aimed from the outset to produce multiple perspectives on these questions through contrasting types of data: diary commentaries written by anonymous members of the M-O A panel and face-to-face interviews with people, generally conducted in their homes (for demographic details of both samples, see Tables 1-5).<sup>6</sup>

In our study's first phase, open-ended questions on media and the public world were issued on our behalf by the Mass-Observation Archive as Part 1 of its Autumn 2001 'Directive'. The M-O A's current panel (250-300 people) does not claim to be representative of the wider UK population, having at the time of our study a high proportion of women (approximately 70%), a very high proportion of older respondents (more than 90% over 40) and a high proportion living in London and the South-East (approximately 50%). Writing personal responses to M-O A 'directives' is time-consuming, which weights the sample towards those with more free time, particularly the retired; in class terms, the balance is better, but still weighted away from the manual working-class; unsurprisingly these features were reflected in the respondents to

our questions (n=161), with implications that are discussed below. 17 respondents indicated difficulties with some questions, which may reflect the fact that M-O A questions generally deal with non-political themes (even so, the response rate was comparable to other recent M-O A Directives). There were a large number of long, self-reflexive answers and some indicated that, far from being irrelevant to the concerns of the M-O A panel, our questions about the media's relationship to democracy were of central relevance: 'the whole point I was led to believe of MO is the gulf between media stories and people's experiences' (Female, B1180).

The second phase of our study comprised 10 individual interviews conducted in London in April-June 2002 and obtained through personal contacts of each researcher, with some snowballing. We asked similar questions to those put in the first phase, but added detailed questions on media access and media use. Our main aim was to adjust for limitations of the M-O A sample. The interview sample was 50% men, with 8 interviewees out of 10 aged under 40. 7 out of 10 interviewees were in full-time work, of whom 2 were professional working mothers in dual income families (uncommon in the M-O A panel); 6 of the interviewees were single (the M-O A correspondents had just under 10% single persons). Correction for the M-O A panel's class bias proved more difficult, with only one working-class interviewee obtained. For budget and time reasons, it was not possible to correct for the M-O A panel's regional bias.

The M-O A questions were sent out in October 2001 and, while our questions deliberately avoided references to the terrible events of 9/11, these were mentioned by a number of correspondents. 9/11 was also mentioned spontaneously by all our interviewees six months later: for example, Amanda who had then been working at a US University in London spoke



of that day ‘as an extreme example of the media connecting people’. It is difficult to assess what consequence this extraordinary historical context had on responses, but the point must be noted.

We will now discuss our findings in detail, looking first at disconnection from the public world (a major theme particularly among our older M-O A sample), before moving to the complexities of public connection: the sense of a duty to ‘connect’, but also the constraints on connection; a typology of mediated (dis)connection; and, finally, a review of where and to what interviewees in particular saw themselves as connected.

### ***Disillusion and Disconnection***

What struck us, particularly, about the M-O A responses was the high degree of dissatisfaction revealed with media and/or politics, often trenchantly expressed. Of the 161 correspondents, an overall majority (and majorities of both women and men correspondents) expressed dissatisfaction with how media provided information on public affairs and matters of citizenship.

A substantial majority (44 to 17), having been asked whether their ‘way of life’ was represented in Britain’s media, said that it was not.<sup>7</sup> There were many reasons for feeling unrepresented, notably age and sickness (expected given the profile of the sample) but also as in the last quotation (a young recycling worker) social status:

‘My way of life is ignored by British media, as it is for millions of pensioners’ (G1041)<sup>8</sup>

‘I feel a stranger in my own country’ (G2818)

‘Basically my way of life is of no interest to the media’ (Male, G2941)

Another specific reason for disenchantment with media was the recent prominence given to celebrity (there is no trace here of the familiar cultural studies argument that celebrity narratives are indirect means of raising personal or public concerns). Many (25: 17 women and 8 men) referred unprompted to their dislike of the recent focus of news towards media-focussed, especially celebrity, stories:

‘I’m not very interested in lifestyle, celebrities, reality TV, etc, which probably means I miss more of the interesting stuff out when it is there’ (B2948)

‘the statements that are made are quite ludicrous – “which of us wouldn’t like to be in the shoes of the most glamorous couple in the world” (whose world?)’ (H2447)

The latter comment suggests more than disenchantment: rather, a sense of being misrepresented through false inclusion in a supposed community of concern unconnected to the writer’s own world (the couple in question were probably the English footballer David Beckham and his wife Posh Spice).

By itself, disenchantment with media coverage need not involve a wider disconnection from media’s contribution to civic awareness. The hope of being informed by media may remain implicit, even if disappointed, as with one 22 year-old postgraduate student:

‘We live in a media world. There are eyes everywhere but we still know nothing. We still see nothing’ (K2936)

But M-O A correspondents often exhibited a more drastic sense of disillusion with democracy itself. We had asked a deliberately vague question: ‘in your view, do you generally have available to you the information you *need* to be a full and active member of a democratic society?’. For some, the notion of ‘activity’ contradicted their life-circumstances too drastically (because they were sick or disabled); for others, the term was itself obscure or posed in the type of language they didn’t, or professed not to, understand.<sup>9</sup> But for many the problem was not language but the workings of democracy:

‘Most of my friends feel that we are not full and active members of a democratic society. Which simply means we cannot air our views or give out any of our experience of life in general’ (H260)

‘Well, we are not a democratic society, are we?’ (Male, L2393)

‘If my views counted for nothing after 50 years doing the job I knew about, why should they count about other things I know less about?’ (G1148, a 66 year-old retired nurse)

The disenchantment expressed here, particularly in the last quotation, may have sources (for example, old professional hierarchies) partially unconnected to media or politics, but some comments focussed explicitly on media’s role in democracy:

‘I’m so disillusioned with it all that I don’t want to be an active member of a democratic society . . . That is not to say that I don’t want to live in a democratic society but that I choose in democratic society not to be active and part of this is because I don’t feel confident that representation I am given is truthful’ (B2917, aged 25)

The M-O A comments, however, were not always so negative. It was striking, within a mainly elderly sample, that a number of people invested considerable hope in new media (specifically the internet rather than multiple satellite and cable television channels for which there was little enthusiasm):

‘the internet is the one technical innovation which is not controlled and restricted by hugely powerful groups or individuals, and in this respect I rejoice in the fact . . . the internet is a great mine of useful and accessible information’ (male, W2322).

‘with the coming of the mobile phone and computers and the Internet, many parts of the world are instantly available to those with this knowledge and very often it is at odds with what is shown in the media to the general public’ (78 year-old woman, R1468)

But again it is a general sense of dissatisfaction with media that forms the background to this hope.

Since M-O A rules did not allow us to follow up these diaries with face-to-face interviews (as otherwise we might have liked), we need to turn, for further contextualisation, to the separate interview sample we recruited in mid 2002. Here too, we found evidence of dissatisfaction with media: ‘I find it very difficult to get facts from newspapers nowadays’ (Simon); ‘the

media is quite useless on news, to be honest with you, because you are always fed stories that people want you to hear' (Andrew). Maggie expressed concern about the consequences of media for her own engagement with a public world, the core issue of our research:

'... I don't like the level of cynicism that I get from the media. ... I think that the media presentation of that side of things is I find destructive of my own sense of involvement and of my own sense of society.'

Here there is clearly an echo of the 'media malaise' debate in political communications. Only occasionally however did we find traces of the more trenchant dissatisfaction with formal politics common in our M-O A sample, and significantly only among the only interviewees who belonged to a clear minority group (Andrew was gay, Salif was a Muslim living in Glasgow). Nor is this surprising: first, because a high percentage of the M-O A sample, being retired, belonged, if not to a 'minority' in the usual sense, to a group which faces social and even political exclusion (Hazan, 1994); second, the recruitment of our interviewees (though direct and indirect personal contacts, with freedom not to take part) weighted that sample towards those with at least some, even if a vague, orientation to the public world; third, our remote relationship with the M-O A correspondents may have elicited more outspoken comments than those same people would have expressed face-to-face.

The vehement disconnection from media and/or politics of many in the M-O A sample remains, however, a significant finding, and, as we have seen, has echoes in our younger interview sample. In the rest of this article, but against this cautionary background, we will explore the forms that public connection takes, and the constraints to which it is subject: here,

because of the more fine-grained accounts of everyday media consumption they provide, it is mainly on our interviews that we will draw.

### *A duty to connect?*

In broad terms (see Table 5), our interview sample was well-resourced in terms of media access. Cost was not therefore a dominant factor limiting their possibilities of public connection through media. The most common reason interviewees gave for accessing media was the sense that media enable you ‘to know what’s going on...’ (Andrew). For some this involved a strong sense of duty, a point to which we return later; Beth for example had an almost physical compulsion to follow what was in the press: ‘I find that I have to make a really conscious effort to skim a newspaper, because I feel that . . . I should know about what’s going on in the world’. Prioritising media’s role as entertainment was less common: the only clear example was Salif; Jane, by contrast, had very little time for media consumption of any sort, and prioritised interpersonal uses of media (especially telephone and email).

Overall however the majority of our interview sample saw media’s role positively as ‘connection’ to a public world. The notion of ‘connectedness’ emerged spontaneously in Maggie’s interview when the relative importance of media’s information or entertainment roles was put to her:

‘. . . that isn’t the distinction I’d make. The one that occurs to me immediately is the distinction between wipe-out time . . . . time for . . . [interviewer: Pure relaxation?] [Between] Pure relaxation time and connectedness time . . . yes and that would certainly

cover accessing information time but it would also be stuff like, um, using the local newspaper to find out what's happening locally or to get a sense of what's going on'.

As with M-O A correspondents, interviewees often referred to themselves as critical media consumers, sometimes in a cliched formula but sometimes in self-reports that suggested a more reflexive practice: 'if it's the story that you're interested in, you read between the lines of how various media are reporting here, how CNN is reporting it in America' (Andrew). For this younger sample, there was less dissatisfaction over lack of media choice: 'I think generally speaking if you use enough sources of the media you can find out more or less anything you want to' (Simon); for most, confidence in using the Internet made it a ready supplement to less flexible traditional media sources. An exception (discussed later) was Mick who tried to use Teletext<sup>10</sup> as an alternative form of up-to-date information.

As to information overload, a theme raised by some M-O A correspondents, most interviewees were confident in their ability to screen information out. The interviewee who felt information overload most acutely (Beth) was the one with the most traditional sense of duty to consume the news (cf Hagen, 1994). Interestingly her solution was to select even more drastically:

'when I was getting the Guardian everyday and more magazines and stuff, it was almost like I was getting them and trying to read them because I felt that I should and it just got sort of too much and it was like a . . . kind of overload and I was feeling guilty about all the things that I didn't know about and hadn't read about that were going on in the world . . . So I suppose the way that I deal with that is by not buying them . . . it's much easier for me

to just not go in the shop and buy the paper than it is for me to buy it and say, I don't care' (Beth).

This takes us to the important issue of practical constraints on public connection.

### *Constraints on Connection*

Among our interviewees, a factor emerged that had been largely latent among the often retired M-O A correspondents: time.<sup>11</sup> The sense that our lives are 'time-scarce' is pervasive, even if (as Robinson and Godbey (1997) show for the US) the evidence of reduced time availability is more limited; for young employed people and particularly working couples with children, there may be a strong sense of living in the 'rush-hour of life' (Frissen, 2000).

For most interviewees, time was certainly the main explicit constraint on their media use. Jane, for example, found significant media consumption incompatible with her busy acting career. Sally, a senior IT strategist who was married with three school-age children, appeared relaxed about information overload, but only because it was a problem she had long since accepted had no solution; nonetheless she made great efforts to preserve a basic connection to a mediated stream of information: 'I can listen to the news on the radio on my mobile phone . . . . So I'm trying to get into the habit of listening to that on the way to the station. Just to fit a bit more in really'. The effort required on Sally's part reveals the intensity of the constraint. Drastic constraints applied to other media consumption too, such as book reading, although most interviewees retained some habitual reading time, often before going to sleep.



Time was not the only constraining factor on public connection through media. Sometimes people felt they did not have the energy to read a large broadsheet newspaper ('you need something light on Saturdays', said Amanda, justifying her choice of a tabloid newspaper at weekends). Cost and time sometimes overlapped: for those with fewer financial resources, free media available during free time (a newspaper left on a train or in a café during lunch) were an opportunity they would take, not buying a paper otherwise (Mick, Jane, Salif). But it was time that emerged as the principal constraint on interviewees' media consumption.

Against this background, the Internet was universally valued as a resource that enabled more effective use of time. For most interviewees, one advantage of the Internet was its delivery of instant connection: 'With the Internet you could find out absolutely everything at the push of a button and it's there. . . . You're not waiting till the next morning . . . you're not waiting until the next news bulletin comes on to know' (Andrew). The Internet's responsiveness was not only a matter of speed, but directedness: '[the internet gives you the] ability to actually go out and get what you want sort of actively and decide what it is you want and search for it, as opposed to just sort of sit there and wait for it to come to you' (Beth).

This personal directedness of internet use was linked to a vaguer sense that, as individuals, interviewees could overcome the biases of any particular internet source.

'I find it a lot easier to find out other people's views in the world [through the Internet]. I was reading an article the other day . . . about the Israel thing [Israeli-Palestinian conflict] and it was actually an Israeli girl, aged 13, who'd posted something on the Internet saying . . . the newspapers are saying this but they're not looking . . . at what it's . . . really like for

me to live in fear surrounded by this. The news will give you only one side of the story.’

(Simon)

However, the interactivity of the Internet as a space for the exchange of ideas and information was rarely mentioned (the only exception was Panos, a student who had institutional access to the Internet). Internet use was, as expected, important for a range of practical information tasks - shopping, travel and health information; jobs; work research; evaluating schools for their children.

Only Mick among our interviewees was significantly constrained from using the Internet as a means of public connection, not by reason of cost (he had an home online connection that he used for pursuing his interest in vintage cars), but through lack of technical skill or confidence; ‘pop-ups’ made the Internet unusable as a news source for him, even though his concern to be up-do-date was passionate. Instead Mick used Teletext as a sort of low-cost equivalent of the Internet’s instant (and unbiased?) connection: ‘I get myself glued to Teletext first thing in the morning cause once I get out of the bath, I like to sit there and look at that. And I think Teletext is a very good way of getting information because they only have that one small page on each screen, they quite often just report facts as they are. They don’t often put a bias on it’.

Having seen, then, the basic importance of public connection through media use and the constraints under which it operates, we are ready to move towards a tentative typology.

*Towards a typology of mediated (dis)connection?*

The interviews, by contrast with the M-O A responses (that were necessarily non-dialogic and based on a sample with a lower rate of new media use), allowed us to generate a tentative typology to grasp possible shifts in modes of public connection. Our interviewees could be divided into *old-style connectors*, *new-style connectors* and *time lackers*, with a residual category of *non-connectors*.

The *old-style connectors* (Beth, Amanda and Maggie) were heavy consumers of news, relying on and respecting broadsheets more than any other media although combining that with radio and to a lesser extent television (depending on their time constraints). They had a clear and distinctive sense that as citizens they had a duty to be informed (cf Hagen, 1994): ‘...I tend to feel you’re in a bubble and you’re not really connecting with anyone else and it’s too easy just to you know...find out what’s happening in Big Brother and the rest of the world doesn’t affect you. So . . . I feel very cut off if I don’t get a good build-up of news every other day, at least’ (Amanda); ‘I suppose I feel it’s sort of you know, responsibility . . . to sort of keep oneself informed’ (Beth). They felt guilty if they were unable to cope with the information load. Importantly their connection with the world through media was dominated by the time patterns of traditional media (the newspaper delivery, the news bulletin in radio and television). Interestingly, as we shall see, they were also the ones with a more supranational/global – albeit vague - understanding of what constituted their society.

The *new-style connectors* (Simon, Andrew, Panos) had an equally intense sense of public connection through media, but with a lesser emphasis on news/public affairs and a much clearer sense of individualised media use, trying to set and control their own agendas and manage their own time structure<sup>12</sup>. They maintained almost constant access to the internet (each had a high-speed 24/7 connection) and compared every other medium with the

internet's capabilities (especially its flexibility and its vast range of sources): '...if I hear something of interest on the television, I'll then research it on internet probably so I can get a bit more depth, more facts' (Simon). An important working class variant of the *new-style connector* was Mick who, as we mentioned, sought a similar sense of continual, individually responsive, connection through the older technology of Teletext.<sup>13</sup>

Although time was a constraint on media use for most interviewees, there was a separate category of people for whom time constraints were the primary shaper of how they consumed media: *time lackers* (Sally, Jane). For different reasons (Jane, building a career; Sally, the combined demands of work and children), they had time to consume media only in limited packages (for very brief periods or for a specific purpose). Both Jane and Sally were inured to how time constrained their media use; they felt no guilt, although they retained a vague sense of the importance of connection: 'I think I just skim through it and ignore things. I don't feel overwhelmed by it' (Sally).

In this, they were distinct from the residual category of *non-connector* to which Salif belonged. Salif appeared unimpressed by the media's ability to connect him to a wider world, and consumed (principally) TV for entertainment: 'realistically I could be without any of [the media] because at the end of the day it doesn't 100% affect the way I live my life'. However, he was active in his local community where he was involved in various charity activities; it was in regard to more distant forms of politics that he felt a lack of efficacy and disillusion:

'...politics is something that goes down in London...they are the people that are making decisions and that is to me what real politics is. But the reality of life is

different from that... I don't know how to actually take part and I don't know if I am the best person to do it'.

As we shall see, Salif was also the person with the most complex sense of identity, juxtaposing what at times were contradictory spheres of belonging.

### *Ambiguities of Participation*

In this section, we explore how these differences were reflected in the question of political and civic participation. Here, we found clear evidence in our interviewees of understandings of politics that encompassed 'life-style' politics and highlight the importance of identity. There were also signs of a complex interaction between citizenship and consumption.

The concept of being a 'full and active member of a democratic society' was problematic for some interviewees: not, as with the M-O A correspondents, through a failure to understand (the term could be clarified face-to-face), but instead an analytical difficulty. We phrased the question as openly as possible, yet found little common ground. Of course, the 'democratic society' has many meanings term, and this multivalence reflects long-standing disagreements between democratic theorists about what 'participation' involves: is it engaged and continuous deliberation (Barber, 1984), or intermittent 'monitorial' involvement (Schudson, 1998), or simply voting every four or five years (Lippman, 1925)? The ambiguity, however, over where people should be connected to is of practical as well as theoretical importance.

There were of course some interviewees who mentioned casting a vote in elections, but no interviewee mentioned this as the core activity; when present, voting just seemed to be an

obvious –but not that significant- part of the ‘package’. One of the most direct answers to what ‘membership of a democratic society’ meant was in terms of local involvement in the community, well below the scale of national politics. However, the definitions of what constitute both ‘local’ and ‘involvement’ varied. The former was at times defined by proximity (my street, the school area, the council authority, London) but was also often cut across by issues of identity linked to a set of overlapping communities (Hermes 1998,158):

‘I do like to take part in my community. And generally it is again, I fall under different categories within community. I’m an ethnic person and a Muslim but at the same time I’m a Glaswegian and a Scot...These are things that identify us’ (Salif).

‘Full and active member of society I think is having an understanding of what’s going on in the word around *you*, whether, it’s sort of every aspect...like what films are coming out, the club scene in your area . . . what your peer group are involved with. Also an understanding of . . . business and politics ... whoever you are, business and politics affect you’ (Simon).

The importance of identity also emerged in regard to political participation. Apart from Mick (who was active in anti-fascist politics), only Simon and Andrew mentioned specific instances of political participation, and these actions were not attached to national electoral politics but to issues of identity: participating in Pro-Israel rallies and demonstrations for gay rights. Interviewees’ sense of participation often included other arenas, for example their roles as producers in the economy (Simon and Panos) or using their power as consumers:

‘...it would mean participating within the local community and support[ing] things that would develop, develop England as a whole, i.e. supporting local business, buying British products’ (Andrew).

‘Coca-Cola gave . . . one billion . . dollars to the Israeli State...Now I didn’t think that was right so I’ve basically kind of boycotted their product...So again, I’m not in power to do anything about it but I have the right to have my views’ (Salif).

For Sally, involvement in society was even more detached from political participation, involving instead the sustaining of social values, through paid work or voluntary work.

Other interviewees, who lacked a sense of either local or national connection, looked instead towards an international dimension, even if the nature of this international connection could be rather vague:

‘...understanding...not only ... your own people but also trying to have some understanding of other cultures, other societies, other parts of your own society and have an understanding of their kind of viewpoint...I think it’s a responsibility...if you’re going to offer any opinion on what’s going on in the world’ (Beth).

Such trans-national engagement fell short of a specific interest in supra-national politics, although Maggie felt that even this might be growing in importance:

‘I think that’s a factor since September the 11<sup>th</sup> actually ... I’m glad that there’s a larger Europe which is more anti-American than Tony Blair is at the moment. Yes, so I suppose I do have a larger sense of a European society or identity’.

For Jane, by contrast, the absence of a national focus did not translate into a more international outlook but rather into an individual space. Asked where her sense of ‘community’ would be, she answered: ‘well in a way it is the world but you can’t live in the world so it’s, in a way it’s just yourself...’. Significantly, for the French sociologist Alain Touraine this gulf between globalising forces and individual dislocation, which makes people feel ‘at one here and everywhere, or in other words nowhere’ (2000:5), is one of the roots of increasing political disconnection (we return to this in our conclusion).

An important element here might be the different patterns of media consumption. In contrast to Jane, a *time lacker*, Amanda, Beth and Maggie – *old-style connectors* – saw being informed as one of their civic duties. Their heavy media consumption – particularly broadsheets - provided them with material for connection with distant arenas. However, although this might make old-style connectors more knowledgeable about distant worlds, it does not necessarily translate into motivation for action. Amanda explained how the media can help and hinder:

‘...in a way sometimes having information about the subject can make you feel that you’ve done something rather than you forget about it... I think you can kid yourself that you are doing a lot or just by not doing very much at all...’ (Amanda).



Amanda was not the only interviewee for whom the focus of her public engagement was puzzling. Maggie reflected on this uncertainty through a metaphor whose abstractness is telling:

‘It’s like a pot which if everybody contributed to it, it would fill up. It’s a void into which you kind of put things in the hope that the bottom doesn’t get deeper . . .’ (Maggie).

The other side of this abstractness was her lack of confidence in getting publicly involved:

‘I’m not sure that I would say that I’m a full and active member. I mean there’s also people who are a lot more active than I am and it’s a bit of ... a bit of a self-fulfilling negative. I mean it’s a bit like the Groucho Marx thing about I wouldn’t be a member of any club that would have me’ (Maggie).

It was striking, however, that notwithstanding these uncertainties, Maggie insisted on holding onto the assumption of public connection (a concept she volunteered during her interview):

‘I think there is a public world that I feel connected to. It almost feels a bit like an article of faith really ... But I have no alternative but to believe that the public sphere exists because ... I think if I felt otherwise, it would be too bleak to bear and ... yes, I think that’s what I feel about it, it’s like a negative article of faith’ (added emphasis).

In sustaining that ‘negative faith’ in a public world, Maggie saw the media’s contribution as crucial, but (as we saw earlier) largely unhelpful.

In spite of this dissatisfaction, shared, as we saw by some other interviewees, some appreciated the potential of the media for connecting people, and even struggled to make it happen in everyday life. Some attempted to generate public debate using whatever media materials came to hand. Most striking and bold was Mick (who had also emphasised his disillusion with the information media provide):

‘I do it every single lunchtime. The caf that we go to... whatever the latest news story is, I always open up a discussion in the caf...if I want to find out what people are really thinking, I’ll spark off a debate in the caf. And we normally sit on the table with, there’s normally five or six from work but the caf is a big caf, it’s got about 30-40 people in it and no, I just, I ask people on the table next to me what they think’.

Andrew and Simon also used what they learnt from the media to attempt to break down social barriers they found when meeting with people from other parts of world, whereas Amanda found that talking about media was a very useful tool for inter-generation communication. Even Salif, who had difficulties in connecting with/through media, drew attention to how the media could enable him to perform his role in the community more successfully:

‘...organising this football tournament. I need to get media coverage to make it aware so people actually come down, make them aware something is being done. So that gives confidence within knowing something good is happening in their community. They get involved, that kind of creates a fission reaction if you like, so they might be wanting to get involved...’.

Despite interviewees' relatively low level of satisfaction with the media, they continued in their search through media for connections to a public world.

### *Conclusion*

We have found, then, evidence both of disconnection from and connection to a public world sustained by media consumption. In the M-O A diaries, it was the sense of disconnection that dominated. For most of the interview sample, by contrast, the media – even if imperfectly – played a key role as information source and also as offering a form of connection to a public world. The 'participation' this enabled, however, was full of ambiguities. In part, the problem lay in interviewees' dissatisfaction with the media, and the time constraints on their media use, but at play were also the multidimensional nature of people's identities and the uncertainties of our engagement with 'society' itself. Recognising such complexity is extremely important but often missed by conventional models of politics:

'Politics, in this [conventional] view, is a distinct and self-contained part of public life, and citizen is one role among many played by individuals ... But people, politics and the media are far more complex than this. Individuals are simultaneously citizens, consumers, audiences, family members, workers, and so forth.' (Delli Carpini and Williams 2001,161; see also Dahlgren 1998: 91-92).

It is clear to us that it was only by paying close attention to citizens' own accounts of their orientation to public world(s), that such complexity could clearly emerge; this involved moving away from narrow definitions of political engagement and examining people's

broader, if sometimes vague, understandings of citizenship and politics, and media's role in sustaining a link to public world(s).

A limitation was that our sample group almost certainly showed an untypically high level of connection. M-O A participation is already a form (if a highly specific one) of public connection; constructing the interview sample involved relying on some prior interest in our research theme - only one interviewee fell into the residual category of 'non-connector'. A larger-scale study could expect to find a wider range of connection and disconnection.

It will be important to watch in future research for how (as in this study) the media consumption of even explicit connectors was significantly constrained by extraneous factors, particularly time. Lack of time for connection cut across issues of resource, skill and desire among many interviewees. Any possibility of public connection through media intersects with the everyday realities of the 'time-famine society' (Robinson and Godbey, 1997: 43).

More difficult to address will be the sense of dislocation between the 'world' to which media connects us and the actual small scale of everyday action. We found this particularly among those with the strongest sense of a duty to connect. It is precisely this dislocation that Touraine sees as the basis of a longer-term disconnection, not just politically but socially:

'The media play an increasingly important role in our lives, and television takes pride of place, because it establishes very direct links between our most intimate lived experience and reality as its most globalized . . . That direct link eliminates the mediations between the individual and humanity, and because the messages are decontextualized, it may play an

active role in the general trend towards desocialization. The emotion that we all feel when we see images of war, sport or humanitarian action is not transformed into motivations, and does not make us take a stand.’ (Touraine 2000, 5).

Such dislocation is likely to be accompanied by a difficulty of articulation. Maggie’s notion of a public world in which she must believe as a ‘negative article of faith’ is striking, but remember that Maggie was a highly articulate university graduate; not all would be able to express a sense of puzzlement so clearly. The consequences of an absence of available language are hardly straightforward and require sensitivity from researchers. There are dangers, on the one hand, of research subjects reaching a blank wall, unable to articulate a sense of disconnection for which they have no ready language and, on the other hand, of interview rapport evoking a performance of ‘alienation’ that would not have occurred otherwise. Yet this difficulty cannot be evaded if we take seriously Oscar Gandy’s diagnosis of ‘the real digital divide’ as the disarticulation between consumption and citizenship discourses. What if we are moving towards a situation when ‘individuals . . . actually feel better about knowing less and less about the world around them’ (Gandy, 2002: 452)? The challenge, while acknowledging that the ground rules of public connection may be changing, is to devise research strategies for tracking how those changes are subtly registered in everyday sense-making.

The result may be to find a heterogeneity of (dis)connections no longer containable within a unified notion of ‘civic culture’. If we want to track how are people living out the changing possibilities of public connection, we may need as our reference-point not the apparent unity of ‘civic culture’ but the assumed heterogeneity of the ‘dispersed citizen’. This study is, we hope, a useful step in that direction.

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## TABLES

**Table 1: MO Correspondents - Gender**

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
<b>Male</b>	47	29.2	29.2
<b>Female</b>	114	70.8	100
<b>Total</b>	161	100	

**Table 2: MO Correspondents – Age by range**

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
<b>Over 65</b>	93	57.8	57.8
<b>41-65</b>	59	36.6	94.4
<b>25-40</b>	6	3.7	98.1
<b>18-25</b>	3	1.9	100
<b>Total</b>	161	100	

**Table 3: MO Correspondents – Occupation status**

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
<b>Active</b>	43	26.7	26.7
<b>House wives</b>	12	7.5	34.2
<b>Part Time</b>	8	5.0	39.2
<b>Retired</b>	90	55.8	95
<b>Student</b>	5	3.1	98.1
<b>Unemployed</b>	3	1.9	100
<b>Total</b>	161	100	

**Table 4: Interviewees’ Socio-demographic data**

Name	Age	Marital Status	Education	Occupation	Category*.
<b>Sally **</b>	42	Married + 3 child.	BA + postg. qualifications	Senior IT Strategist	Managerial & professional
<b>Andrew</b>	36	Single	BA + postg. qualifications	Hall of Residence Manager	Managerial & professional
<b>Simon</b>	21	Single	BA (third year)	FT Student	Student
<b>Salif</b>	23	Single	BA	PT call centre worker	Intermediate
<b>Panos</b>	21	Single	BA (third year)	FT student	Student
<b>Amanda</b>	30	Single	BA	Financial Manager State School	Managerial & professional
<b>Maggie</b>	44	Married + 1 child	BA + training as solicitor	Lawyer	Managerial & professional
<b>Mick</b>	39	Married + 2 child.	O Levels	Pest Controller	Lower supervisory & technical
<b>Jane</b>	34	Divorced	BA	Actress + PT work as ticket officer	Intermediate
<b>Beth</b>	34	Single	BA	Free lance marketing f/ arts organis.	Managerial & professional

\* Categories taken from the National Statistic self-coded method for NS-SEC, <http://www.statistics.gov.uk>.

\*\* All names changed.

**Table 5: Interviewees' Media access (all of them have radio)**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Television*</b>	<b>Newspaper**</b>	<b>Local</b>	<b>Internet</b>
<b>Sally</b>	Cable (basic package)	G; I or O (Sun)	Yes	2 computers both with access + work
<b>Andrew</b>	Digital connection–not used	G and M	No	1 computer w/ 24 hours access + work
<b>Simon</b>	Digital TV	TT & DM; FT (on line)	Yes (ES)	1 computer w/ 24 hours access + univ.
<b>Salif</b>	Cable	M (exceptionally)	N/A	1 computer w/broadband
<b>Panos</b>	Terrestrial + Greek Channel	G & FT (on-line); O	N/A	1 computer w/ connection + univ.
<b>Amanda</b>	Terrestrial	ES, DM (Sat), O	Not much	1 computer w/ slow connection + work
<b>Maggie</b>	Terrestrial	G & O	Yes	4 computers w/access + work
<b>Mick</b>	Terrestrial	S, MI, DS	Yes	1 computer w/ connection
<b>Jane</b>	Digital	M	Occasion.	1 computer w/connection
<b>Beth</b>	Terrestrial	G	Seldom	1 computer w/connection

\* All have radio

\*\* G (The Guardian), I (The Independent), O (Observer), TH (The Times), M (Metro), DM (Daily Mail), ES (Evening Standard), S (Sun), MI (Mirror), DS (Daily Star).

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Office of the e-Envoy (2002).

<sup>2</sup> We say 'still' only to mark the recent and public intensification of anxiety about these issues. In fact, concern about the experiential basis of democratic politics has been a strand in political thought since the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century (Tocqueville, Kierkegaard), and aspects of the disconnection discussed here have similarly long historical precedents.

<sup>3</sup> Almond and Verba (1963), Almond and Verba (1989), Verba, Schlozman et al (1995).

<sup>4</sup> The authors gratefully acknowledge the financial support of STICERD for this research during August 2001-July 2002 and the assistance and friendly cooperation of Dorothy Sheridan and her team at the Mass-Observation Archive. The permission of the Trustees of the Mass-Observation Archive, University of Sussex, to reproduce quotations from the response to the Autumn 2001 Directive is also gratefully acknowledged. [name removed] acknowledges the general financial support given to her research by Fundacion Antorchas and the Anglo-Jewish Association.

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<sup>5</sup> See (within sociology and cultural studies) Skeggs (1995), Sennett (1999), Young (1999), Walkerdine (1999), Couldry (2000) and Lembo (2000); and (in work closer to mainstream political science research) Eliasoph (1999).

<sup>6</sup> Originally, this was aimed in part as a methodological comparison between the two data sources: certainly we found differences between how opinions were expressed in the two cases, depending on whether an interlocutor was present. But it is difficult to separate the greater trenchancy of MO-A comments from other factors, particularly age-related disenchantment discussed below, so we draw no methodological conclusions from this.

<sup>7</sup> As frequently with M-O A panel responses, correspondents did not always answer each question posed: response totals for particular questions, may therefore be considerably less than 161 (total overall responses).

<sup>8</sup> M-O A correspondents are women, unless noted.

<sup>9</sup> This was not simply a matter of misunderstanding. One woman (J931), having said that “A full and active member of a democratic society” is the sort of sociologist speak people don’t understand’, then defined it precisely: ‘I assume it means someone understanding how government works and having all the information necessary to cast their vote responsibly and having the know-how to make their views count by being able to present them to others’.

<sup>10</sup> This is UK terrestrial TV’s text-based information service.

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<sup>11</sup> Questions of time were not often raised by the MO-A respondents. One exception was the ironic comment of C2677: 'We have more news available but do we have more time to discuss and digest it? Discuss!'

<sup>12</sup> On the significance for democracy of symbolic participation through media, particularly new media, see Bucy and Gregson (2001: especially 375).

<sup>13</sup> Ceefax/ Teletext was mentioned as significant by 7 of the M-O A correspondents (4 women, 3 men).