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The contribution of media consumption to civic participation

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**Mediating public participation:
On the political significance of everyday media consumption**

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Abstract

A national UK survey (N = 1017) examined the association between media consumption and three indicators of civic participation – likelihood of voting, interest in politics, and actions taken in response to a public issue of concern to the respondent. Multiple regression analysis was used to test the variance explained by media use variables after first controlling for demographic, social and political predictors of each indicator of participation. Media use significantly added to explaining variance in civic participation as follows. In accounting for voting, demographic and political/social factors mattered, but so too did some media habits (listening to the radio and engagement with the news). Interest in politics was accounted for by political/social factors and by media use, especially higher news engagement and lower media trust. However, taking action on an issue of concern was accounted for only by political/social factors, with the exception that slightly fewer actions were taken by those who watched more television. These findings provided little support for the media malaise thesis, and instead were interpreted as providing qualified support for the cognitive/motivational theory of news as a means of engaging the public.

Keywords: Civic participation; voting; interest in politics; political action; social capital; media consumption; news consumption; online news

Mediating Public Participation: On the Political Significance of Everyday Media Consumption¹

Declining civic participation

Participation is a multidimensional phenomenon (Norris 1999; Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley 2004; Scheufele and Nisbet 2002). Forms of participation may vary in significance in different countries (Haste 2004), and there is a lack of consensus regarding both definition and measurement of participation. None the less, there is sufficient justification for Pharr, Putnam and Dalton's claim (2000: 7, 9), based on cross-national findings, that although there is 'no evidence of declining commitment to the principle of democratic government ... by almost any measure political alienation soared over the last three decades'. A recent survey of UK citizens found a high level of 'disconnection' (72 per cent felt disconnected from Parliament) fairly evenly spread across age, social class and gender (Coleman 2005), though policy concern tends to focus on the young (BBC 2002; Hansard 2001; Morris, John and Halpern 2003) and, to a lesser degree, on socioeconomic status and ethnicity (Electoral Commission 2005a; Scheufele and Nisbet 2002; US Census Bureau 2004).

Of various indicators charting declining civic participation, electoral turnout is crucial. Norris (1999) reviews evidence of a decline in voting across established democracies (c.f. Coleman 2005; Power Inquiry 2006). In the UK, this decline is evident in local, national and European elections: turnout for the 2001 UK general election was 59 per cent, the lowest for any postwar UK general election, and at 61 per cent the 2005 election turnout was only marginally higher. In the USA, national voter turnout at federal elections fell from 63 per cent in 1960 to 55 per cent in 2004 (US Census Bureau 2004; c.f. Scheufele and Nisbet 2002).

Voting is not the only indicator of participation, though it shows the clearest evidence of long-term decline. On the softer measure of 'interest in politics', the Electoral Commission (2005b) identifies a parallel decline, with those who are very or fairly interested in politics falling from 60 per cent in 1973 to 53 per cent in 2004. The British Social Attitudes survey is less conclusive (Bromley 2004), with decline most evident in interest in Parliamentary politics (Lusoli, Ward and Gibson 2006). While acknowledging that, in the USA, people are increasingly distrustful of politicians (Norris 1999; Scheufele and Nisbet, 2002), Bennett (1998) argues that the public remains concerned with diverse political issues, albeit often single issues such as the environment or health rather than party politics. He reviews evidence that the American public participates actively in relation to issues they are concerned with, ranging from political discussions with friends to signing a petition or joining a demonstration, these often being 'lifestyle' actions rather than 'group-based' participation. Similarly, in the UK, trend analysis over the past two decades shows no decline in reported willingness to engage in a range of political actions, both traditional and alternative, and it reveals an increase in political action from the mid-1980s to 2000, peaking in the early 1990s (Bromley, Curtice and Seyd 2004).

The UK's Power Inquiry (2006) concluded that the public is neither simply contented, nor apathetic, for levels of community or voluntary work, along with other participatory activities, have remained relatively high. The decline, in short, is primarily focused on voting, accompanied by falling interest in and rising distrust of politics and politicians (Bromley, Curtice and Seyd 2004). Low political efficacy among the public helps to explain the declining vote, since trust, efficacy and turnout are linked (Bromley, Curtice and Seyd. 2004). The Power Inquiry concurred with many commentators that the shift to a post-industrial economy has destabilized long-established relations of authority and deference, while failing to put in their place an alternative structure of engagement and representation (Bennett 1998; Scheufele and Nisbet 2002), though it should not be assumed that the public would, in consequence, prefer participatory to representative democracy (Coleman 2005).

Accounting for participation

Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley (2004) summarize five models of the factors that support active citizenship, distinguishing between choice-based (or utility maximization) theories and structural models of citizenship. The choice theories include 'cognitive engagement' models and those focused on 'general incentives to act'. The former explains why individuals seek civic or political information, and claims that education, knowledge, and motivation are crucial. The latter is concerned to explain why they are motivated to use such information, and so efficacy, social norms regarding participation and personal/group incentives for participation are stressed more. They divide structural models into the 'civic voluntarism' model, the 'equity-fairness' model and the 'social capital' model (Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley 2004). The first explains why people do not become engaged, emphasizing the importance of resources (as measured by socio-economic status), civic skills, mobilization and political efficacy (Verba and Nie 1972). The equity-fairness model is concerned with social comparisons, low social status, and a sense of relative justice; while explaining the occurrence of non-traditional or non-approved forms of participation, this model is less effective in accounting for the overall decline in participation. The social capital model (Putnam 2000) stresses the importance of social or interpersonal trust in enabling the local or voluntary participation that strengthens community relations, this feeding a virtuous circle of civic engagement.

As Pattie et al. (2004) and others have shown (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000; Pharr, Putnam and Dalton 2000), a fair body of evidence supports each of explanatory factors identified by these models in seeking to explain public participation. Notably, there has been a striking decline in public trust in established political institutions, both in the UK (Electoral Commission 2005b; Kavanagh 1989; Topf 1989), the USA (Inglehart 1977; Norris 1999), and elsewhere. A decline in social capital, concomitant with the decline in social trust, suggests a further cause of decreasing political participation. Claiming that, 'the core of the theory of social capital is extremely simple: social networks matter', Putnam (2000: 6) points to the decline of formal associations, captured in his famous image of 'bowling alone' (although see Field 2005; Fine 2001; Hooghe and Stolle 2003; Hall 2002). Indeed, Bennett (1998) shows that volunteering has increased, with consequences for the relationship between social trust, civic involvement and political engagement (see Cohen 1999; Eliasoph 1998; Fine and Harrington 2004). Political efficacy (Inglehart 1977) may also play a role, for people are unlikely to take action unless they believe they can 'make a difference'. In the UK, 67 per cent agree that 'You want to have a say in how the country is run', but only 27 per cent agree that 'You have a say in how the country is run', pointing to a gap between political commitment and individual efficacy (MORI 2004; see Bromley, Curtice and Seyd 2004; Scheufele and Nisbett 2002). MORI (2004) found that political efficacy (but not social capital or interest in politics) predicted likelihood of voting, as did political knowledge (see also Haste 2004).

Last, the role of interpersonal discussion has been researched since the original two-step flow model (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; c.f. Beck, Dalton, Greene and Huckfeldt 2002). Following Robinson and Levy (1986a), among others, who showed that talk about the news promotes news comprehension, Eveland (2004) analysed national US survey data to show that such discussion is effective less because it extends exposure to political news but because knowing that one will discuss the news with others encourages an anticipatory elaboration of one's political understanding during and after news exposure; also, the discussion itself helps to elaborate political knowledge and improve understanding. While Eveland takes this as evidence for 'cognitive mediation', one might also point to the social and motivational aspects underlying discussion (McLeod and Becker 1974), for social pressure to keep up with the news (Wenner 1985) and to appear informed among peers also reinforces the value and identity aspects of informal civic participation (Dahlgren 2003) or non-participation (Eliasoph 1998).

Media use and civic connection

In parallel with these trends in civic participation, there has been a transformation in the media and communication environment over recent decades. Media channels and contents are increasingly globalized, commercialized and diversified, yet also personalized and individualized.

For some, this seems unrelated to participation. Evans and Butt (2005) chart relations between political parties and public opinion over time but treat communication from the parties to the public as unmediated. Bromley, Curtice and Seyd (2004) explain declining levels of political trust in terms of the public's perception of the responsibilities of governments, their post-materialist values and declining social trust and/or party identification, but they do not inquire into the media's role in representing Government and parties to the public. Indeed, media-related variables only feature in two of Pattie et al.'s (2004) five models of citizen participation, playing a positive causal role in the 'cognitive engagement' model, where the focus is on the motivated seeking of political information through news (Norris 2000), and a negative causal role in the 'social capital' model, where the focus is on the media distracting people from civic engagement (Putnam 2000). In none of these models is media consumption treated as a significant consequence of civic participation and so, although such a possibility would also be of interest, it is not pursued here. Rather, the aim of this article is to examine the social capital and cognitive engagement models, treating these as prominent exemplars of theories that propose media consumption to either increase or decrease civic participation (see also Capella and Jamieson 1996; Graber 2004; Hooghe 2002; McLeod, Scheufele and Moy 1999; Newton 1999; Robinson and Levy 1986a; Shah et al. 2005).

Looking more closely at the social capital model first, we note that Putnam regards high television consumption as a major cause of declining levels of social capital and civic engagement: 'just as television privatizes our leisure time, it also privatizes our civic activity, dampening our interactions with one another even more than it dampens individual political activities' (Putnam 2000: 229). Indeed, many have judged the media to have 'undercut the kind of public culture needed for a healthy democracy' (Dahlgren 2003: 151). The media, it is claimed, keep people at home and away from civic and community spaces; distract them by easy entertainment so they neglect more demanding news and current affairs; transform the content of news, in an age of political marketing, so that it encourages cynicism or disengagement (Capella and Jamieson 1996); commodify news into branded infotainment and dumbed down journalistic values to the point where fact and fiction are indistinguishable within politics itself (Delli Carpini and Williams 2001) or where the news seems not to speak to people (Hargreaves and Thomas 2002); and focus attention on the activities of the traditional (privileged) establishment, silencing difference and dissent (McChesney 2000).

However, this model has been criticized for ignoring a positive role for television news consumption in civic engagement (Norris 1996, 2000). Television remains 'the main source' of news (Robinson and Levy 1986b), cited as such by three in four British adults; two in three people trust television to provide the most fair and unbiased news (Office of Communications 2004), more than trust the newspapers or internet (Bromley, Curtice and Seyd 2004). Pinpointing the importance of news consumption specifically, Graber (2004) argues that the public gains much of its political knowledge from the news (see also McLeod, Scheufele and Moy 1999). Since attracting and sustaining citizens' collective attention is a central challenge in modern democracies and a prerequisite for most political or civic action, Graber (2004) analyses citizens' 'information needs', arguing in support of the cognitive engagement model that, by providing such information to the public collectively, the media play a role in connecting the public's everyday lifeworld to civic participation.

It seems that in so far as media use is included in explanations of civic participation, researchers are divided over whether it facilitates or undermines participation. Partly, the problem is the focus on different media. In relation to television, it is the potential to undermine participation is generally stressed, though the specific and positive contribution of the genre of television news has been emphasized by some. By contrast, the role of the press in supporting democracy has long been acknowledged (Graber 2004). For the recently-arrived internet, some identify an individualizing effect but others point to its community-building and social networking features (Wellman et al. 2001). Since the media are plural in their cultural and technological forms and modes of address, one should surely expect them also to be plural in their effects. Thus, the second aim of this article is to examine the role of media consumption by disaggregating the

generic term 'the media' within these debates, and by doing so permitting us to frame research questions that distinguish overall media consumption, news consumption and, more specifically still, the social and motivational aspects of a positive cognitive engagement with the news, for each of several media.

Hence we ask, for television, radio, press and the internet:

RQ1: In what ways, if at all, does overall media consumption add to the explanation for civic participation, over and above demographic, political and social factors?

RQ2: In what ways, if at all, does news consumption add to the explanation for civic participation, over and above demographic, political and social factors?

RQ3: In what ways, if at all, do the social and motivational aspects of news engagement add to the explanation for civic participation, over and above demographic, political and social factors?

Method

Survey sample

The authors commissioned a reputable market research company to administer a telephone survey to a nationally representative quota sample of the population of Great Britain (aged 18+) in June 2005 (N = 1017). Quotas were set for age, gender and socioeconomic status (SES) and the results were weighted to the profile of all adults. Comparison of the survey sample against the 2001 Census confirms that the sample characteristics matched those of the population (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham 2007).

Measures

Building on standard questions asked in the British Social Attitudes, Electoral Commission, Pew and other surveys, and on qualitative work by Couldry, Livingstone and Markham (2007), the questionnaire combined items on public and political interest, knowledge and action with questions on media access, use and evaluation.² Demographic variables were coded as follows: gender (male = 0, female = 1), socioeconomic status (1 = AB, 2 = C1, 3 = C2, 4 = D, 5 = E) and age (2 = 18-24, 3 = 25-34, 4 = 35-44, 5 = 45-54, 6 = 55-64, 7 = 65+).

Indicators of civic participation were *Likelihood of voting* (a traditional, 'hard' measure), *Interest in politics*³ (a traditional, 'soft' measure) and *Actions taken* in response to an issue of concern to the respondent (permitting a diverse range of actions). The explanatory variables consisted either of scales constructed from several items as in previous research (*Political trust*, *Political efficacy*, *Social capital*) or, for a basket of individual items commonly used in previous research but not necessarily interrelated, they comprised scales constructed from an exploratory factor analysis (this identified factors for *Social expectations*, *News engagement*, *Media trust*, and *disengagement*). The Cronbach's alphas were generally adequate (see below), with the exception of *Disengagement* (alpha = 0.35), which was omitted from the present analysis. In addition to the variables used to construct the *News engagement* scale, media use was measured through eight items, asking both about overall *Media consumption* and specifically *News consumption*, for each of four media (television, radio, newspaper, and the internet). For the measures listed below, responses used a 5 point Likert-type rating scale where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree, unless otherwise stated.

(1) Indicators of civic participation:

Likelihood of voting Rating for the item, 'You generally vote in national elections' (mean = 4.12, st.dev. = 1.20).

Political interest Rating for the item, 'You are generally interested in what's going on in politics' (mean = 3.56, st.dev. = 1.22).

Actions taken

This applied only to the 72 per cent of respondents who named an issue in response to the question, 'Which public issue has been particularly important to you over the last three months?' They were then asked, 'Still thinking about the issue you have just mentioned, have you done any of these things in relation to it?' A list of 13 possible actions was read out and the actions selected were recorded and summed (average number = 1.35, st.dev. = 1.96). The actions listed in the survey were: Joined a national interest or campaign group; Joined a political party; Joined a local group or organization; Participated in a strike; Contacted an MP, councilor, etc; Got in touch with a newspaper/TV/radio station (e.g. letter to the editor, phoned a talk show, sent an email or text to a program); Contributed to an online discussion; Gone on a public protest; Contributed to/created a public message (e.g. website, newsletter, video, etc); A personal protest (e.g. boycotted a product, worn a slogan, left a meeting); Contributed to them financially; Researched the topic; Discussed with family/friends/colleagues.

(2) Social and political factors:

- Social capital* Scale constructed from three items: 'You play an active role in one or more voluntary, local or political organizations', 'Being involved in your local neighbourhood is important to you' and 'You are involved in voluntary work' (alpha = 0.61; mean = 2.78, st.dev. = 0.92).
- Social expectations* Scale constructed from two items: 'People at work would expect you to know what's going on in the world' and 'Your friends would expect you to know what's going on in the world' (correlated with $r = 0.51$; mean = 3.48, st.dev. = 1.04).
- Political efficacy* Constructed from two items: 'You feel that you can influence decisions in your area' and 'You can affect things by getting involved in issues you care about' (correlated with $r = 0.33$; mean = 3.20, st.dev. = 0.96).
- Political trust* Scale constructed from three items: 'You trust politicians to tell the truth', 'You trust politicians to deal with the things that matter' and 'You trust the government to do what is right' (alpha = 0.76; mean = 2.68, st.dev. = 1.04).
- Talk about issues* After being asked which of a list of 18 themes they generally keep up with, respondents were asked, 'Taking these things that matter to you, how often do you tend to talk to others about these kinds of things?' (1 = not at all, to 4 = all the time; mean = 2.57, st.dev. = 0.69).

(3) Media factors:

- Media consumption* Response to the item, 'In a normal day, on average, how much time do you spend doing each of the following?' Asked, using an 8 point response scale (1 = no time, 2 = less than 15 minutes, 3 = 15-30 minutes, 4 = 30mins-1 hour, 5 = 1-3 hours, 6 = 3-6 hours, 7 = 6-12 hours, 8 = more than 12 hours), for television (mean = 4.89, st.dev. = 1.16), radio (mean = 3.91, st.dev. = 1.94), newspapers (mean = 2.90, st.dev. = 1.40), and the internet (mean = 2.43, st.dev. = 1.62).
- News consumption* Response to the item, 'Do you do any of these things at least 3 times a week on average? If so, which ones?' Asked (as a binary yes/no question) for national newspaper (61 per cent, st.dev. = 0.49), radio news (71 per cent, st.dev. = 0.45), television news (89 per cent, st.dev. = 0.31), and online news (23 per cent, st.dev. = 0.54).
- News engagement.* Scale constructed from five items: (1) 'It's a regular part of my day to catch up with the news', (2) 'You follow the news to understand what's going on in the world', (3) 'You follow the news to know what other

people are talking about', (4) 'It's my duty to keep up with what's going on in the world', and (5) 'You have a pretty good understanding of the main issues facing our country' (alpha = 0.71; mean = 3.89, st.dev. = 0.69).

Media trust:

Scale constructed from four items: 'You trust the television to report the news fairly', 'You trust the press to report the news fairly', 'You trust the internet to report the news fairly', 'You trust the media to cover the things that matter to you' (alpha = 0.64; mean = 3.26 st.dev. = 0.81).

Results

Main descriptive findings

The survey identified considerable support for voting: 82 per cent said they 'generally' vote in national elections.⁴ Likelihood of voting was strongly associated with age ($r = 0.315$), with younger voters being ambivalent about voting and the oldest groups more committed voters (63 per cent of the 18-24 year olds, compared with 93 per cent of those over 55, said they generally vote in national elections). Political interest (claimed by 65 per cent overall) was also associated with age ($r = 0.160$), with socioeconomic status ($r = -0.125$) and, marginally, to gender ($r = -0.071$). Older and middle class people, and men, reported more interest in politics. There was also a small association between gender and reported number of actions taken ($r = -0.077$).⁵

The survey also showed that, despite the proliferation of media and news sources, for most people television remains the main source of news (c.f. Robinson and Levy, 1986b): 89 per cent watch the news at least three times per week, while 71 per cent listen to radio news three times per week (higher for men and middle class people), 61 per cent read the national paper (more men and older people), over half (56 per cent) read their local newspaper, and only 23 per cent use the internet to access the news three times per week (more men, younger and middle class people). Further, most people trust television news (68 per cent), compared with trusting the press (40 per cent) and online news (36 per cent).

Predicting participation

Given scepticism over whether and how media use plays a role in explaining civic participation, an analytic strategy based on hierarchical multiple regression was conducted separately for each of the three indicator variables, voting, political interest and actions taken. First, we controlled for the variables that were expected to influence the relationship between the main variables of interest and the indicator variables (Hays 1988), by entering age, gender and SES (using the enter method) into an ordinary least squares regression model. Second, we examined the explanatory value of measures traditionally considered by political science (social capital, social expectations, political efficacy, political trust, political talk), by adding these as a second block of variables into the analysis (using the stepwise method within the block). Last, we tested whether the media use variables added to the models by entering these (using the stepwise method) as a third block, since the crux of our present concern is whether various forms of media use, disaggregated by medium and consumption type, can improve on accounts of participation that omit media consumption.

Examination of the correlation matrix for the media use variables confirmed a complex pattern of interrelations that did not permit constructing a single media use scale or, even, separate scales for overall media consumption and news consumption.⁶ For example, time spent with newspapers was positively correlated with time spent with television ($r = 0.102$) and radio ($r = 0.091$) but negatively correlated with internet use ($r = -0.057$). However, time spent with television, though positively associated with reading the paper, was negatively correlated with both radio ($r = -0.82$) and internet use ($r = -0.111$). Similarly, those who seek television news were also likely to get news from the newspaper ($r = 0.162$) and radio ($r = 0.073$) but not from the internet ($r = 0.039$). Indeed, those who get news online seemed to have distinct rather than

general news habits, this being largely uncorrelated with news consumption from other media. Thus in the analyses that follow, the media consumption and news consumption variables were not aggregated across media or consumption types. Rather, in the third phase of the analysis, we tested whether the media variables added to the regression equations already established for the three indicator measures of participation, thus extending the hierarchical regression models by including a third block (using the stepwise method within the block).

(i) Voting

As shown in Table I, the demographic variables entered in the first block accounted for 11 per cent of the variance in likelihood of voting, with older, more middle-class people being more likely to vote. What role do the social and political variables play? When these variables were added to the model in a second block, a more satisfactory explanation resulted. The R-squared increased to 16 per cent. In addition to the association with age and SES, people are more likely to vote, it seems, if they feel more efficacious, if they trust politicians, and if they are higher in social capital. Social pressures to 'keep up', along with the degree to which they talk about issues of importance to them with others, were not associated with voting.

To address RQ1 (the extent to which media consumption adds to the explanation for civic participation), the third block comprised the measures of overall media consumption (for television, radio, newspaper and internet). These added marginally to the regression equation for voting, raising the R-squared from 16 per cent to 17 per cent, with radio consumption main accounting for this rise.

For RQ2 (the extent to which news consumption adds to the explanation for civic participation), the news consumption variables instead were added as Block 3, following the demographic variables (Block 1) and the social/political variables (Block 2). For voting, these four news consumption variables added nothing to the regression equation.

Finally, to address RQ3 (extent to which social and motivational aspects of news engagement add to the explanation for civic participation), the third category of media variables (news engagement and media trust) were entered as Block 3 into the regression equation. In predicting voting, adding this third block added 3 per cent to the R-squared, this reflecting the contribution of news engagement only, not media trust.

Table I: Regression models predicting voting

	Block 1: Demographic variables only	Block 1+2: Demographic, social and political variables	Block 1+2+3a: Demographic, social, political and media consumption variables	Block 1+2+3b: Demographic, social, political and news consumption variables	Block 1+2+3c: Demographic, social, political and news engagement variables
Gender	~0.0	~0.0	~0.0	~0.0	~0.0
Age	0.34	0.33	0.35	0.34	0.29
SES	-0.12	-0.10	-0.10	-0.11	-0.10
Social capital		0.11	0.10	0.11	0.08
Social expectations		~0.0	~0.0	~0.0	~0.0
Political efficacy		0.11	0.09	0.11	0.07
Political trust		0.10	0.09	0.10	0.08
Talk about issues		~0.0	~0.0	~0.0	~0.0
TV consumption			~0.0		
Radio consumption			0.09		
Newspaper consumption			~0.0		
Internet consumption			~0.0		
News from newspaper				~0.0	
News from radio				~0.0	
News from TV				~0.0	
News from internet				~0.0	
News engagement					0.18
Media trust					~0.0
Constant	3.13	2.09	1.91	2.09	1.28
N	1017	1013	1013	1013	1007
R-Squared %	11.2	15.6	17.1	15.6	18.5

(ii) Political interest

As shown in Table II, the demographic variables accounted for only 6 per cent of the variance, with older and more middle class people claiming interest, though gender also added to the equation. The R-squared jumped to 17 per cent when the second block of variables was included). An additional 11 per cent of the variance was accounted for by political efficacy and

social capital (as for voting), as well as talk about issues and social expectations, though political trust played no role. The apparent role of talk and of social expectations in fostering an interest in politics is noteworthy.

Adding media consumption variables increased the R-squared by 1 per cent, with both reading the newspaper and listening to the radio adding to the explanation of variance in political interest.⁷ Similarly, news consumption added marginally to the variance explained: a regular habit of gaining one's news from the newspaper, radio and internet adds to the explanation of variance in political interest; only television news consumption makes little or no difference. Adding news engagement variables into the equation had a more dramatic effect in explaining the variance in political interest, adding 8 per cent to the R-squared: not only news engagement but also media trust contributed to predicting political interest, but the latter bore a negative relation to political interest.

Table II: Regression models predicting political interest

	Block 1: Demographic variables only	Block 1+2: Demographic, social and political variables	Block 1+2+3a: Demographic, social, political and media consumption variables	Block 1+2+3b: Demographic, social, political and news consumption variables	Block 1+2+3c: Demographic, social, political and news engagement variables
Gender	-0.06	-0.06	~0.0	~0.0	-0.06
Age	0.21	0.18	0.15	0.18	0.10
SES	-0.17	~0.0	-0.13	-0.11	-0.11
Social capital		-0.13	0.11	0.10	0.08
Social expectations		0.18	0.17	0.16	~0.0
Political efficacy		0.09	0.09	0.09	~0.0
Political trust		~0.0	~0.0	~0.0	~0.0
Talk about issues		0.17	0.14	0.15	0.11
TV consumption			~0.0		
Radio consumption			0.08		
Newspaper consumption			0.11		
Internet consumption			~0.0		
News from newspaper				0.09	
News from radio				0.09	
News from TV				~0.0	
News from internet				0.07	
News engagement					0.40
Media trust					-0.07
Constant	3.47	1.12	0.81	0.74	0.15
N	1017	1013	1013	1007	1007
R-Squared %	5.6	17.0	18.3	18.0	24.7

(iii) Actions taken

As shown in Table III, the demographic variables played no role at all in accounting for variance in actions taken. Accounting for action required a different explanation from the indicators above, for adding the second block resulted in a substantial increase in the variance explained to nearly 15 per cent. Those who take more actions in relation to an issue of importance to them were more likely to be higher in social capital and political efficacy and they were more likely to talk about issues with others.⁸ Social expectations to keep up with events played no role, while political trust was negatively associated with actions.⁹

Adding media consumption variables made only a marginal difference to the variance explained in actions taken, adding 1 per cent to the R-squared. In this equation, what mattered was amount of television viewed – it seems that those who watch more television take fewer actions on issues that matter to them. Adding news consumption variables to the regression equation for actions taken made no difference. Adding news consumption variables into the regression equation also made no difference to accounting for variance in actions taken.

Table III: Regression models predicting actions taken

	Block 1: Demographic variables only	Block 1+2: Demographic , social and political variables	Block 1+2+3a: Demographic , social, political and media consumption variables	Block 1+2+3b: Demographic , social, political and news consumption variables	Block 1+2+3c: Demographic , social, political and news engagement variables
Gender	~0.0	-0.08	-0.08	-0.08	-0.08
Age	~0.0	~0.0	~0.0	~0.0	~0.0
SES	~0.0	~0.0	~0.0	~0.0	~0.0
Social capital		0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25
Social expectations		~0.0	~0.0	~0.0	~0.0
Political efficacy		0.16	0.15	0.16	0.16
Political trust		-0.14	-0.13	-0.14	-0.13
Talk about issues		0.12	0.12	0.12	0.12
TV consumption			-0.09		
Radio consumption			~0.0		
Newspaper consumption			~0.0		
Internet consumption			~0.0		
News from newspaper				~0.0	
News from radio				~0.0	
News from TV				~0.0	
News from internet				~0.0	
News engagement					~0.0
Media trust					~0.0
Constant	-	-0.89	-0.15	-0.85	-0.85
N	730	729	729	727	727
R-Squared %	-	14.6	15.6	14.6	14.6

Discussion and conclusions

For those sceptical that everyday media use contributes, positively or negatively, to civic participation, the present findings provide some support. In each regression model presented above, demographic variables and traditional political and social factors taken together account for the largest proportion of the variance explained. For the likelihood of voting, demographic variables (age and SES) were most important (c.f. Scheufele and Nisbet 2002), while for political interest and taking action, the political and social factors were more important (especially social capital and political efficacy; c.f. Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley 2004). These variables accounted for between 15-17 per cent of the variance in our three indicators, a respectable if moderate finding consistent with previous research.

Notwithstanding continued theoretical debates over social capital (Field, 2005; Fine 2001; Hooghe and Stolle 2003; Putnam 2000), we conclude that this is important for all three indicators of participation: the 18 per cent who reported playing an active role in local organizations, and the 28 per cent who said they did voluntary work, were also more likely to vote, be interested in politics, and take various forms of action. Political efficacy was also important for all three forms of participation: it seems that people need to feel that their actions have consequences, that they can make a difference. Thus the rather low levels of political efficacy may help explain low levels of participation: 73 per cent said they sometimes feel strongly about something but did not know what to do about it, suggesting the opportunity structures for action are lacking (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996). Political trust played a more complex role: greater trust was positively associated with voting, unrelated to political interest, and negatively related to taking action (a lack of trust appears to motivate people to take action; see Misztal 1996). Talk mattered for interest in politics and for taking action, but was unrelated to voting, supporting the view that talk stimulates civic engagement (Cho 2005; Eliasoph 2004; Shah et al. 2005; Wyatt, Katz and Kim 2000). Last, social expectations mattered only for political interest, where being expected by peers to 'keep up' and to 'be in touch' seems effective, but such expectations were not associated with the behavioural measures of voting and taking action.

Since the explanation of different indicators of participation varies, we should expect the role of media use also to vary for different forms of participation. This proved to be the case. In accounting for the likelihood of voting, media consumption (listening to the radio, which was correlated positively with reading the paper and negatively with watching television) made a very small difference, and specific news consumption made none. The social/motivational construct of news engagement contributed more, suggesting that it is an active and sustained engagement with the news, rather than its mere habitual use, that makes people more likely to vote (as proposed by RQ3).

A similar picture emerged for political interest. Here too, media consumption (reading the newspaper and listening to the radio) added a little to the explanation of interest. News consumption made a small contribution (specifically, the regular habit of gaining news from the newspaper, radio and internet, though not from television). However, a positive engagement with the news (again, as in RQ3) contributed most, as did media trust (a negative relation). In short, when controlling for demographic and social/political factors, those high in news engagement and low in media trust sustained a greater interest in politics (and vice versa).

Variation in taking action on a matter of concern to the respondent, however, was explained only by the social and political factors of efficacy, social capital, and talk. Media consumption made only a small difference, albeit an interesting one given the debate over Putnam's thesis, for the only media variable entering the equation was watching television, suggesting that those who watch more television take fewer actions on issues that matter to them (as in RQ1). However, news consumption and news engagement made no difference to taking action.

In sum, there is little support here for what Norris (2000) terms the 'media malaise' thesis (media as a distraction from or 'dumbing down' of the political agenda), with the possible exception of

taking action. The stronger finding is that use of media and, especially, a positive engagement with the news, seems to sustain both voting and an interest in politics. Though we cannot determine causality in a cross-sectional study, we suggest that news engagement feeds into a virtuous circle: the already-engaged become more interested and engaged; however, the opposite, 'vicious circle' is also indicated, with the unengaged becoming less interested or engaged (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham 2007; Norris 2000). Note that news engagement, as defined here, combines the cognitive, motivational, habitual and normative in a manner that consistent with qualitative work on news consumption in everyday life (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham 2007; BBC 2002; Bennett 1998), integrating several features of Dahlgren's (2003) 'circuit of civic engagement' (values, affinity, identity and talk).

The picture is different for different media, suggesting that the content of the media matters (Newton 1999). Reading the newspaper and listening to the radio, whether in general or just for the news, contributed most to explaining variation in levels of civic participation, particularly in relation to the likelihood of voting and political interest. The internet played little role, at least in these UK data (see also Lusoli, Ward and Gibson 2006¹⁰, although Shah et al. (2005) report a greater role in the USA). We therefore conclude, with Scheufele and Nisbet (2002), that the widespread optimism over the potential of the internet for enhancing civic participation is, at best, premature. Last, although television remains the main source for news, television consumption did not discriminate the more from the less civically engaged. However, there is a hint, in the present analysis, of support for Putnam's *Bowling Alone* thesis, with those who watch less television being more likely to take action on a public issue (see Hooghe 2002); contrary to Putnam, television does not appear to undermine political interest or voting, but for the 'additional' or more diverse civic activities (ranging from signing a petition to contacting a politician or making a protest), more television consumption may distract people from taking such actions.

As regards the different forms of participation, we note that media use played a greater role in explaining variation in political interest, the 'softest' of our indicators of participation, than in explaining the 'harder' measure of voting, and its contribution to explaining action is both small and negative. Since media use did not contribute to the behavioural measure of taking action even, as here, on an issue selected by the respondent to be of direct concern, the present research adds to the argument that there is a disconnection, rather than a straightforward connection, between political interest and taking action (see Couldry, Livingstone and Markham 2007). However, since political interest was strongly correlated with voting and action¹¹, there may be some indirect consequences of using media to sustain interest that, in turn, have consequences for civic participation.

In conclusion, we suggest that civic participation is, to a moderate degree, influenced by media use. While such influence appears to differ for different media and for different forms of participation, there is more evidence to suggest that media use enhances than undermines participation. However, media use appears to play the greatest role is sustaining political interest, being irrelevant to or even negative in relation to taking action. Further research is needed on the specific patterns of overall media consumption versus specifically news consumption and, more especially, on the important role played by people's cognitive, social and motivational engagement with the news media, which we have here termed news engagement.

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Notes

1. This chapter reports on research funded by an ESRC/AHRC grant (RES-336-25-0001) to Nick Couldry and Sonia Livingstone.

2. As with most surveys, practical considerations (e.g. cost of a national survey, overall length of questionnaire, respondent attention) limited the number of items that could be included, resulting in fewer items that would have been optimal for some variables.

3. Note that as measured here, political interest is broader than parliamentary politics: those with greater political interest claimed to 'keep up with' a wide range of issues - international news ($r = 0.430$), trade unions ($r = 0.284$), events in Iraq ($r = 0.305$), the UK economy ($r = 0.389$), religious matters ($r = 0.269$), sport ($r = 0.105$), local council politics ($r = 0.298$), debates about Europe ($r = 0.408$), crime ($r = 0.218$), the environment ($r = 0.233$) and third world poverty ($r = 0.206$).

4. These figures suggest a tendency to over-claim, since voting figures for the 2005 UK General Election show that only 37 per cent of 18-24 year olds and 48 per cent of 25-34 year olds voted, compared with 71 per cent of those aged 55-64, and 75 per cent of those 65+ (Electoral Commission, 2005a). Note that the question asked here concerned propensity to vote rather than actual voting behaviour.

5. Of those who named a particular public issue of importance to them in the past three months, 55 per cent said they had taken some form of action in response: 31 per cent signed a petition, 21 per cent contacted an MP or councillor, 19 per cent went to a local meeting, 11 per cent made a personal protest (e.g. boycotting a company), 10 per cent joined a local group; 9 per cent contributed to an online discussion, 8 per cent contacted a newspaper/ TV/ radio station, 8 per cent contributed to a public message online in a newsletter, etc, 7 per cent joined a national interest or campaign group, 7 per cent went on a public protest, 5 per cent joined a political party, 4 per cent took part in a strike and 3 per cent joined an international campaign group (3 per cent).

6. Factor analyses of the media use variables were conducted with unlimited and delimited numbers of solutions but none produced reliable groupings.

7. In consequence, gender drops out of the equation, because gender is not as strongly related to political interest as is reading newspapers, and so given the partial correlation between gender and newspaper readership (and to a lesser extent, radio), the predictive strength of gender is outweighed in the regression.

8. We acknowledge some circularity in our analysis here, since 'discussed with family/friends/colleagues' was one of the 13 items listed under 'actions taken', thus contributing somewhat to the association with 'talk about issues'. On reflection, we decided to accept this situation in order to be able to include exactly the same variables in each of the three regression equations, to facilitate comparability (noting that talking about issues has been proposed by several of the authors cited as a possible predictor of voting and political interest).

9. Once these variables were added, gender re-entered the equation, such that, controlling for the other variables, men are also more likely to take more actions. This relationship is only marginally significant, however, and gender's absence in the first regression would suggest that the link between gender and actions taken is at best tenuous.

10. Their UK survey found 40 per cent of internet users accessed news online but this was only a route to participation for those already engaged (c.f. Eveland 2004; Pew 2002; Tewksbury 2003; Uslaner 2004).

11. Correlation between interest and voting, $r = 0.341$. Correlation between interest and action, $r = 0.143$. Correlation between voting and action, $r = 0.076$.