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## THE PUBLIC CONNECTION PROJECT TEN YEARS ON

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In *Media Consumption and Public Engagement* (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham 2007, 2010), we tried to find a new, and methodologically rich way of answering what we saw as a fundamental question in media and communications research and in political science more generally: *are people in fact oriented to a world of public issues beyond what is of private interest to them, their family, friends and close associates?* To focus attention on this subtle yet vital form of ‘orientation’, we defined ‘public connection’ as a shared orientation to a public world where matters of common concern are, or at least should be, addressed. Public connection, we further argued, raises some particular questions about the media. First, if people do share an orientation to the public world, is it *media* that helps sustain that orientation? Second, if so, how do the media *mediate* that orientation, shaping and directing its nature and outcomes? And if not, or if that orientation is potentially unstable, in what ways might that matter? Third, insofar as the media do play a role in public connection, what are the *consequences* of that role for the workings of democracy and contemporary societies?

In the past decade, nothing has changed our mind about the importance of these questions, and we are delighted that our work continues to stimulate researchers in Latin America, Europe and elsewhere to adopt aspects of our design and pursue closely related questions. We are pleased to have the opportunity to reflect here on the lasting lessons from our original research, and the implications of the differences and similarities between our project and these new projects.

Our methodology was rooted in a *practice* approach to media (Couldry 2004) that ‘frames its questions by reference, not to media considered as objects, texts, apparatuses or perception or production processes, but to what people are doing in relation to media in the contexts in which they act’ (Couldry 2012: 35). This approach gives particular weight to how those it studies define the contexts in which they act, avoiding (so far as possible, and as we discuss below under Methods) imposing such a definition from a researcher’s ‘outside’. In this way the practice approach give us ‘a better grasp on the distinctive type of *social* process enacted *through* media-related practices’ (Couldry 2012: 44, original emphasis). We foregrounded people’s *habits* of orientation and media consumption, understood within the context of what counted *to them* as relevant public issues, without imposing our understanding. We asked, at its simplest, what are the practices which link private action to a public world, beyond the obvious act of walking down to the polling station to cast one’s vote? Our interest lay as much in the *phenomenology* of political engagement as in tracking how a formally defined ‘public sphere’ was, or was not, sustained by the audience’s everyday actions.

To grasp this set of concerns, we invited during 2004 37 adults across England, selected for maximum diversity, to keep a weekly diary over a three month period. As flexibly as possible, we invited them to reflect – in writing or by audio recording - on their experiences

of public connection and media consumption, along with the possible links between them. We sandwiched the diary between individual open-ended interviews with each diarist at the start and end of the project, and we complemented the qualitative work with a national survey conducted in June 2005 to check on the representativeness of the findings.

We were ready to find evidence of public connection, mediated or otherwise or, indeed, of public disconnection, and we found both. Throughout, our detailed empirical focus was directed to a broader question: if people do experience public connection, then what exactly follows from this for the effectiveness of democracy? And if they do not, what then for democracy, British democracy in particular? That broader interest took us some way from our original expertise, as media and communication researchers, in terms of how people use media to orient themselves to a public world. But it also precisely brought our expertise on how processes of mediation work into dialogue with political science and political sociological debates over the public sphere in a media-saturated age. In this there was a deep continuity between our work and other approaches to mediation: Jesus Martín-Barbero's book *De Los Medios a las Mediaciones* (published in English as Martín-Barbero 1993) and our late colleague Roger Silverstone's equally dialectical approach to mediation as encompassing both 'how processes of communication change the social and cultural environments that support them' and how media 'institutions and technologies as well as the meanings that are delivered by them are mediated in the social processes of reception and consumption' (2005: 189).

We wanted to look as widely as possible at how people's habits of public connection linked up with, and were supported by, other things they did (in the context of their work, their discussion with friends, family and workmates). And we were prepared to find that these habits were *not* linked up with much else at all! We started to worry about the 'missing links' between people's habits of following a wider public world, and their possibilities of acting, as citizens, or as people with a claim to be treated as citizens. We saw our work, from the beginning, as contributing to the analysis of what the Swedish sociologist Peter Dahlgren (2003, 2009) called 'the circuit of civic culture', scoping a multidimensional model which developed beyond the limits of Almond and Verba's much-criticised original notion of civic culture (1960) (and, arguably, also beyond Stuart Hall's and Richard Johnson's media-focussed circuits of culture too: Hall 1980; Johnson 1986). Dahlgren's proposed new 'circuit' of six interlocking processes (values, affinity, knowledge, practices, identities and discussion) opened up multiple ways in which the mediation of a key social process - civic life - might variously sustain or undermine public connection.

Several researchers working in distinct but related areas have followed in this direction. Two notable examples come from the Annenberg School at University of Southern California: first, research led by Sandra Ball-Rokeach into the complex practices of community engagement and media in Spanish speaking Los Angeles (Ball-Rokeach and Kim 2006) and, more recently, the research led by Henry Jenkins (Jenkins et al. 2016) on the subtle ways in which modes of engagement in popular culture and entertainment can, under certain conditions suggested by Dahlgren contribute to the the production and reproduction of civic culture. In this perspective, each moment in the circuit of civic culture becomes a site of contested power, potentially or actually renegotiating in particular ways, serving particular interests and undermining others. While the general public – and media audiences – may appear to have relatively little power in this struggle, the concern of our and this later research has been to counter those who would neglect their part in the wider circuit of culture, and so missing the role that individual and group acts and narratives may play in the mediated *culture* of politics. And here there are potential connections too with other chapters in this volume,

for example Manuel Guerrero's finding of thematic connectors' that shape engagement which links to Henry Jenkins' findings on the importance of 'motivated learning' as a building-block of civic culture.

In this chapter, we reflect on our earlier study in terms of both its overall conclusions and its methodology. We are struck by the considerable degree of agreement in conclusions between ours and the later studies collected in this book, in spite of the major differences in context (from media landscape to cultural and political setting), and detailed design, between the various studies. Whether this reflects an underlying set of concerns with the state of democracy and with the media's potential contribution to it raises important questions on which we want to reflect.

### ***The findings of the UK Public Connection study***

The first key point that emerged from our study was that most, but not all of our diarists connected with the public world through their engagement with the media. However, the very diversity in their approaches suggested that, in so far as people do use media to sustain an orientation to a public world (that is, *if* they experience 'public connection' that is 'mediated'), then this basic feature of their lives may take many forms. This is because 'mediated public connection' is a 'dispersed' practice (Schatzki 1996: 89) that involves many heterogeneous elements and lacks any one simple form. Within the rich complexity of our diarists' lives, as revealed by their interviews and diaries, we distinguished between 'media world connectors' – those whose public orientation is driven principally by their *practice* as media consumers, and, contrastingly, 'public world connectors' – those whose public orientation is driven principally by their sense of themselves as *agents* in a public world (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham 2007 and 2010: chapter 4).

The mediated public connection of these two groups was therefore distinctively sourced and, thereby, also vulnerable in relation to sustaining civic engagement in different ways. For 'media world connectors,' their democratic connection was vulnerable to a sense of information overload, and the consequent need periodically to withdraw from news. For 'public world connectors,' their connection was vulnerable to specific forms of disillusion with, or loss of trust in, aspects of the public world, as well as to the apparent weakening of (in late modernity) of contexts which motivate people to follow a public world beyond the private by providing them with a sense that their individual actions matter more widely. However, far from being taken for granted, even people's basic connection through media was not always assured: some experienced a connection to a public world through means other than media consumption (for example, through religious practice or through sports fandom); and some we called 'weakly connected,' being relatively disengaged from and uncommitted to either media or public accounts of the wider society.

We avoided throughout a media-centric approach to studying public engagement (Couldry 2006) , and were open to the importance of other, non-media factors in shaping people's practices of mediated public connection. A number of factors stabilised different diarists' *habits* of using media to keep informed about a public world: in particular, the world of work provided powerful motives and meaningful contexts for people to display valued knowledge about a public world. For some, an identification with long-standing traditions of party politics or their local community served a similar function, though this seemed concentrated among older people. A strong, felt commitment to the public world, whether

mediated or not, was least evident among the younger diarists, a point we return to below in relation to the possible significance of recent emergence of social media.

Indeed, although a general picture of *mediated* public connection emerged clearly across our 37 participants, an important finding is that individuals ‘might have positive reasons for being disconnected’ (2010: 182). This possibility of effective (even pleasurable) *disconnection* from the world of public issues today complicates considerably the status of the ‘duty to keep up with the news’ in the contemporary world. Since our study was originally conducted, the possibilities for *staying* connected through media (whether to family, friends and contacts; whether to public issues or formal politics) have grown hugely, as we discuss more below. But even though many people endorse the civic importance of dutifully using media to stay connected to issues one regards as of public concern (the normative habit at the heart of our definition of public connection), this may not become one of the ‘plausible narratives of the self’ (Hoover 2006: chapter 4) – in Dahlgren’s terms, there may be a disconnect between values, practice and identity. After all, the sheer volume of media outputs and information flows may lead to saturation and withdrawal (Turkle 2011), as people feel that they simply *must* ‘select out’ in order just to cope (Couldry 2012: chapter 2). Or, as one of the authors found in a recent ethnographic study of teenagers and their parents and teachers, the more digital media afford connections among people across time and space, the more they may find merit in positive disconnections, carving out private or quiet times and places that precisely evade constant communication in order that other benefits (day-dreaming, face-to-face communication, escape, sleep!) may follow (Livingstone and Sefton-Green 2016).

This was where we found to be decisive our participants’ wider sense of how their actions (of both media consumption and civic practice) fitted, or not, into the wider political field,. Focusing on the particular context of the UK and its increasingly neo-liberal tendencies, we had argued that the disconnects or even breaks in Dahlgren’s circuit of civic culture were linked to a wider fissure in Britain’s political landscape: not so much a motivation crisis on the part of citizens, as what we called a ‘recognition crisis, a gap between what citizens do, or would like to do, and the state’s recognition of what they do’ (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham 2010: 189). Recognition is a term with significant philosophical depth (Honneth 2007), although it has been little developed in the field of media studies (for an important recent exception, see Maia 2016). Honneth’s concept of recognition is however, particularly valuable for underpinning our purpose through the Public Connection study of broadening political science’s notion of political efficacy to capture the wider implications for civic identities, affinities and practices of citizens’ sense that their efforts are valued by those in power, notably the state. The *absence* of such recognition was, we concluded, highly problematic for the sustainability of mediated public connection: ‘what will sustain mediated public connection best in the long run is citizens’ sense that if they follow the public world, that knowledge may contribute to their agency in that world, and that agency may in turn make a difference’ (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham 2010: 194-195).

On the other hand, while media consumption (of old and new media) contributes importantly to people’s possibilities for public connection and engagement in the democratic process – especially in relation to their sense of duty to keep up with the news (Livingstone and Markham 2008) - it does not ensure them. This, as research amply shows, is substantially due to the evident and disturbing *disconnections* among values, affinity, knowledge, practices, identities and discussion, as well as to people’s motivations to pursue practices of media consumption that are oriented *away* from public issues. To explain these disconnections, in turn, the analytic focus must encompass the ways in which social and political institutions,

including but going far beyond the media, offer – or fail to offer – meaningful pathways for engagement to the public.

***Historical (dis)continuities: comparing findings before and after the advent of social media***

It is striking how these conclusions from a decade ago (a time when two arch representatives of global neoliberalism and global interventionism were in power: George W Bush and Tony Blair) are still relevant to the world of summer 2016, when the UK's vote to leave the European Union is widely interpreted as reflecting a widespread sense of lack of recognition among poorer voters, when similar dynamics appear to lie behind the rise of non-mainstream candidates in the US Presidential election (Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders), and when in Spain two new parties have shaken the two-party political landscape, with names that clearly affirm citizen agency against the state: *Podemos* ('We Can') and *Ciudadanos* ('Citizens'). One can think of many other changes in the world even in the past ten years, and a fuller analysis of them than we have space for here could no doubt offer an insightful account of both the similarities and differences between our study and the others reported in this volume and elsewhere.

However, we will here focus the most dramatic change in the *media* landscape of the past decade or more, namely the spread of the internet in general and social media platforms in particular. Clearly, the explosion in social media usage rests on a deeper infrastructural change led by profound political-economic investment: the expansion in richer nations (and in many poorer ones) of pervasive access to high-speed internet access, increasingly via mobile phones and other mobile devices. And, equally clearly, there has been huge speculation – and a rapidly growing body of research – concerned with the public and political consequences: for news-following and civic engagement, on the part of the public; for the quality of journalism and the viability of the press, on the part of the media; and for the commercialisation and personalisation of politics and the rise of populist movements at the expense of established political parties, on the part of politics and the state. This speculation has often been too little supported by evidence and expressed technologically-determinist terms (claiming for example that the internet lowers the entry barriers to direct political engagement, condemns us to communicate only with like-minded others, democratises access to information and expertise, swamps us with dubious claims from fringe groups, or distracts us in the interests of big business). From the perspective of people's daily lives, the growth of time over the past decade spent with media and the further penetration of seemingly all spaces by media, as media become ever more individualised, commercialised and privatised, represent a dramatic change. Many claims about society – the network society, the digital society, the social media age – have resulted with much of the hyperbole focused especially on youth (the so-called digital generation).

Before considering what such changes mean for public connection, let us wind back the clock to 2004-2005, when we were doing our original UK Public Connection fieldwork. As reported by the UK's communications regulator, Ofcom, in 2005 41% of UK adults (16+ years old) had not used the internet at all, a number that has since fallen sharply to 26% in 2010 and since then by a further half to 13% in 2015; further, among internet users, time spent in a typical week has risen from 9.9 hours in 2005 to 21.6 hours in 2015, a huge increase that, for sure, includes greater reliance on the internet for work and education but also, most significantly, shows that the internet is becoming increasingly vital for leisure, family life and orienting to the public world via news, social media and more. As for smartphones and tablets, these are newer still – Ofcom only began measuring take-up in 2010 (when the smartphone

had reached 30% of UK adults and the tablet just five percent). Use of social media platforms was also only tracked since 2010, when 54% of UK adult internet users had a profile – this has now risen in 2015 to 73% of internet users (or, perhaps more interestingly, to 63% of all UK adults).<sup>1</sup>

All of these findings have been strongly stratified by age and socio-economic status, more or less following the predictions of Everett Rogers' (1983) early theory of the diffusion of innovations. Since younger and wealthier people are now thoroughly used to online and social media, the more recent trend is the spread of new information and communication habits and practices among older and poorer people, gradually equalising at least basic access. However, there *remains* a significant percentage of a wealthy country's population that does not use the internet, in spite of huge pressure on them to do so. It is equally important that new forms of inequality - in devices, connectivity, and digital competence - continue to arise (Helsper and van Deursen, 2016). In this regard, digital media are markedly less democratic than radio, television or the press, all of which have been far more fairly accessible, at least in the global North, for the past half century.

In short, since we conducted our research, access to and use of the internet has changed from being an occasional activity for a relatively privileged minority of people to a more commonplace yet still unequal activity for the majority, and from an activity tied to a fixed device and location (usually the home or workplace) to one that can be flexibly engaged in anywhere, anytime. Unsurprisingly, these transformations in media access and use are associated with other equally decisive shifts since our study was completed, with noteworthy consequences for public connection. Were we to replicate our study in the UK today, here is where we would expect to find the key changes.

In our 2005 survey, when we asked them which news media they followed at least three times a week on average, we found that UK adults put television at the top (89%), followed by radio (71%), a national (61%) or local (56%) newspaper, with the internet far below at just 23% (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham, 2006). In 2015, Ofcom reported that 67% of adults said they follow the news on television 'nowadays', 41% used the internet for news, 31% newspapers and 32% radio. Even allowing for some differences in measures between the two surveys, the shift from mass media to the internet in less than a decade is striking: we note in Kim Schröder's chapter for this volume an even more dramatic shift in Denmark towards 'social media' and away from 'television and printed newspapers' as sources of news, even in the short period of 2013-15. Yet, also striking, surely, is the *persistence* of television, especially public service broadcasting, which remains the most used and most trusted sources in the UK. Among those who get their news online, around four in ten use social media (such as Facebook and Twitter), rising to six in ten among the young (16-24 years old); across all adults, therefore, social media are used for news by around one in six. Thus it is also important to recognise that, while social media represent the fastest growing news source, they are far from dominant, as yet.

Two related broader changes, not present in our 2004/5 fieldwork, have also emerged: for the first time in 2015, the mobile phone became the 'most missed' medium' on average across the UK population, although the trend was starkly different between those over 55 (for whom the television was more missed among the vast majority) and those under 35 (for whom the vast majority elected for the mobile phone). The second change is 'an increasing polarity between different age-groups in terms of communications activity' (Ofcom 2016: 6), something we could not have discerned from a cross-sectional survey.

All of these trends would today make impossible some of the conclusions we once reached, drawing not just on our own data but on that of other research available at the time. One such conclusion is that internet use for accessing news is – as it was in 2005 - the practice of a small minority (Couldry Livingstone and Markham 2010: 180). Another is our finding that ‘the internet proved [for our participants] much less important as a primary news source than recent hype . . . would suggest [with]mobile media barely register[ing] as a significant news source’ (p.182-3). Third, the last decade’s strong growth of internet as a news source, enabling readers to *send on* the same news source to others anywhere, has encouraged practices of *sharing news*, which before were highly constrained. What once involved buying a hard copy newspaper, cutting out an extract and posting it someone for them to receive it several days later, is now a matter of a copy and paste, performed in a second or two before hitting ‘send’ – even more remarkably, we can now ‘share’ this action with many others simultaneously.

These historic changes in how media works as a information source intersect, in some countries, with different social contexts of news consumption. While we certainly looked for social contexts that stabilised patterns of news use, this was not an obvious primary topic of fieldwork in the way that investigating people’s social networks as sites for news consumption was in Laura Ahva’s and Heiki Heikkila’s study from Finland (this volume) or an important finding from fieldwork as it was in Andrea Press and Bruce Williams’ US study which drew on the Public Connection methodology (Press and Williams 2010: 178-186). Perhaps the balance of our study would have been different if we had set out to study social networks of news consumption and commentary, but it is a distinctive feature of the UK context that we did *not* discover, however indirectly, the sort of reliable network contexts that Ahva and Heikkila and Press and Williams found. Indeed it was striking in the case of a number of participants that lacked precisely such a social context for consuming news, and this in turn was reinforced by a missing link between available social contexts of habits of public connection and *wider political or civic contexts* (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham 2010: 183).

Notwithstanding the past decade’s historic shifts in media infrastructures and these subtle cultural differences, we are struck also by the continuities between our older study and the other chapters of this volume: for example with Manuel Guerrero’s finding from Mexico that social media do *not* displace traditional mass media as influences on public engagement, even if they provide important starting-point for online engagement, albeit starting-points that have their roots in face-to-face relations. This continuity confirms, we believe, the enduring relevance of the broad framing of public engagement that we adopted back in 2003. It is time now to turn, in a more detail, to how exactly we sought as researchers to get close to the complex ‘object’ of public connection.

### ***Reflections on method***

As our original project took shape it became clear that our understanding of public engagement from the contributions of our participants would emerge neither by hypothesis-testing on the basis of an imposed analytical framework nor by simply asking people what words like ‘public’ and ‘engagement’ meant to them. In both the qualitative and quantitative phases we tried to avoid thinking of engagement as something merely present or absent. Further, although this device remains all too popular, we were wary of devising typologies that would end up speaking for themselves, almost too eloquently. The categories we went on



to introduce helped us – and hopefully readers – to challenge the pervasive assumptions we mentioned at the beginning about how we address ourselves to a public world, and what role the media plays in sustaining or undermining this. But it is also easy for new typologies to congeal into reified forms that seem to justify themselves but bear little relation to other research. This is not just a matter of saying that every participant is different – of course they are – but that the ways of being, thinking and acting they hold in common must be grasped in their full specificity if we are to understand what publicness means at a particular moment in time; and this in turn requires a flexible analytical model that avoids applying rigid criteria for engagement and ventriloquizing ideal types.

This led us to the central concept of ‘orientation’, our lived and naturalised – but not unproblematic – bearing towards the world which underpins our experience of being in it. Orientation is distinct from worldview, incorporating the profound but also the mundane, everything that is naturally meaningful and thinkable amid the rhythms of everyday life. As we talked to our diarists and read their weekly submissions we felt fairly confident that we could do this methodically and responsibly, by listening, eliciting, observing – and as far as possible avoiding any ‘front-loading’ of what they *should* find meaningful, or pleasurable, or unbearable for that matter (in this we followed the basic principle of a practice approach). Diary participants became increasingly familiar to us over time, and yet our intention was not to achieve a methodological intimacy with them, let alone pretend to get inside their heads and experience the world exactly as they did. We sought rather to understand their lives as well as we could, but always with two questions in mind that would open up fruitful lines of analysis. The first of these is typical of all phenomenological investigation: what has ‘to hold’ in order for this or that experience of the world to be just-liveable, just-talkable about (it was significant for us therefore that, for the most part participants did *not* struggle to find things to write about or to respond to in our interview prompts and questions). Insights into what underpins a naturalised orientation towards the world varied richly across the sample, and it soon became clear how much more there was to it than trust in politics or fulfilling a citizen’s duty to stay informed.

The second question we held in mind when poring over our transcripts and collected diaries was: what exactly is this evidence of? Our guiding principle was to avoid conflating epistemologies of orientation and epistemologies of engagement/disengagement. Simply put, evidence of one did not stand for evidence of the other. This may appear an obvious point, but it is one we wanted to emphasise, being aware of the readiness – especially in political science – to read hypothesised and often normative concepts into any and all observed behaviour. Is a statement of blanket mistrust of all politicians *ipso facto* evidence of political disengagement, and if so, of what kind? What makes it readily sustainable over time, part of the background hum of everyday life, so that it could become ‘at hand’ to be uttered effortlessly, gleefully or bitterly, in a conversation with one of us? Is diligently keeping up with the news despite the pain of it a defiant expression of public engagement, come what may, a signal of alienation, or just the vestigial remains of a mode of engagement no longer relevant to life as it is now? Is a voracious appetite for celebrity gossip evidence of a retreat from public life, an orientation towards a different kind of public world with its own affordances and articulations, or is it futile for us to even begin to analyse it using the language of ‘public’ and ‘private’? Is an utterance that aligns the speaker with ‘everyone’ else a show of solidarity, a projection of cultural belonging or a performance of ordinariness? Is evidence of an active social life pointing to a substitute for public connection, or a sign of the very thing that sustains it? The animated family discussions one of our participants described sound like Papacharissi’s account of the private sphere (Papacharissi 2012) not as the opposite of the public sphere but

its antechamber, somewhere we can try out ideas and rehearse our public selves. But how confident can we be about drawing a link between his private and public realms, still less those of the rest of his family?

The established discourse analysis method of parallel coding proved effective in this regard, with the three of us often – but not always – seeing evidence of different forces at work in the rich tapestries of the data, and discussing at length what a particular phrase or reference meant. Instinctively whoever had first interviewed a participant might feel that they have the keenest sense of what underlay a diary entry, but this could not be taken as self-evident, and again those questions about what had to be in place for certain things to be conceivable and utterable, and what they could be taken to represent, led us to challenge our hunches and develop our analysis incrementally and reflexively. This process is represented in the conceptual maps, some of which we presented in Chapter 4 of our original book, that detail the lines of inference we drew – dotted and dashed where ambiguous or tentative – from the web of objects, practices and commonplaces that made an individual's life just *theirs*, to the bigger questions we wanted to ask about everything that sustains, disrupts, prevents or distances modes of existing in relation to a public world, however defined. We would not presume that the particular and peculiar form that our analytical visualisations took should be used as a template by future researchers, but we hope that the transparency we aimed for in revealing out analytic 'workings' in and around our data help other researchers in facing the complexities that are inevitably part of research in this area.

A similar methodological impetus drove our quantitative analysis. We rejected the idea of asking respondents directly about their connectedness or happiness. This is a common enough technique in the social sciences, but one spurred by a particular epistemological imperative: that citizenship and life satisfaction are not attitudes to be measured but ways of being that can only be glimpsed through webs of relations to things, events and ideas – like night vision, such glimpses are snatched by looking slightly off-centre. Care was taken to ensure that each basket of variables had the requisite Cronbach's alpha, and we let factor analysis determine our direction of travel at different points, but we always came back to that same question of validity: *how could we be sure that this or that pattern in the numbers was indicative of this or that aspect of orientation, still less of a relation of causality?* This is the complex methodological question that we take to underlie all the chapters of this volume, notwithstanding their greater or lesser differences form the exact combination of methods we selected in our study. Addressing this question also involved a lot of deliberation, and cross-referencing the qualitative results helped, too, and the major conclusions of the quantitative aspect of the project have proven reasonably robust. But more narrowly in terms of methodology there is a specific message from doing this analysis that remains especially pertinent. This is that we think we know what we are measuring when we measure social capital, trust or efficacy; we intuit that this or that variable is a reliable indicator of one or another, and we make assumptions about how they are experienced by people like and unlike ourselves. In practice there is rarely such an equivalence of epistemology and ontology, and the best we can do is to make our interpretations plain and our reasoning watertight.

Consider the examples of 'troubled closeness' and 'satisfied distance' we developed (Couldry and Markham 2008) to capture the experience of those who remain oriented towards the public sphere conventionally conceived despite being routinely upset and frightened by what goes on there, and those who live blithely and confidently oriented anywhere but towards that traditional centre of public life. In one respect these were presented as interesting counterfactuals to the received wisdom on public engagement, that its presence is not just a

normative good but associated with a positive life experience, its lack associated with resentment and ennui. Yet they are also worthy of serious investigation as (relatively) stable ways of being in the world – which is to say potentially painful or pleasurable, but sustainable in the everyday contexts of things and experiences largely taken for granted, an existence lived as seamlessly as any other. We know from the work of Hannah Arendt and more recently, Nancy Fraser, that public engagement is not generally sustainable as pure political principle stripped of all affect, as much as the pleasure principle can never on its own explain why people engage publicly. And the corollary we wanted to tease out was that ambivalence, apathy, and even alienation are not just markers of the absence of engagement, but distinct forms of orientation in their own right, ways of being in the public world whose affordances and articulations as well as constraints are just as important to understand.

These modes of orientation to the public world are, we hope, of more than philosophical interest. For they affect directly how we go about ‘reading’ the social and political world on, as it were, the ground level. If someone attends to public life resentfully, sceptically or distractedly, we need not pathologise this as a care deficit – a deficit either caused by a particular mode of media consumption, or one which a different kind of media could efface. This approach is part of a broader tendency to reframe crises of politics and public life as crises of morality that displace responsibility onto media practitioners and audiences. Each mode of orientation is a reasonable and potentially stable bearing towards the world and may be experienced positively or negatively, but none provides a target for any sort of magic bullet that will break through someone’s indifference and spark re-engagement with politics or other public world.

Our commitment to the phenomenology of public connection underpinned our reluctance to set out overly prescriptive solutions to disengagement in the conclusion to our book. It remains as crucial to recall that there are not only inclusive spaces in which learning, expression and deliberation can take place, but links from media consumption to spheres of action in which individuals and groups can feel invested as actors. But there is no lever we can pull so that individuals will attend to that space and do so in the ways we have historically associated with ‘political citizenship’. Some of this comes down to the practices of care of the self through which individuals maintain continuity across time in everyday contexts: we saw how participants used the same events in the news to rationalise palpably divergent orientations, some citing paying attention to bad news as precisely underpinning their commitment to distant others, others using it to explain their turning away. Likewise, while we tend to associate media literacy with public engagement, it was fairly common for diarists to invoke manipulative journalistic techniques as a factor underscoring their *disengagement*. People have reasons for turning away, as well as for connecting with, a public world, and it is only by investigating the complicated array of relations sustaining orientation away from ‘the’ public sphere and towards myriad potential others that we can begin to explain individual citizens’ actual ways of being ‘in’ the civic and public world. To register this, we need to avoid the temptation to simply give participants a platform on which to ‘express’ themselves, and instead to offer them a far from frictionless process of reflection whose lived tensions could provide their own insights into the complexities of public engagement..

## ***Conclusion***

Let us, finally, revisit the four main conclusions from our project report (Couldry et al, 2006) to clarify what, in the light of the studies reported in this volume, conducted in different

countries with related methodologies, has changed in the domain of ‘public connection’ by ten years later

1. Consumption of both old and new media still contributes importantly to people’s possibilities for public connection and engagement in the democratic process. Our UK research revealed multiple ways in which media consumption contributes to public connection, with analysis of the survey showing news engagement contributes significantly to explaining political interest and, thereby, voting, and other chapters in this volume repeat this finding from different perspectives.
2. Habits of media consumption and news engagement are heavily stratified by age. The habits of an older generation (watching the evening TV news, reading a daily newspaper) remain important, although less prevalent among those under 30. While using the internet for news is associated with being younger, it may not generate habits of news consumption as stable as those associated with traditional media; internet use/access remains socially stratified.
3. While media consumption contributes to public connection, it does not ensure it, since many people’s practices of media consumption are oriented away from public issues. While many diarists followed celebrity- or reality-based media, we found no evidence here of a route into broad public engagement, quite the contrary.
4. Media consumption’s contribution to public connection is however constrained by wider disarticulations between talk about public issues and opportunities for acting upon them, and between many people’s engagement in civic action but disengagement from formal politics. Our diaries offered disturbing evidence of civically active people who doubted whether their experience was being taken into account by policymakers, while our survey found a gap between being informed about civic issues and feeling able to influence local decisions.

We suggest that, were we to repeat our study in the UK today, we might draw very similar conclusions all over again. Perhaps we would find new habits of news consumption via social media gradually stabilising among the young but that is far from certain. Then as now, the most common reason for following the news was ‘to know what’s going on in the world’ (compare Couldry et al, 2006 and Ofcom, 2016). Then as now, young people were more likely to follow celebrity than news, but then as now, they also followed the national news, albeit often shared with them via social media. Then as now, the elite media and the government are – rightly – worrying about the democratic deficit in political engagement while paying too little attention to their own contributions to this problem.

It matters, therefore, today just as much as a decade ago, if neoliberal governments on more than one continent show as little, if not less, trust in their citizens as their citizens place in them.<sup>2</sup> We recognise of course that there are major differences of political history that perhaps separate the chapters of this volume. We do not pretend, for example, that the context that has ‘hindered civic participation and deliberation’ in the UK’s recent history is fully comparable to the historical context that has over a century had this effect in Mexico (as noted in Manuel Guerrero’s chapter). But those complexities only underline the importance of the commitment to rigorous global comparative work on media’s contribution to public engagement that this new volume helps to further.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For the statistics in this paragraph, see Ofcom (2016).

<sup>2</sup> Couldry Livingstone and Markham (2010: 18) discussing Toynbee (2005).

<sup>3</sup> For other discussion of the importance of global comparative research as a necessity, not an option, for media studies, see Couldry (2012: chapter 7), and Livingstone (2012). The invitation to comparative thinking was there already from early on in Jesus Martín-Barbero's work.