

[Nick Couldry](#)

## Researching digital (dis)connection in the age of personalised media

### Book section

**Original citation:**

Couldry, Nick (2010) *Researching digital (dis)connection in the age of personalised media*. In: Murdock, Graham and Golding, Peter, (eds.) *Digital dynamics: engagements and connections*. Hampton Press, Inc., Cresskill, NJ, USA, pp. 105-124. ISBN 9731572739314

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Available in LSE Research Online: October 2013

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# 6

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## RESEARCHING DIGITAL (DIS)CONNECTION IN THE AGE OF PERSONALIZED MEDIA

*Nick Couldry*

Agents shape their aspirations according to concrete indices of the accessible and the inaccessible, of what is and is not 'for us', a division as fundamental and as fundamentally recognized as that between the sacred and the profane. . . . The relation to what is possible is a relation to power; and the sense of the probable future is constituted in the prolonged relationship with a world structured according to the categories of the possible (for us) and the impossible (for us), of what is appropriated in advance by and for others and what one can reasonably expect for oneself. (Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 1990, p. 64)

CHEBUTYKIN [*reading the newspaper*]. Balzac got married in Berdichev. . . . I really must put that down in my little book. [*Makes a note.*] Balzac got married in Berdichev. [*Carries on reading the newspaper.*] (Chekhov, *Three Sisters*, 1980, p. 198)

### INTRODUCTION

We have, it seems, moved beyond the notion of 'Digital Divide.' This may have advantages, since, by itself, the description 'digital divide' always carried the promise of being superseded by the relatively simple fact of techno-

logical diffusion. So Benjamin Compaine (2001) and others have, rather glibly, argued that the Digital Divide is disappearing (and was always destined to disappear), at least in the most prosperous countries. Or, more subtly, it can be argued that the Digital Divide repeats the features of preexisting socioeconomic divides on a national and global scale, and so raises no specific problems (Norris, 2001). Either way, the Digital Divide might appear destined to evaporate as a priority for research.

Yet this is not the end of the story. Although the Digital Divide (descriptively) is a relatively straightforward concept—‘the differential access to and use of the Internet according to gender, income, race and location’ (Rice, 2002, p. 106)—the significance of the Digital Divide as a priority for policy-makers’ and academics’ attention was always based on wider concerns: first, with a threat to long-term market functioning from excessive barriers to consumer participation in the online economy, and, second, among at least some governments and commentators, with the threat to long-term political and social functioning caused by the permanent exclusion from public discourse of those without effective access to the online world. It is the second of these underlying concerns in which I am interested (although the first is important and has major consequences for the second). My interest, then, is in the close link between the Digital Divide and social exclusion, or rather (as we might reasonably put it, since digital phenomena necessarily have a symbolic form) symbolic exclusion.

It is, however, precisely the symbolic dimensions to exclusion that have often been neglected, whether in accounts of the economy, the class system, or technological change (see e.g., Murdock, 2000).<sup>1</sup> Lacking home access to the Internet is not merely a material lack, any more than being able to go online from home is merely a material asset. For ‘the Internet’ symbolizes something much vaster—a sense of the social ‘world’ that is *there* to be connected to. The Digital Divide, then, at least for those concerned with social and political exclusion, has always been a symbolic divide. As such, it does not simply disappear just because a large majority acquires a basic digital connection or even a basic capacity to use that connection. The Digital Divide, as a symbolic divide, can only be assessed by considering, first, the nature and quality of online use, and, second, the significance that use has for those involved. Symbolic ‘significance’, however, is not something lofty and intangible: the meanings of a practice are directly related to the consequences and value people expect from it. It was here that the chorus of increasingly upbeat Digital Divide assessments was interrupted by the U.S. Children’s Partnership 2000 Report (Children’s Partnership, 2000). This noted the lack of online content that made sense to U.S. working-class and ethnic minority users given their practical priorities (especially job searching) and argued this lack of relevant content was an important and neglected divide (what it called ‘the Digital Divide’s new

frontier') that could not be cured simply by putting more computers in schools, libraries, and homes.

The Digital Divide, as a symbolic divide, remains an important research topic, even if (following Norris) we doubt that lack of access to the Internet is, in itself, a sufficient causal explanation for social exclusion. The issue, rather, is: What are the changing forms that symbolic exclusion is taking in the era of digital media and media convergence? This requires looking at 'connection' more broadly than allowed by measures of Internet access or even the distribution of basic Internet use. Indeed, as the opening two quotes suggest, the question of symbolic connection (the sense of being included, or not, in the narratives that pass for society's 'central' narratives) arises at every stage in the history of communications technologies, whether in the pre-media societies that Bourdieu discussed in *The Logic of Practice* or in the newspaper-based media environment of prerevolutionary Russia. Being in the slipstream of an information flow, however large, hardly helps you if that information is disconnected from your possibilities of action, including action as a citizen. Here is the potentially radical, if not fully intentional, legacy of Digital Divide debates, and it is on this question that I want to focus.

To do so, I introduce a program of empirical research, which, with colleagues at the London School of Economics, I developed between 2001 and 2006 in two stages: first, a small-scale research project conducted with Ana Langer in 2001–2002 into the role of media in people's sense of connection to public and civic space (the 'Dispersed Citizen' project),<sup>2</sup> and, second, a larger project with Sonia Livingstone and Tim Markham entitled 'Media Consumption and the Future of Public Connection' (October 2003–March 2006).<sup>3</sup>

## THE QUALITY OF PUBLIC CONNECTION

### Design of the 'Dispersed Citizen' Research<sup>4</sup>

Neither stage of our research program has aimed directly toward research on social exclusion or indeed the Digital Divide. Instead, they have tried to investigate the effective 'bottom line' of most political science and indeed most media studies that (a) whatever people's local dissatisfactions in a society such as Britain with aspects of politics, all but a small minority share a basic orientation toward the mediated public world where politics takes place; and (b) there is the assumption of a certain level of shared 'public connection' based in shared media consumption. This is one aspect of the idea (constructed, not real) that elsewhere I have referred to as the 'media frame' ('the media' as 'frame' through which the social 'world' becomes available to

us; see Couldry, 2000). Powerful and pervasive though the assumption of 'public connection' is, there have been few, if any, empirical studies that have investigated whether it corresponds to how people conduct and reflect on their lives.

The 'Dispersed Citizen' study approached that substantial question via two contrasting, if limited, sources. Our first source was questions on media and the public world issued on our behalf by the UK's well-known Mass-Observation Archive (M-OA)<sup>5</sup> to its panel of regular diarists as part of its Autumn 2001 'Directive.' Some points that distinguish this situation from other panel-based research must be noted immediately. First, the M-OA does not claim that its panel (at the time of study, 250-300) is statistically representative of the wider UK population: it has a clear majority of women (70%), and correspondents are overwhelmingly older (over 90% aged 40 or more); the geographical range is also skewed with 50% (on 2002 figures) living in London and the South-East. There is a reason for this: responding to M-OA directives takes time, so the panel correspondents are drawn disproportionately from those with more free time, including the retired: the panel's class balance is better, but unsurprisingly there is low representation among the manual working class. The panelists who answered our questions (N = 161) reflected these features, as expected. Second, the M-OA's long-term relationship with its correspondents involves a 'friendly' style of questioning that imposes on researchers a looser phrasing than might otherwise have been chosen. Because M-OA is a public archive, this part of the Dispersed Citizen data is publicly available to those visiting the Archive; the following reading is therefore open to revision by other researchers who might look at it again in the future.

Our second source for this initial study was 10 individual interviews conducted in London in April-June 2002 based on a comparable set of questions recruited through personal contacts of each researcher, with some snowballing, but in such a way as to balance to some extent the age and gender deficiencies in the M-OA sample: 50% men, with 8 out of 10 interviewees under age 40.<sup>6</sup> For the same reason, 7 out of 10 interviewees selected were in full-time work, 2 of whom were professional working mothers in dual-income families (seemingly uncommon in the M-OA panel). Also, the low number of single people among the M-OA correspondents (just under 10%) was corrected (6 of the interviewees were single).

Despite these limitations, both types of material offered useful insights into the potential divide around the quality of people's mediated connection to a public world. I come later to our strategy for moving beyond these limitations in the larger study since undertaken (see Tables 6.1-6.5).

TABLE 6.1. MO Correspondents—Gender

GENDER	FREQUENCY	PERCENT	CUMULATIVE PERCENT
Male	47	29.2	29.2
Female	114	70.8	100
Total	161	100	

TABLE 6.2. MO Correspondents—Age by Range

AGE (YEARS)	FREQUENCY	PERCENT	CUMULATIVE PERCENT
Over 65	93	57.8	57.8
41–65	59	36.6	94.4
25–40	6	3.7	98.1
18–25	3	1.9	100
Total	161	100	

TABLE 6.3. MO Correspondents—Occupation Status

OCCUPATION	FREQUENCY	PERCENT	CUMULATIVE PERCENT
Employed	43	26.7	26.7
Housewife	12	7.5	34.2
Part time	8	5.0	39.2
Retired	90	55.8	95
Student	5	3.1	98.1
Unemployed	3	1.9	100
Total	161	100	

TABLE 6.4. Interviewees' Sociodemographic Data

NAME*	AGE (years)	MARITAL STATUS	EDUCATION	OCCUPATION	CATEGORY**
Sally	42	Married + 3 children	BA + postgrad qualifications	Senior IT Strategist	Managerial & professional
Andrew	36	Single	BA + postgrad qualifications	Hall of Residence Manager	Managerial & professional
Simon	21	Single	BA (third year)	FT Student	Student
Salif	23	Single	BA	PT call centre worker	Intermediate
Panos	21	Single	BA (third year)	FT student	Student
Amanda	30	Single	BA	Financial Manager State School	Managerial & professional
Maggie	44	Married + 1 child	BA + training as solicitor	Lawyer	Managerial & professional
Mick	39	Married + 2 children	O Levels	Pest Controller	Lower supervisory & technical
Jane	34	Divorced	BA	Actress + PT work as ticket officer	Intermediate
Beth	34	Single	BA	Freelance marketing for arts organization	Managerial & professional

\*All names have been changed.

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

TABLE 6.5. Interviewees' Media Access\*

NAME	TELEVISION	NEWSPAPER**	LOCAL	INTERNET
Sally	Cable (basic package)	G; I or O (Sun)	Yes	2 computers both with access + work
Andrew	Digital connection— not used	G and M	No	1 computer w/24- hour access + work
Simon	Digital TV	DT & DM; FT (on line)	Yes (ES)	1 computer w/24- hour access + univ.
Salif	Cable	M (exceptionally)	N/A	1 computer w/broadband
Panos	Terrestrial + Greek Channel	G & FT (online); O	N/A	1 computer w/ connection + univ.
Amanda	Terrestrial	ES, DM (Sat), O	Not much	1 computer w/slow connection + work
Maggie	Terrestrial	G & O	Yes	4 computers w/ access + work
Mick	Terrestrial	S, MI, DS	Yes	1 computer w/ connection
Jane	Digital	M	Occasionally	1 computer w/ connection
Beth	Terrestrial	G	Seldom	1 computer w/ connection

\*All have radio access.

\*\*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*), DT (*Daily Telegraph*).



### Responses From the M-OA Panel

The point that emerged right away from the M-OA correspondents was how dissatisfied they were with media and often also politics. Most correspondents (including majorities of both men and women) were specifically unhappy with how media covered public affairs and anything that affected them as citizens.

These concerns had a more specific focus. A sizeable group (17 women, 8 men) told us without prompting about how they disliked the shift of news coverage (especially the press) away from public affairs towards news focussed on media, including celebrity narratives. This could explain why a majority (44 out of 61) who specifically answered a question about whether their ‘way of life’ was represented in UK media, denied that it was: such dissatisfaction confounds the cultural studies nostrum that celebrity stories provide indirect routes for channeling personal and public concerns (see Couldry and Markham, 2007, for a similar argument from the Public Connection project). Other reasons for feeling unrecognised in media were mentioned: age, ill-health, and in the last quotation, from a young recycling worker, social status (note that correspondents’ gender, if not stated, is female).

‘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)

‘My way of life is ignored by British media, as it is for millions of pensioners.’ (G1041)

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

Our question about the relation of media to public connection—‘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?’—was deliberately vague. The term—“full and active member of a democratic society”—caused difficulties. There were those for whom “activity” was at odds with their life circumstances (the sick or disabled); for others, the phrase was unclear:

‘I cannot define what would be a full and active member of such a [i.e. a democratic] society because I do not think it really completely exists.’ (C2570)

‘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, 66-year-old retired nurse)

Clearly, there were other sources of dissatisfaction involved here—for example the new ‘flexible’ work cultures—that are not directly linked to media causes.<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere such a link was clearer:

‘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, age 25)

Our questions provoked the expression of a considerable degree of disaffection with a media-based connection to a public world that political science assumes to be in place.

There were, of course, more positive comments. But if we looked for consistency among those positive comments, it was in relation to new media, not old media. Given the sample was skewed away from young consumers, it was striking how many had high hopes of new media, contrasting the internet positively with the multichannel television environment for which few had 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)

Many commented on being able to carry out research through the Internet in new ways, and some made the link from there to their sense of connection with issues in the public domain (for example international questions).

### **Fleeting Connections: Evidence From the Dispersed Citizen Interviews**

If our M-OA responses gave us a striking and surprising suggestion of levels of disconnection among a particular, older sector of the UK population, our interviews (targeted, as they were, at a contrasting demographic: younger, generally single, generally at work) offered contrasting, but complementary, evidence. There were traces in the interviews of similar themes to those in the M-OA sample: political dissatisfaction, media dissatisfaction, information

overload, media selectivity, lack of representation, and uncertainty about what being a full and active member of a democracy means. But interviews gave us a different window into people's lives: M-OA correspondents provided only a brief self-reported summary of media use and access, whereas interviews allowed us to talk with people in more detail about their daily practice as media consumers, especially of news and politics. Rather than a broad sense of dissatisfaction (as with many from the M-OA panel), interviewee comments split apart into a range of positions, which taken together presented a fascinating spectrum of how the (dis)connection between private citizen/media consumer and public world might be lived out.

### *The Time to Connect*

Media's role in connecting people to a public world was a theme we generally avoided in our explicit questions (because it was precisely what we wanted to test), yet it was one that interviewees raised themselves. For most, the main aim of media use was 'connection'—generally connection to a public world, but sometimes to a mixed private/public world. The term 'connectedness' emerged without prompting when Maggie was invited to discuss the relative importance of information or entertainment media:

. . . 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.

Cutting across the theme of connection is an issue left largely unexplored among the older (often retired) M-OA sample: time. Most interviewees found it was time that most obviously constrained their media use. For Jane, her busy acting career seemed to leave few possibilities for high media consumption, although this was not a particular concern to her. Another interviewee, Sally, who was a senior IT strategist married with three children at school, saw no solution to information overload, but made strenuous efforts to keep herself connected to media information flows, for example, listening to radio news on her phone on the way to work. This prominence of time may, however, have been linked to the particular age/work profile of our interview sample.

Against this background, the Internet was universally valued as a resource that enabled more effective use of time. For most of the interviewees, one advantage of the Internet was its delivery of 'instant' connection: 'With the Internet . . . 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 is not only a matter of speed, but also the ability of users to organise the flow of their own usage: the internet allows 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). By contrast, the interactivity of the Internet as a space for the two-way exchange of ideas and information was much less often mentioned (the only exception was Panos, a student who had institutional access to the Internet). Interviewees' use of the Internet was mainly instrumental: shopping, travel, and health information; jobs; and evaluating schools for their children—but with some role for news consumption.

What we could not tell from the interviews alone, of course, is the proportion of interviewees' Internet use actually devoted to news: we cannot tell, in other words, how far the Internet enabled a real, rather than mainly imagined, public connection given interviewees' acute time constraints.

*(Dis)connection: Old and New Style*

If media's role as a source of connection, at least in principle, was valued by most of those interviewed, there were, nonetheless, important contrasts in how this connection seemed to work for different people.

In the interviews, two contrasting types of connection emerged. First, there were heavy news consumers (Beth, Amanda, Maggie) who relied particularly on the broadsheet press, combined with radio and/or television (subject to time availability): call them 'old-style connectors.' Their sense of themselves as citizens came with a strong awareness of their duty to keep informed (Hagen, 1994); the shape of that duty was linked closely to the traditional media schedules (daily paper delivery, regular television or radio news bulletins). By contrast, other interviewees also felt connected to media (Simon, Andrew, Panos), but in a different time structure: call them 'new-style connectors.'<sup>8</sup> These interviewees were almost constantly online, and saw this as their main source of information (not surprisingly all had continual access to a high-speed connection). They compared the internet favourably with other media for its flexibility and breadth of sources. Mick offered a variant on the new-style connector: while lack of money and technical skill limited his internet use, he sought continuous connection through the older, more cumbersome technology of Ceefax/Teletext: his need for individual control over news flow was quite different from old-style connectors.<sup>9</sup> Again, however, it is important to emphasize that these typologies are abstractions from interviewees' self-reports in the interviews and may have diverged from their actual pattern of media use.

Nonetheless, these self-reports do at least suggest a contrast with another category of people for whom time constraints were the primary shaper of how they consumed media: we might call them 'time lackers'

(Sally and Jane). Both Jane and Sally's possibilities of connection were severely constrained by time and highly uneven, by their own account, yet they retained a sense of the importance of connection as an ideal. Jane and Sally differed from Salif who fitted into a residual category of 'nonconnector.' Salif appeared uninterested in media's ability to connect him to a wider world of public issues, although he seemed anxious in the interview to suggest the opposite. For Salif television was primarily a source of entertainment, but our interview provided no chance to explore whether any deeper disillusion underlay this attitude, or whether this was more a matter of cultural preference.

It would be misleading, however, to suggest that our interviewees were more satisfied than the M-OA panelists with the degree to which media connected them to a public world. Some connectors, also expressed significant feelings of frustration:

'Am I satisfied with their [the media's] job? No, I'm not satisfied after thinking about that . . . but then again it's, I don't know where else to get my information from. So even if I'm not satisfied, I don't know what else I would do.' (Mick)

If not frustration, there was a sense that media have limited relevance: for Jane, for example, her special interests in theatre and film prestructured her media use; in that sense, general media were somewhat marginal to her life. Nonetheless, the interview sample was broadly more satisfied with its degree of public connection than the M-OA sample, and this may partly be because the face-to-face interview situation discouraged the expression of such positions of conscious disconnection from media and/or the public domain, unlike the remote relationship of writing an anonymous diary.

#### *Connection to What?*

As noted in the introduction, the lasting legacy of the Digital Divide debate is a concern with how media access (or its absence) is linked with democratic engagement (or its absence). As with the M-OA panel, interviewees were asked whether, in their view, the media provided them with what they needed to be 'full and active members of a democratic society.' Even if in retrospect this phrasing carried too heavy an implication of expected responsibility, the gaps and tensions in people's responses remain instructive.

Most interviewees made little mention of the national political sphere as something that focused their attention or involvement. Although some referred to 'the national' in passing, this rarely had a specific political connotation and tended rather to be a cultural category (English, Scottish, British), that as such could intersect with other identities (Muslim,

Glaswegian, etc.). Sally regarded society (by which she meant national society) as an important reference-point for her understanding of key values (such as obeying the law, participating in the world of work) but did not refer to it as a space of participation. Her sense of ‘public connection’ therefore became indistinguishable from a broader notion of civic practice. The person who had the clearest sense of national politics as for him a potential space of action was Mick, who was also the most politically active interviewee and described himself as ‘an active member of society’. Otherwise, it was only Andrew (who had taken part in a gay rights demonstration) and Simon (who had participated in pro-Israel rallies) who made any reference to the experience of taking part in politics. One interviewee who did turn implicitly to some notion of a national public sphere used language that was striking in its abstractness:

‘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*.’ (Interview with Maggie, added emphasis)

Media for Maggie were highly relevant to sustaining that ‘negative faith’ in a public world, but in a way that was not positive: ‘I don’t like the level of cynicism that I get from the media. . . . I don’t like the way politicians get panned roundly all the time. I just really really dislike it. So no, I think that the media presentation of that side of things is I found destructive of my own sense of involvement and destructive of my own sense of society.’

For Mick, by contrast, national media were a tool for reconstructing some sense of engagement—not in themselves, but through putting them to use at a much more local level. Mick’s aim when he went down to this local café for lunch every workday was to generate public debate using whatever media materials came to hand:

‘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.’

This opens up a broader issue of how far people’s sense of mediated (dis)connection from the public world is further mediated by their embedding in social networks.

## QUESTIONS FOR NEW RESEARCH: THE PUBLIC CONNECTION PROJECT

The Dispersed Citizen project was preliminary in nature and, although offering certain insights, served to highlight questions to be pursued in more detail in larger scale research. Let me now turn to the approach we adopted in the follow-up project: Media Consumption and the Future of Public Connection.

A limitation of the earlier study was that its sample group almost certainly showed an atypically high level of connection. The interview sample was constructed through snowballing from people known to the two researchers, relying on interest in the broad theme of the research (only one person, as we saw, fell into the residual category of ‘nonconnector’), whereas the M-OA correspondents, to participate in the archive at all, must be people who, in some sense, are interested in public participation of some kind. A larger scale study, obtaining its respondents at a greater remove, could expect to find a wider range of connection and disconnection, and in doing so it is vital more generally to ensure a more representative range of classes and ages. However, the difficulty only sporadically encountered in our earlier study of middle-class interviewers talking with working-class interviewees about the question of symbolic inclusion—an issue that might precisely divide interviewer and interviewee—would inevitably be more prominent in a more representative study. This is one reason that in the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) study we opted for a mixture of qualitative methods, some (e.g., interviews, focus groups) involving the presence of the researcher and others (e.g., diaries) compiled with the researcher absent (see Bird, 2003).

Let me explain the thinking behind the Public Connection project in more detail. This project avoids using the word ‘citizen’ in defining its research question. This is done for the same reason that many researchers (e.g., Barnhurst, 1998) have avoided using the word ‘politics’ in investigating people’s attitudes toward political engagement in the broadest sense: because the potential negative implications of both mainstream ‘politics’ and formal civic engagement may deter people from talking about precisely the forms of (dis)engagement that are central to what is being studied. Instead, we aim to research the existence, or not, of something more general than political engagement or civic involvement: an orientation to a public world, leaving open what might make up that public world (whether traditional politics, soap opera, sports, or reality television). We are interested in how people themselves define what counts for them as the public world, the form that people’s variable orientation to that world takes, and the extent to which it is routed through their media consumption. Our aim, in other

words, is to take seriously one implication of the Dispersed Citizen project—that people might not have a sense of public connection or that the content of the public world to which they are connected might be different from the content of others' public world and might involve different media forms or, indeed, none at all (working more through face-to-face connections).

People's orientation to a public world (their 'public connection') is, quite clearly, a rather strange and complex object to research. It requires a close examination of people's practice as well as their thoughts and ideals. Above all, it requires looking closely at people's reflections on what is a complex and subtle issue about which all of us may be confused or disoriented at times. Methodologically, this requires a multiperspective approach that looks at people's practice from various angles. Hence, we chose to combine the fundamental method for first-person reflexivity (the diary, whether written or taped) with other methods (interviews with the diarist before and after the diary is written, and focus groups that bring together an individual diarist with either other diarists or their immediate social circle). We decided, however, against going one stage further and using observation or strict self-reporting techniques to build up an 'objective' tracking of people's media use because (even if that were possible) it would have risked undermining people's sense that it was their own account of their media use (in the diaries) that we wanted to hear.

Employing such a mixture of methods takes time, but this durational element is not accidental. Indeed, we have drawn out the process by asking people to write diaries for 3 months, although inevitably life events or other commitments have sometimes intervened to cause people to finish their diary before that. We wanted to work with people over a number of months (in total, including initial and subsequent interviews, up to 9 months) in order to track how their own thoughts about the public world and their degree of connection with it change through that time. People's thoughts are likely to evolve, in part, through the process of producing reflections in permanent form (the diary), but that does not mean such reflection is artificial because—and this admittedly is an assumption on our part, not something we can prove—their degree of public connection (or its absence) is something about which all, or almost all, people care in some way or another.

The advantage of our multimethod approach, however, is to generate both a process of explicit reflection (the diaries) and various vantage points for further reflection on that process (whether later diaries or the subsequent interview and focus group).

It is important not to assume that people are publicly connected through media. Thus, we are asking people to tell us in their diaries where they talk about the public issues they pick out as significant, whether it is at work, with friends, or in the family. Equally, it is important not to assume that the Internet is necessarily important for all participants and, even if it is,



that it operates as a key medium of public connection, rather than as a private information resource.

Demographically, we have aimed at a broader range than achieved in the Dispersed Citizen project. Through market researchers, we have recruited a group of around 36 diarists (allowing for some dropout) spread across genders, age groups, and regions. We anticipated from the outset that men under age 50 would be particularly difficult to recruit and retain (partly because of work commitments, but also because of gendered attitudes toward a form such as the diary; see Bird, 2003). This has proved to be the case, even when we provided them with an alternative to the written diary (tape recorder). We have also aimed to recruit across various degrees of media resources from the media-poor (no computer at home) to the media-rich (online at home) to the media superrich (broadband at home).

From the resulting diary and initial interview data, we extracted some key themes in order to design a survey for a wider population (1,000), which was conducted in June 2005. This overview of our methods is not, however, the place to report on our detailed findings (see Couldry, Livingstone, & Markham, 2007).

## CONCLUSION

This chapter's argument has been that, whatever the changes in baseline figures for digital media access, the Digital Divide remains an important focus for research, provided it is translated into this question: What forms in the era of digital media does symbolic exclusion take? What, then, are the implications of the London School of Economics-based research program—completed in 2006—for that question?

First, it is not helpful to limit research to new media consumption. At a time when most people's media consumption is a hybrid of old and new, and when the questions addressed are so large (connection, exclusion), a limitation to either old or new media blocks off important issues (as earlier research noted; Silverstone & Hirsch, 1992). What matters much more is to investigate the practices relating to digital media—or linking digital and predigital media—that are stabilizing into habits. The habit of using the Internet at your work computer to check up-to-the-minute news (which Maggie mentioned in connection with 9/11: 'I want to know what's happening now [ . . . ] I don't look to the web for analysis [ . . . ] It's when there's some particular item that is breaking then and I want to know what's happening') remain, for many, allied with the older habit of switching on the television news when you get home, but the combination is significant; at the same time, the availability of that combination divides those with individual control over their computer use at work from those who share or lack work

computer resources. Assessing the shape and significance of such new forms of symbolic divide requires detailed analysis of people's media consumption across the whole day as embedded in their work, leisure, and family roles. This is one reason for the diary component of the ongoing Public Connection project because it can provide people's own narratives of those cross-context patterns of use.

Second, future research needs to give close attention to how (as with the Dispersed Citizen interviewees) the media consumption of even explicit 'connectors' is significantly constrained by extraneous factors, particularly time. The lack of time for public connection cuts across people's resources, skills, and desires for public connection. This is not just a question of actual time available, but also of people's sense of time lack in today's 'time-famine society' (Robinson & Godbey, 1997, p. 43). To what extent is public connection through media, however desirable, seen as a luxury that time lackers can ill afford? If so, are there other ways through which such people sustain a sense of public engagement—for example, through their work practices or work status? Here media research needs to link to other areas, such as the sociology of work and identity.

Third, we need to look closely at the difficulties that individuals may have in articulating their sense of public (dis)connection. Maggie's notion of a 'negative article of faith' is striking, but remember that Maggie was a highly articulate university graduate (see Table 6.4). Articulating the absence of available language, or puzzlement at the abstractness of connection, is hardly a straightforward thing to evoke in any respondent. There are dangers in two directions: on the one hand, of research subjects reaching a blank wall and being unable to go further in articulating a sense of disconnection for which they have no ready language; and, on the other hand, of rapport in the interview situation evoking a performance of 'alienation' that would not have occurred but for the dynamics of the interview encounter. Yet this difficulty cannot be evaded if we take seriously Oscar Gandy's (2002) recent diagnosis of 'the real digital divide' as the disarticulation between discourses of consumption and citizenship. What if, Gandy warns, we are moving toward a situation when 'individuals . . . actually feel better about knowing less and less about the world around them' (Gandy, 2002 p. 452)? What if that appearance of 'feeling better' (about being less connected) is as much a difficulty with articulating a taken-for-granted disconnection as a problem?

The challenge, while acknowledging that the ground rules of public connection may be changing, is to devise research strategies for tracking such changes in everyday sense-making in ways that do not submerge underlying patterns of disconnection beneath upbeat readings of individual 'choice.'

Finally, to do this, we need a range of methods that allow time for respondents' reflection and self-correction. We have to listen closely and

without sentimentality to people's contradictory, uncertain, and unfolding reflexivity on such subtle and difficult problems. There is no way to research symbolic exclusion, whether manifested in relation to digital or other forms of media use, without close attention to the grain of people's voices and the discursive resources available to them to articulate the significance (or otherwise) that their media use has. There is a danger, of course, that such research ends up naturalizing the social division (between an 'articulate', 'connected' researcher and a less articulate, less well-connected research subject) that facilitates research in the first place (Bourdieu, 1998), hence the importance of what George Marcus (1999) has called 'complicity', shared between researcher and researched, in seeking to understand shared uncertainties.

One compelling thing, then, about digital divide research—at least in the broader sense I have been considering here—is that the divide in question may be deep enough to encompass most of us to some degree. Certainly, to recall my opening quotations, it is only by close attention to the complexity of people's reflections on public 'connection' that we can understand how digital media are involved in the continued reformulation of what is or is not 'for us' (i.e., within our potential sphere of action). Only in this way can we distinguish forms of media consumption, whether digital or predigital, which camouflage a deeper disconnection (Chekhov's doctor jotting down useless newspaper items before, in the play's final act, he loses all interest in the wider world) from those that offer genuine democratic inclusion through information and communication technologies for which Digital Divide discourse, however unwittingly, has given us reason to hope.

## NOTES

1. There are, however, important exceptions to this neglect: for example (within sociology and cultural studies), Sennett and Cobb (1972), Skeggs (1995), Sennett (1999), Young (1999), Walkerdine (1997), Lembo (2000), and, in work close to mainstream political science, Eliasoph (1999).
2. Funded by STICERD, whose financial assistance is gratefully acknowledged.
3. Project carried out October 2003–March 2006, funded by the ESRC under the Cultures of Consumption program (grant no. RES-143-25-0011). Their financial assistance is gratefully acknowledged. For more information on the outcomes of this larger project, see Couldry et al. (2007) and <http://www.publicconnection.org.uk>
4. In this section, I draw on material from an article (Couldry & Langer, 2005) that reports on the Dispersed Citizen project. Many thanks to Ana Langer for her invaluable work on that project. The permission of the Trustees of the Mass-Observation Archive, University of Sussex, to reproduce quotations from the responses to the Autumn 2001 directive is gratefully acknowledged.

5. For materials on its early history, see Harrison and Madge (1986).
6. For more demographic details, see Tables 1.1–1.5 of Couldry and Langer (2005).
7. See, for example, Sennett (1999).
8. See Bucy and Gregson (2001) on the significance to democracy of symbolic participation through media, particularly new media.
9. Ceefax/Teletext is a text-based news and information service on most televisions with UK terrestrial television channels that will disappear with switchover of the digital signal: seven of the M-OA correspondents (four women and three men) mentioned it as important.

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