

CULTURE AND CITIZENSHIP: THE MISSING LINK?
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‘The sphere of “political communication” has as its foundation the series of inclusions and exclusions, on the basis of which only the private, domestic experiences of some categories of people are connected (or “mediated”) to the sphere of citizenship and its “moralities” . . . We must be particularly attentive to the processes of “framing”, which constitute the limits (and shape) of the picture we see within the frame of television’s “window on the world”. It makes all the difference in the world if, for some people, that window is wide open, while for others it is double-glazed to keep out the noise, or perhaps even nailed shut.’

David Morley (1999: 203-4)

Introduction

The title of this conference raises the question of what is at stake in the term ‘culture’, or at least in cultural analysis, so I want to start by making a sharp distinction between, on the one hand, the notion of ‘cultural citizenship’ (about which I want to be rather cautious) and, on the other hand, investigating the relationship between ‘culture’ and ‘citizenship’ (studying the ‘culture’ of citizenship), which I suggest is more productive.¹

The term ‘cultural citizenship’ (discussed for example in Stevenson, 1997; Hermes, 1998; Turner, 2001) has been used in important ways to make sense of arguments for including new groups of people as citizens in contemporary polities, or including new types of claim or conflict within civic or political space. Often the arguments made in support of these inclusions are based on claims about ‘culture’ or ‘cultures’, and certainly cultural difference is not a good reason within a diverse polity for excluding someone from citizenship. But this does not mean that such claims establish a new type of citizenship which is best called ‘cultural’ (rather than, say, political, social or economic), only that exclusions from citizenship based on invalid arguments from cultural difference have been defeated. It is a little unclear in such cases what the word ‘cultural’ adds to our understanding of ‘citizenship’.

The same applies even in aspects of citizenship which, on the face of it, we might all be tempted to call ‘cultural’, rather than, say, ‘political’, if such a terminological choice was necessary: for example, the intensely personal issues around sexuality and sexual practice that are increasingly embedded in public debates and constitute, as Ken Plummer has argued, ‘intimate citizenship’ (Plummer, 2003). Plummer’s is an important argument to which I return, but for now I just want to suggest that it adds little to call this aspect of citizenship ‘cultural’; indeed the term ‘cultural’ might distract us from the arguments concerning rights to resources, rights over bodies, obligations of care, and so on (all as much as political, social and economic as ‘cultural’) to which ‘intimate’ citizenship gives rise.

I am pressing this point about the phrase ‘cultural citizenship’ only to suggest that using it too freely may obscure a more interesting, and perhaps less discussed, set of questions about the relationship between culture and citizenship. On the face of it, that relationship seems unproblematic. There is the traditional notion that a shared ‘culture’, specifically a shared national culture, is an essential lubricant of the wheels of citizenship and indeed politics. While this idea goes right back to the beginning of cultural analysis by Herder and others, it remains important in TH Marshall’s post-World War II analysis (where he includes in citizenship ‘the right to share to the full in the social heritage’ and indeed the ‘national heritage’, following ‘the great expansion [in the 20th century] of the area of common culture and common experience’: Marshall (1992) [o.p. 1949]: 8, 16, 44). More surprisingly it is still present, even if seen as under some threat, in Nick Stevenson’s more recent discussion of cultural citizenship (Stevenson, 1997: 42, 49, on ‘inclusive participation within national life’ and ‘the national “cultural” dimension’). The idea that a shared cultural frame of reference is an essential precondition for national politics, and civic practice within it, is readily translated into a notion of ‘cultural citizenship’ as the entitlement to share in, and contribute to, that shared cultural frame (analogous in part to the ‘social’ dimension of citizenship that Marshall envisaged): to capture this, Bryan Turner (2001: 12) defines ‘cultural citizenship’ as ‘the capacity to participate effectively, creatively and successfully within a national culture’.

But this apparently straightforward notion of cultural citizenship - as cultural entitlement - quickly runs into two major problems, as Turner notes (2001: 12-14): first, in an era of global movement of both cultural agents and cultural signs it is no longer clear what is the appropriate scale on which such cultural entitlements should be thought about (certainly ‘the nation’ can no longer be assumed to be the only scale that is relevant here: cf Hermes, 1998: 159); second, this notion of ‘cultural citizenship’ seems to be entirely about rights, and not obligations, so contradicting one of the basic features of citizenship as ‘a bundle of rights and obligations that formally define the legal status of a person’ (Turner, 2001: 11, added emphasis). We might try to get round the first of these problems by arguing that cultural entitlement, while a vital component of citizenship, operates across a range of scales to match people’s actual mobility. But this still assumes we can readily identify a shared frame of reference for belonging: what if today’s regular confusions about the interrelation of multiple scales of action (cf Marcus, 1999) disable a sense of citizenship? Put another way, to what end and in what circumstances do we want, perhaps need, to participate in a shared culture with others?

I pose these questions not in order to suggest that the idea of ‘shared culture’ is misguided (quite the contrary), but only to suggest that it is too easy to assume that we know what it looks like, and (even if we do) it is too easy to assume also that we know how, and on what scale ‘shared culture’ might contribute to the practice of citizenship. It is better, perhaps, to adopt a less prescriptive approach to the possible interrelations between ‘culture’ and ‘citizenship’ (which means bracketing the phrase ‘cultural citizenship’ for now) and give ourselves room to look openly at the uncertainties and puzzles in this area: what does ‘culture’ contribute to ‘citizenship’? what would a culture of citizenship look like? Is it perhaps the absence of such a ‘culture’ that underlies the often-feared decline of politics? Or (more positively) what new cultures of citizenship might be emerging, and where/ how can we best look for them empirically?

When I talk of a ‘culture’ of citizenship, I am using the term ‘culture’ not in the sense of ‘cultural’ production versus, say, economic production², but ‘culture’ in the more general sense of a nexus of beliefs, practices and meanings that ‘hang together’ identifiably in the social world. Is there, in other words, a ‘culture’ which captures how the dispersed meanings, beliefs and practices we might identify with ‘citizenship’ hang together meaningfully for actual citizens?³

Having explained, perhaps rather pedantically, how I will be combining the terms ‘culture’ and ‘citizenship’, I want to introduce in the rest of this paper an approach to this difficult question - what would a culture of citizenship look like? – that with Sonia Livingstone and Tim Markham at LSE I have been developing as part of an ESRC-funded project called ‘Media Consumption and the Future of Public Connection’. First, however, I need to explain more fully why this question might be important and how it provides an opportunity for cultural studies approaches to contribute usefully to the cross-disciplinary literature on citizenship and political engagement.

Closing a Gap in the Literature

It is risky to say of a literature as huge as political science and political sociology that it has gaps, but there has, I would argue, been a significant gap in studying the experiential dimensions of citizenship, studying, that is, what it actually feels like to be a citizen (cf LeBlanc, 1999). The potential fascination of this area was foreshadowed in Albert Hirschman’s classic argument (Hirschman, 1970), mainly directed at economists, that markets and politics are each characterised by exit and voice, but economists concentrate on ‘exit’ to the neglect of ‘voice’, while political scientists concentrate on ‘voice’ to the neglect of ‘exit’. This raises for both disciplines the question of the interrelationship between exit and voice (1970: 42-43). There clearly is a relationship (1) between lack of voice and the attractiveness of exit and (2) between the easiness of exit and lack of interest in acquiring a voice, but discovering what that relationship comprises is hardly straightforward and must be understood in terms of people’s diverse practices and purposes.

The relative inattention to the ‘feel’ of citizenship, especially in mainstream political science, is made more serious by recent uncertainties about the scales and reference-points by which citizenship should be understood in the era of globalisation: ‘what does it mean to belong to society’ asks Nick Stevenson (2001: 4)? ‘what counts as community and solidarity’ asks Anthony Elliott (2001: 55)? Thomas Janoski and Brian Gras make the same point more formally when they argue that ‘theories of citizenship need to be developed to provide the informal aspects of citizenship integrating both the public and private sphere’ (Janoski and Gras, 2002: 42, added emphasis): what are the practices which link private action to the public sphere, beyond the obvious act of walking down to the polling station to cast your vote?

Some in cultural studies would respond sceptically that there are no such practices and the whole notion of ‘the citizen’ is a chimaera (Toby Miller, in Burgelman and Calabrese, 1999)! Some sociologists would argue, certainly, that those connecting practices between public and private spheres presupposed by citizenship are disappearing. Bryan Turner (2000) writes of ‘the erosion of citizenship’ by many

factors including the changing organisation of work and families; as a result, taken-for-granted contexts of civic action have been lost, although some others have been gained. The political sociologist Danilo Zolo (1992) argues that in complex societies the increasing demands on private citizens' finite attention-span demanded by media messages about politics reduce in absolute terms the likelihood of traditional civic engagement, because that engagement requires too large a quantity of a scarce resource: attention. Others see the problem in the displacement of public discussion. Leon Mayhew (1997) analyses the contemporary crisis of politics in terms of 'a chronic, socially structured inflation produced by the dissociation of public discussion and unifying issues of public concern' (1997: 236, added emphasis), while Nina Eliasoph's study (1998) of where in America political talk between private citizens occurs suggests that this dissociation may be played out also in the spatial organisation of everyday socialisation (with 'political' talk being excluded by definition from all but the most private settings!).

Not everyone of course is so negative. The large literature on Internet-based civic practice is well-known; also relevant is the American sociologist Michael Schudson's argument (1998: 298-299) that 'civic participation now takes place everywhere . . . [people] are citizens in their homes, in schools, and places of employment' and, he argues elsewhere in the book, in the courts! However Schudson's 'monitorial' view of citizenship (discounting as it does talk about politics) remains controversial and owes something to traditional elite views of democracy (cf for example, Lupia and McCubbins, 1998).

More recently, writers have begun to move beyond general claims about the absence or presence of the public/ private connections that make citizenship meaningful towards modelling in much greater detail what exactly are the practical preconditions for active citizenship and a well-functioning democratic politics. Drawing on a well-known but in many ways unsatisfactory earlier literature (Almond and Verba, 1962; Almond and Verba, 1989), Peter Dahlgren has recently reexamined the notion of 'civic culture' as the key concept underlying the daily experience of citizenship:

'civic culture points to those features of the socio-cultural world – dispositions, practices, processes – that constitute pre-conditions for people's actual participation in the public sphere, in civil and political society . . . civic culture is an analytic construct that seeks to identify the possibilities of people acting in the role of citizens' (Dahlgren, 2003: 154-155).

There is no space here to do justice to the multi-dimensional model Dahlgren offers of civic culture (in terms of a 'circuit' of six interlocking processes: values, affinity, knowledge, practices, identities and discussion), but what is most striking about that model is the multiple and often uncertain relation it suggests between the imagining and understanding of civic life and its practice (both acts and talk). This multi-dimensional approach to the 'links' between public and private worlds that underpin citizenship and political engagement is present also in Ken Plummer's (2003: 81-82) identification of five 'generic processes' through which new public spheres can appear: imagining/ empathising; vocalising; investing identities through narrative; creating social worlds and communities of support; and creating a culture of public problems. While both models are at this stage principally theoretical, they both point

to seeing the ‘culture’ of citizenship as having at least three aspects: imaginative, cognitive and organisational/ practical.

I will not be offering a rival model to these. Instead, I want to illustrate what a cultural studies perspective might contribute to understanding the complex interrelation of culture and citizenship. By a ‘cultural studies’ approach, I mean here not only an emphasis on cultural consumption or popular culture (although that is taken for granted in what follows), but more an approach loyal to cultural studies’ concern with the deep inequalities that structure how individuals emerge as speaking subjects at all (whether they speak as citizens or as audiences or as employees). The concern with symbolic inequality (Grossberg, 1992; Walkerdine, 1997; Steedman, 1986; Probyn, 1993) is by no means exclusive to cultural studies, but it has been relatively rare in the wider sociological literature (Bourdieu’s and Sennett’s work being major exceptions: see Couldry, 2005 on Bourdieu, and see for a more recent exception in sociology, Skeggs, 1997).⁴

Whether citizens feel they have a voice, or the space in which effectively to exercise a voice, is crucial to their possibilities of acting as citizens. The quote from David Morley with which I began raises the question eloquently, but at the same time sets the stakes very high. How can we develop a sensitive enough methodology to capture such subtle forms of exclusion and the positive ‘culture’ that might be the antidote to such exclusion? A concern with how political and civic space is structured in advance around certain deep forms of exclusion has, of course, been a major concern of feminist political theory (Pateman, 1970; Fraser, 1992; Phillips, 1996; Young, 2000). It has also, if only at the margins, been powerfully recognised by some political sociologists: see the work of William Gamson (1992) and David Croteau (1995) on working-class exclusion from US politics. Nearly four decades ago an important article by Marvin Olsen (Olsen, 1969: 291) distinguished between two dimensions of alienation: ‘forced alienation’ (based on the realisation that the system objectively prevents you from participating effectively in wider life) and ‘voluntary alienation’ (based on a subjective feeling that the social world is simply ‘not worth participating in’). Once again, tracking these dimensions of alienation from politics requires a sensitive methodology that addresses both material and symbolic exclusions (recalling the multi-dimensional nature of Dahlgren and Plummer’s models).

Another respect in which cultural studies may have a distinctive contribution to make in understanding the ‘culture’ of citizenship is by studying not just the language and practices of citizenship, but how each, and their interrelation, emerges in individual reflection. Individual possibilities of ‘reflection’ are of course themselves structured by the inequalities of class (Skeggs, 1997) and the public and civic spheres generally, but that does not mean we can safely ignore the traces of people’s reflexivity about their status as citizens – quite the contrary. And here there is an overlap with some versions of mainstream political communications research, particularly the ‘constructionist’ approach (Neuman et al, 1992; Gamson, 1992) which examines ‘the subtle interaction between what the mass media convey and how people come to understand the world beyond their immediate life space’ (Neuman et al., 1992: xv, added emphasis).⁵

This, then, is the background to the LSE ‘Public Connection’ project. Let me now turn in more detail to what I see as its broadly ‘cultural studies’ take on the political realm.⁶

The ‘Public Connection’ project

general description

Our research question in the ‘Public Connection’ project is best explained, first, in terms of two connected and widely made assumptions about democratic politics that we’re trying to ‘test’:

- First that, in a democracy such as Britain, most people share an orientation to a public world where matters of common concern are, or at least should be, addressed (we call this orientation ‘public connection’); and
- Second that this public connection is focussed principally on mediated versions of that public world (so that ‘public connection’ is principally sustained by a convergence in what media people consume, in other words, by shared or overlapping shared media consumption’).

Most writers about politics make both these assumptions – although the two are detachable. Some believe the first without believing the second, because they argue that public connection is unlikely to be served by people’s use of media (Robert Putnam’s well-known *Bowling Alone* thesis takes that position at least in relation to the effects of television). Generally however writers assume both – or at least that is our contention (there is no space to defend our view of the literature here). Can we find evidence for those assumptions in how citizens think about their own practice?

The first assumption is important because it underlies most models of democracy; consent to political authority requires that people’s attention to the public world can be assumed, or at least that we can assume an orientation to the public world which from time to time results in actual attention. The word ‘public’ is, of course, notoriously difficult, since it has a range of conflicting meanings (Weintraub and Kumar, 1997). When in this project we talk of ‘public connection’, we mean ‘things or issues which are regarded as being of shared concern, rather than of purely private concern’, matters that in principle citizens need to discuss in a world of limited shared resources. Our hunch is that, however much people differ over what exactly counts as the public world and what doesn’t, most people can at least make sense of this difference between ‘public’ and ‘private’; our working assumption, then, is that the public/private boundary remains meaningful in spite of many other levels of disagreement over the content and definition of politics. Once again, there is no space there to defend this working assumption, but I would suggest that even political theory that emphasises the fluidity and multivalence of this boundary still ends up by reaffirming its significance (eg Geuss, 2001). The famous feminist slogan ‘the personal is political’ can be seen as, not undermining that boundary completely, but rather offering a crucial rethinking of where it should be drawn; as Jean Elshtain points out, few live on the basis that absolutely everything they do is, and should be, open to public scrutiny (Elshtain, 1997).

But our understanding of the public/private boundary is not prescriptive. On the contrary, the point of our research has been to ask people what lies on the other side of the line from the things that they regard as of only private concern; what makes up their public world? How are they connected to that world? And how are media involved, or not, in sustaining that connection to a public world (as they understand it)? These are the questions we aimed to explore – first by asking a small group of 37 people to write a diary for 3 months during 2004 that reflected on those questions, second by interviewing those diarists, both before and after their diary production, individually and in some cases also in focus-groups; and finally by broadening out the themes from this necessarily small group to a nationwide survey (targeted at a sample of 1000 respondents) to be conducted in spring 2005.

We were drawing here on earlier pilot research done here at LSE 3 years ago ('The Dispersed Citizen' project, 2001-2:⁷ see Couldry and Langer, 2003 and 2005). This study drew on questions posed to the Panel at the UK's Mass-Observation Archive and also a small set of ten interviews in London. It suggested, first, a significant degree of alienation both from media and from contemporary British politics particularly among the quite elderly, mainly female Mass Observation sample, but, second, by contrast, among those we interviewed in person, a sense of media as offering a form of 'public connection'. That connection, however, took various different forms (for some, a more traditional form based on national press, TV, radio; for others, a newer form based on continuous online connection) with time (the constraints on people's time) being a major factor in limiting those possibilities of connection. Our current project attempts to develop these questions on a larger scale for a more diverse group of research subjects.

Our research aims to contribute to our understanding of the 'culture(s)' of citizenship by looking as openly as possible, first, at what forms one precondition for such a culture (the orientation we call 'public connection') takes; second, at the constraints under which public connection operates; and, third, at the conditions that encourage and sustain public connection. We are careful not to assume that a decline in attention to politics in the traditional sense means lack of attention to 'politics' in general, let alone signifies apathy. People's sense of what should constitute politics may be changing (cf Axford, 2001; BBC 2002; Tarrow, 2000). At the same time, the media landscape that might enable public connection is also changing. No longer can we assume an older media world where prime time television really was 'prime-time', providing a primary focus for national attention. The multiplication of media and media formats - the increasing interlinking of formats through digital convergence - may lead to an intensification of public connection, as people become more skilful at adapting their media consumption to suit their everyday habits and pressures, or it may lead to the fragmentation of the public sphere into a mass of specialist 'sphericules' (Gitlin, 1998) that can no longer connect sufficiently to form a shared public world.

The rationale of our research is, then, based on the hunch that the 'culture' of citizenship may intersect with people's media consumption in a wide range of ways, whose meaning can only be grasped by listening closely to individuals' reflexive accounts on their practice. But there is obviously a difficult trade-off here between the intensive research process necessary to obtain such fine-grained detail and any claims

to representativeness that can be made from the research. Our planned survey is an attempt to address this question, in part, but since we are still designing it, I must leave this question hanging! Instead, I will in my final section offer some tentative insights into some of the constraining and enabling factors for a culture of citizenship that are beginning to emerge as significant in our project.

Note on Methodology

This is not the place to discuss our methodology, and particularly our use of diaries, in detail. Clearly that choice requires justification, and raises significant methodological questions. But let me just make some brief comments as context for the final section of the paper.

There is nothing new of course about using diaries in social research as such. But our questions for diarists were rather different from those normally addressed in diary-based research. There is a good deal of research which uses ‘diaries’ – often daily or even every few hours – about people’s pain levels or moods, specific forms of consumption, time-use. This often involves ticking boxes or giving short responses to specific questions, and can generate in a relatively short space of time a great deal of data, mainly quantitative. While this is perfectly valid, it does not allow for people’s subjective reflections about whatever is being measured, how *they* understand the questions which are being addressed. More importantly, the frequent, highly structured, ‘minimal’ diary method, because of its extremely intensive and intrusive nature, makes it difficult to track changes over a longer period of time. By contrast, we want to understand how people’s thinking about the public world developed as they reflect for an extended period on such questions.

Such broad research aims might suggest an approach at the polar opposite of the pain or time diaries just mentioned: that is, narrative diaries, where participants are given free rein to relate anything and everything which comes to mind. While the ethos behind such diary methodologies (of not imposing a theoretical framework on respondents) is valuable, we did not want the process of diary keeping to be completely unstructured and open-ended, because it was people’s varying focus on the public world and media, and the connections between the two, that we wanted to understand.

We therefore tried to strike a careful balance in designing our diary between encouraging the free flow of ideas and maintaining a focus on issues of media consumption and public connection. We tried not to direct the diarists’ reflections, but we did suggest some starting points, developing out of diarists’ own reflections in their first interview on what counted as public issues for them. As for the diary itself, we decided against having a series of questions to be answered, or even headings under which diary entries were to be divided. We opted instead for a cover letter which reminded diarists of the questions the project was addressing, along with diary pages left blank except for the project’s title, and which we asked to be submitted weekly. We felt this combination would provide the right mix of prompting and open-endedness.

We were well aware that our choice of the diary method might have different implications for different respondents. There are, for example, gender-related or other

issues that affect whether a diary seems an appropriate or natural form of self-expression for different people (cf Bird, 2003). We therefore gave diarists a choice of media in which to record their thoughts – not just a traditional written diary, but also email, phone message or voice recorder, any of which could be supplemented by press cuttings or whatever else the diarist wished to send in. As it turned out, no one used phone messages in this way, but 5 people used voice recorders and many used emails to supplement, or to replace, hard copy diaries.

Our diarists were recruited through a market research company, The Field Department, and on the basis of a small incentive payment. We aimed for an even spread of diarists across gender and age range (18-30, 30-50, 50+). We aimed indirectly for a wide range of socioeconomic groups through two strategies: first, by recruiting diarists from 6 regions that, together, represented a range of metropolitan/suburban areas and income levels (poor inner city London, mid-income suburban London, poor inner city South of England; largely prosperous suburbs of two Northern England cities, and a mixed-income rural area in the Midlands); and, second, through recruiting people with varying levels of media access in each region.

Again this is not the place to discuss in detail the success of our sampling strategy. Suffice it to say that broadly we are satisfied to have achieved a diarists' sample that ranges from single mothers living on limited incomes in London council flats to retired financial services executives living in some of the most prosperous North of England suburbs. Men aged under 50 (and especially between 30 and 50) were difficult to recruit (as we expected) which meant that, by maintaining our broad parity of genders, we ended up with more men over 50 than we planned; Class D was difficult to recruit and Class C2 was also somewhat under-represented, again as expected. Recruiters were asked to ensure a range of ethnicities, resulting in 9 non-white diarists, an over-representation demographically which nonetheless was important to ensure a range of views on the overwhelmingly white political culture was articulated.

Emergent themes from the Public Connection project

Rather than go further into such details, I now want to mention some emergent early themes from our diary and interview data. I would emphasise we are still collecting data, is not yet complete, and analysis therefore is only in its early stages.⁸ What follows therefore should be taken only as a tentative progress report on a project that is just half way through.

Our project focussed on the cultural and material dimensions of one of the preconditions of civic culture (that is, the orientation to a public world we call 'public connection') rather than claiming to investigate civic culture itself. As a result, we did not address explicitly all the dimensions of Peter Dahlgren's civic culture model, although understanding public connection requires us to address, as I suggested earlier, most of the dimensions Dahlgren identifies. Our emphasis however was as much on the background practices which sustain public connection (talk, knowledge acquisition and use) as on articulated public values or affinities. In studying how public connection is, or is not, embedded in daily practice, we cast our net wide, suspecting that the conditions that undermine or weaken public connection are subtle, perhaps not articulated, and as much to do with how people's lives are organised and

articulated with other practices, as with how they think explicitly about the world beyond their private realm.

Public connection sustained by media consumption

Many of our diarists, particularly older diarists and especially the retired, had routines of media consumption that guaranteed them some orientation to a public world every day. A difficulty however in understanding the meanings for them of such routines lies in distinguishing between media routine that is just that – a routine, whose products generally remain unconnected with other practices (such as work, leisure interests, family discussions, and so on) – and media consumption that is more actively used to fuel continuous reflection about a public world and its developments. Our diary assignment, of course, prompted people precisely to reflect on the public world, but for many this was difficult or artificial. As we develop our analysis of both diaries and interviews, we will try for each diarist, while taking account of the relative artificiality of the diary process, to assess the evidence of how far they put their media consumption to use in other practices. It is too early to offer any conclusions on this difficult point.

For now, it is worth emphasising a number of factors which may restrict the possibilities of such practical links between media consumption (whether more or less routine) and other practices, including but certainly not limited to practices of civic engagement.

(1) constraints of practice: time and social context

One obvious constraining factor is time (cf Robinson and Godbey, 1997; Frissen, 2001). Time not only constrains the possibility of practices that link media use to other aspects of life, but more basically may constrain media consumption itself:

This was a busy week for me so I didn't actually sit down and watch a news bulletin.... Consequently I only caught snatches of news items, and items that were being discussed in the staff room. [33/D/5] (woman, aged 34, with two children, working as part-time teaching assistant, urban South of England)

While I was serving customers in my shop I was trying to read the paper. [3/D/2] (woman, aged 51, shop owner with grown-up children, suburban West London)

We've been extremely busy at work and seemingly every available minute is spent working – at the office and at home, so there's no time for films, music, or T.V. Criminal. [22/D/23] (man, aged 52, teenage children, insurance broker, Northern suburb)

It is probable, however, that our sample of diarists were relatively less pressed for time compared with the general population, and that is one reason why they, not others, agreed to be recruited for what was clearly a time-consuming project.

Another important contextualising factor for people's public connection was the availability of social opportunities to put the public knowledge or information gained from media consumption to use elsewhere. Throughout the fieldwork we asked

diarists about whether they talked with others on any of the public-type issues they raised. In a number of cases, the lack of a social context for discussing public issues was raised by diarists as an issue, for example this diary comment:

I wouldn't bother my ass to sort of stand up and argue about it because I've become so cynical. It's a sad point, sad state of affairs but I've been in situations where people you know, you speak about politics at work and then people get on their high horse and you just think. . . . but then I don't speak to politics about my parents, with my parents or my family. I've had to pull my sister by the hand and drag her down to the electoral booth to vote at election time. She's totally not interested. I think people, I don't know, it's quite scary to see how people are disinterested in it, particularly this generation. [4/11/11-12] (Man, aged 23, university administrator, West London suburb)

An older man commenting on his son and daughter implied, without stating it explicitly, that he too lacked the chance to discuss the public issues in which he was interested within a family setting:

. . . my own children, I have to say really, not interested [in media news]. They don't – nothing has much impact on them outside their own little bubble, as it were. My daughter would be interested because of the effect of the [Iraq War] on the price of petrol but, er, she wouldn't be interested in any other impact of Iraq at all. And I mean they're both bright, they went to university and so forth, but they, yeah, they are insular, both of them. [20/ 12/7] (Man, aged 64, retired financial services chief executive, Northern suburb)

It may well be significant that such judgements about others' public connection tended to be made by men, and not by women, but that does not necessarily mean that women generally didn't lack social context in which to talk about public issues, only perhaps that women tended to be less judgemental about the implications of this. Note that, in the above quotes, it's not necessarily women the men are judging (although we found plenty of signs of conventional gender stereotypes over media consumption, with older men identifying themselves with news and their wives with soap operas, and so on).

In any case, there were also women diarists who lacked a social context for talking about public issues. One local government worker explained why it was enjoyable for her to go along to focus-group-type public consultation meetings organised by her local authority, since this was the type of discussion she didn't generally get at home (or in fact at work):

If I didn't speak to everyone at work – during the week, I wouldn't speak to anyone. [Husband works nights]. I mean the kids – my son's never here . . . [daughter] goes to bed at 9, 10 o'clock at night . . . [12/12/31] (Woman, 45, two children, local government worker, South East London)

A similar picture emerges, but without complaint, from this primary school teacher, asked whether she had discussed the Iraq war with others either at work or socially:

we've got very limited time in the staff room so I mean it tends to be you know stupid things [we talk about] about what you've watched on telly or something light-hearted and fun. I mean the odd thing, I suppose, it is things like child deaths and things that you would say, oh, isn't awful about but it doesn't tend to be a lot of serious types of conversation. . . . we tend to talk as well about our own lives and things going on for us. So I can't say I've had a conversation with anyone at school about Iraq. I mean I'll talk to [name of boyfriend] about things sometimes but you don't tend to talk to your friends about it really. [21/12/11] (Woman, 30, primary school teacher, Northern suburb)

(2) drawing back from the news

As they produced their dairies, and in many cases had difficulties in keeping the diary going (although 29 people did in fact complete at least 10 weeks out of 12), a number of factors emerged which either reduced people's media consumption about public-related issues absolutely, or led them to keep their media consumption isolated from the rest of their life. The sense that the news was too awful to watch regularly, and particularly to reflect on in detail in a diary, was common both among men and women, although these examples are from women:

Not listened to Radio 4 today, but had [name] our local radio station on instead, many because the world news is too depressing. So I had daft and light entertainment today. [28/D/5] (woman, aged 46, hospitality events organiser, northern suburb)

The media is here to stay, love it or leave it, but I can't help wondering whether it was better to live in an age when you only knew what was happening in the next street or maybe village. [33/D/14] (woman, aged 34, with two children, working as part-time teaching assistant, urban South of England)

The period of diary-writing (staggered across 37 diarists) lasted from February to August 2004, with the majority of diarists writing in the period March-April 2004, which was dominated by the unresolved US/UK conquest of Iraq and scandalous revelations from Abu-Ghraib jail, as well as the Madrid bombing.

One diarist wrote that she lay awake at night thinking about the moral implications of needing to keep limits on the time taken up by often depressing media news:

You need to be able to turn the tv off, as awful as it is, and those awful things that happen in the world, you know sometimes I think well what can I do other than say, yeah, I don't know. You know, when we see something terrible that's happened in Africa, so you go and make a donation and that's a good thing of seeing it on there, but I don't know. I don't have the answer because I can't resolve it in my mind how, even how I feel about it, whether I want to watch something that I don't like, or whether I should or whether I turn it off and go and read a magazine, I don't know." [24/12/19] (woman, aged 27, marketing executive, Northern suburb)

The problem for her, she suggests, is not so much the shocking nature of the media images but the apparent pointlessness of informing oneself: 'sometimes I think well

what can I do other than, say, yeah, I don't know'. These were not reflections she was able to resolve explicitly, although in practice she admitted that she rarely did much to acquire extra information to put media news in context: perhaps her sense was that no 'context' would help resolve these issues further.

There are overlaps here between people's reasons for withdrawing from media consumption and reasons found in other research for people's withdrawal from interest specifically in politics (cf Croteau, 1995): feelings of the pointlessness or irrelevance of one's own actions, but also the constraints caused by lack of knowledge, which may lead to a fear of involvement (how far this is just a polite rationalisation is difficult to decide):

Yeah, I've always felt if I cast my vote you know that could be the one casting vote to swing the vote when I wouldn't know exactly what I was talking about and I could be doing absolutely the worst thing.

[Interviewer:] So you don't feel that you're quite qualified in a way?

Yeah, or well informed enough to make that choice. [35/I1/15] (woman, aged 33, hairdresser, urban South of England)

Sometimes however, we found rationales for withdrawal that were based on judgements about the media themselves:

Have avoided newspapers, because as I predicted they are full of the Beckhams and real news is taking a back seat! [10/D/8] (Woman, aged 39, unemployed, south East London)

No – I don't believe we get all the facts...we get what people want us to see... I will never know what's accurate... I won't know what's accurate. I'm a little civil servant – I will never know what's accurate. [12/I2/37-8] (Woman, 45, two children, local government worker, South East London)

other forms of 'public connection'

We tried to avoid in our research the assumption that media consumption was the only way in which people could acquire or sustain public connection. Diarists were encouraged to write about public issues that had arisen for them otherwise than in the media; some did so, although for many diarists it appeared difficult to think about public issues in any other context than what arose daily in the media.

With a few diarists, we had a strong sense of social networks that were considerably more important than media in sustaining their sense of connection to a public world (whether the church or ethnic, women's or sport organisations). Very often, however, it was these same people who had difficulty completing the diary after the initial weeks, because of those other commitments.

In spite of this difficulty, it is important to recognise the limits to media's role in sustaining 'cultures' of citizenship and look for traces of 'public worlds' that bypass media consumption, as in this description of a West London newsagents' shop:

It's like a village shop, so I know my customers, they know me. ... And you talk about the weather, and what's been done and ... ask about the family, they ask me about my family ... And what's the main issue, everyday issue. About the government or the – any kind of things you know? So it all depends on the – what kind of customers I get. Family – again, everyday problems ... Or if I need to sort out something with my finance, or shares ... Or mortgage, or remortgage, or future, or whatever....Kids problems – discuss that – and if one – with my other family members like my sister[name]. So we discuss all sorts of things. [3/11/20-23] (woman, aged 51, shop owner with grown-up children, suburban West London)

One of the most important sources of connection to a public world is of course work, although the nature, and strength, of that connection this very much depends on one's work status. This newsagent (diarist 3) had very little time (as an earlier quote suggested) to consume media directly, but absorbed a great deal through the comments of others, as part of her wider role within the social world of the shop.

In other cases, diarists revealed a sense of a public world that (unlike Diarist 3's) bypassed media consumption entirely. The following description by a 27-year-old marketing executive of what were the important issues at work is worth quoting at length:

Yes, it's very, very interesting actually seeing how the [user group] react to what we're putting across to them. We recently, this last September we did our usual annual national user group conference and [name of boss] did a very sort of rousing speech and [name] who's chair of the national user group, fo up, very rousing speech saying write to your MPs, you've got to write to your MPs, get involved, you know, show support. If you want to choose your system, if you want control over . . . what you do on your day-to-day, write. And a lot of people are saying, well you know it's going to happen anyway, you know what's the point and a lot of people like, yes, I've written to my MP and I'm gonna go see him and it's very interesting how seeing whether people believe that you can affect what's going to happen or whether it's going to happen anyway despite what you think.

[interviewer:] . . . If it did make a difference there, through people doing things like that, writing to their MP and whatever, maybe it would change your views about whether it's possible [in relation to political matters]

Yes, it would. It certainly would.' [24/12/32] (woman, aged 27, marketing executive, Northern suburb)

These comments gained much of their significance from their context: this diarist had already said she had little interest in or knowledge of politics; although this occasionally made her feel guilty, she admitted she did nothing to acquire more information, and saw little point in being interested in politics, on the grounds that it would make no difference. She mentioned the passionate debates at a work conference about the need to change government's attitude to her company's own product towards the end of her second interview, seemingly to correct the impression that she believed nothing she did could make a difference. What the comments

suggested instead, however, was that, when she did think about effective action to influence others' decisions, this was entirely in a business context with no practical links to politics (and also little practical connection to her media consumption of public issues).

This disconnect between the world of work and the practices we might imagine to make up a 'culture' of citizenship is an important issue, on which we will need to do further analysis. Another disconnect from politics involves diarists' alternative sense of connection via media to a public world parallel to, and largely or wholly unconnected with, the world of politics, particularly sport and music. For the world of sport, taken this comment by a mature university student in Marketing:

[interviewer] Now do you tend to talk to people about what's in the news? You said you know people talk about football but do you get a sense that there are issues?

If it's on and I'm watching it with someone else probably, it's not, like the war was such a massive thing that you do talk just generally but like other things, the Ian Huntley thing definitely that sort of quite upset me so I didn't, I think probably did the whole nation so I didn't really want to talk to many people about that, maybe to sort of mother, that's about it. Football, if there's like football things on the news and I'll talk a lot more cos I think I'm more knowledgeable about it as well, so I like to. [36/I1/16-17] (Man, aged 25, student, urban South of England)

For the sense of public connection through the world of music, take these comments from the diary of the hairdresser already quoted:

Usher's single 'oh yeah' is no. 1 in the top 40 charts as heard on radio one on Sunday and Top of the Pops, I'm glad about this as me and all the girls who love to get up and dance to it, favourite song at the moment. ...
Very unlike me this week. I don't what is no 1 in the music charts. Hopefully next week I will have more to write. [35/D/1, 7] (woman, aged 33, hairdresser, Urban South of England)

In both these cases, diarists felt a connection (to the public worlds of sport and music, respectively) underwritten by their skills and everyday routines: Diarist 36 played amateur football three or four times a week and Diarist 35's knowledge of popular music was a basic background skill in social dealings with clients in the hairdressing salon she managed.

The link between media consumption and action

We come here perhaps to the main point to emerge so far from our analysis of the Public Connection diaries and interviews, on which I will conclude. This is the importance for public connection of a sustained context of action, where the individual can either participate direct in civic practice or at least can put their public knowledge to effective use in some social context (the latter depending particularly on occupational status, since some occupations give you that chance, and others don't).

In our interviews, we asked diarists when, if ever, they had been involved in any form of civic action. Most had had little or no such involvement; often, although not always, this was justified by a sense of fatalism, that acting would make no difference. Here we touch on the dimension of 'practices' that Dahlgren (2003) identifies as the fourth element in his circuit of 'civic culture'. But if that link to civic action is missing as it often is, however, we must ask whether people have a substitute link to action, that is, a link to a context where either they can at least put acquired knowledge about a public world to some direct use or can draw on some earlier social context or their acquired social status to endorse the value of their knowledge. Without such a link, the habit of using media to connect us to a public world is, I suggest, liable to become a pure routine vulnerable to attrition by pervasive pressures such as time.

There are, in other words, many strands to be investigated in analysing what a 'culture' of citizenship might involve; the consumption of a shared, perhaps national, media 'culture', is only one of those strands, and perhaps, we may speculate, not the most important one. Just as, if not more, important are the ways in which people's mediated consumption of public issues is articulated, or not, with other forms of practice that are either directly civic or are embedded in forms of action whose significance is socially assured (cf Wenger, 1998 on 'communities of practice'). It is here, returning to my initial quotation from David Morley, that the most subtle forms of exclusion and inclusion may be at work. An analysis of the 'culture' of citizenship cannot avoid addressing those forms, but doing so may involve something rather different from traditional analyses of cultural consumption. [8574 words + reff]

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¹ Thanks to my colleague Tim Markham for help in preparing the last two sections of this paper.

² The division between 'cultural' and 'economic' has of course itself been endlessly undermined, but that is a separate story.

³ I am echoing here Williams' definition of 'the theory of culture' as 'the study of relationships between elements in a whole way of life' (1961: 63, cf 1958: 12) but without claiming that the term 'whole way of life' has sense any more; even if it doesn't, the search for meaningful interrelations between practices, agents and sites is still important, and a vital part of cultural analysis.

⁴ I have argued elsewhere in more detail for the importance in cultural studies analysing the conditions under which individual voices emerge (Coudry, 2000, chapters 3 and 6).

⁵ Peter Dahlgren's model is explicitly constructionist also (2003: 156).

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⁸ The project is due to be completed in March 2006, and we aim to publish our findings as Couldry, Livingstone and Markham (2006/2007).