

Media Consumption and the Future of Public Connection

End of project seminar

London School of Economics, 20 March 2006

Nick Couldry, Sonia Livingstone, Tim Markham

www.publicconnection.org



Introduction and Context





Political context

Fears that engagement in the democratic process is in major decline . . . leading to major problem of political legitimacy?

Political science research on disengagement
(Putnam's *Bowling Alone*)

Social theory: declining bridges between private and public worlds
(Zygmunt Bauman)?

Electoral Commission 2004 Audit

Power Report March 2006

Need for research on what it *feels like* to be a citizen (or not) . . .
complementing Pattie, Seyd and Whitely, *Citizenship in Britain* (2004)



Media context

Digital media and communication era:

- Proliferation of media sources
- Diversification of distribution channels
- Advent of citizens' /participatory media – many experiments
- Possible links between popular and civic engagement
- Hopes that new media can reinvigorate political engagement

Role of mass media?

- Declining and fragmenting audience risks fracturing public sphere
- How to sustain common/shared interests and focus?
- Role of public service in sustaining public sphere?

NB Surprising (to us) neglect of role of media in academic and policy discussions of decline of public participation (except for Putnam)



Aims of the project

To explore the evidence in everyday life for two commonly made assumptions

1. existence of shared orientation to public world ('public connection')
2. public connection sustained by convergence in media consumption

Aim to foreground citizens' own detailed reflections over extended period



The term 'public'

- Many types of public/private distinction
- Here we prioritise distinction between issues that are of public concern (because they require public resolution) v issues of purely private concern
- Remains a fundamental distinction in many versions of democratic theory
- Our working assumption = that this distinction is meaningful in everyday life:
 - 'public' = 'anything that involves ... the collective' (Abby, 48, local govt officer);
 - 'public' = 'anything that doesn't just involve one person' (Josh, 23, architecture student)
 - 'things [that] involve us, even though it's not directly us, it could be us' (Sherryl, 39, unemployed)
 - 'the issues which are of consequence to the country which may well affect me indirectly' (Edward, 64, ret'd chief executive)



Multi-method project

1. Weekly diaries produced by diarists across England over 3 months during February-June 2004
written or tape-recorded
supplemented by . . .

pre- and post-interviews + focus groups
(overall fieldwork period: Feb 04-Mar 05)
2. National survey conducted by ICM Research
1000 respondents aged 18+
weekend of 3-5 June 2005



Multi-method project

Diarist sample: 37 recruited early 2004 by The Field Department

- *Gender* : close to 50/50 Male/ female
- *Age* : good range 18-69 but male 30-50 year olds difficult to recruit
- *Class* : good range from A to E, but AB overrepresented, D difficult to recruit
- *Ethnicity* : 9 non-white out of 37 (5 Afro-Caribbean, 3 South Asian, 1 mixed ethnicity)
- *6 Regions across England* : poor inner city London ; mid-income suburban London ; poor urban South England ; 2 mid-high income North England suburbs ; mixed-income rural Midlands
- Range of media access (no home computer to home broadband) in each region

The Public Connection Survey: Key Findings





Political engagement



Political engagement – variable, stratified, but not low overall

- 82% say they vote in general elections (more older)
- 65% say they are interested in politics (men, middle class)
- A third claim involvement in protests
- Half think it appropriate to discuss politics with others
- A quarter say they are involved in voluntary work (older)
- 1 in 5 play active role in local/political organisations



Efficacy and trust

- Gap between civic information and political efficacy:
 - 81% can find the information they need (older, m/class)
 - But only 39% can influence local decisions
 - Over half think 'people like us' have no say in what gov' t does
 - Yet 68% feel they could make a difference if they got involved
 - Three quarters say they sometimes feel strongly about an issue, but do not know what to do about it
 - Only 45% trust politicians to deal with things that matter, and only 1 in 5 trust them to tell the truth
- Problem of opportunity structures for action?



Orientation to the public world



- What do you generally follow or keep up to date with?
 - environment (70%), crime (67%), health (66%), Iraq (63%) ...
 - Men - Iraq, economy, sports, Europe, int' l/ Westminster politics
 - Women - health, fashion, celebrity, reality TV
 - Older - Iraq, environment, crime, third world poverty
 - Younger - fashion, celebrity, music, reality TV
 - 50% of middle class respondents follow international politics, compared to 28% of working class respondents
 - Half talk to others about issues they follow
- So, people are following overlapping public agendas

What's on people's minds' (open ended question)



- Iraq (13%), crime (12%), health (7%), election (5%), Europe (5%)
 - Women more likely to name health, education, poverty
 - Men more likely to name Iraq, Europe and the environment
 - Older people – pensions; younger people - education
 - Middle class – Europe; working class - taxes
 - Sources: TV (65%), press (50%), local paper (27%), radio (24%), other people (24%), internet (21%)
- Public orientation rather stratified, mainly focused on the national, strongly dependent on media



Media consumption



- 96% watch TV daily, average 1-3 hours
 - 80% listen to radio, average 30 min
 - Older and working class consume more TV
 - Middle class more radio and reading
 - Half do not access internet at all
 - Internet users - more young, middle class
 - Most popular entertainment: documentary (esp. older), comedy (esp. men and younger), music (esp. women and younger), sport (mainly men), drama (more women)
 - News 6th after soaps, history, action, sci-fi, crime, reality TV
- Media strongly embedded in routines and practices of daily life



News consumption

News is especially habitual for many:

- 89% TV news, 71% radio news, 61% national paper, 56% local paper – all 3+ times a week
- Only 23% use internet for news

News is also socially expected:

- 70% feel duty to keep up with news (esp. older & middle class)
- More than half consider friends (66%) and colleagues (54%) expect them to keep up with news

But complex relation to public connection:

- 81% 'good understanding' of issues, esp. men and middle class
- Yet 61% find politics too complicated, 23% say 'no point' watching news as it deals with things they can do nothing about



Media literacy

Since 80% regularly watch news, but 44% consider politics has little connection with their own life

Media consumption alone cannot explain public connection . . .

Why? Partly because habit may not translate into media literacy:

- 66% trust media to cover things that matter, but 40% said media cover things that have little to do with their lives
 - Trust in news is mixed: TV 69%, press 40%, internet 36%
 - Working class – more trusting, more disengaged
 - Middle class – more critical (media literate)
- Media literacy as one link between media consumption and public connection



News engagement

Another link between media consumption and public connection ...

‘News engagement’ (scale) is associated with:

- news consumption
 - media literacy and media trust
 - political interest and voting (with other factors)
-
- So, political interest is mediated (- but depends on the medium, and on gender/class i.e. different routes to engagement)
 - Contra the time displacement thesis of media consumption (for media and news consumption not simply related)
 - And the dumbing down thesis of news consumption
 - But, ‘virtuous circle’ : news enables already-engaged to get more informed, engaged, active (but vicious circle also, esp. for internet)



Predicting voting (multiple regressions)



Public connection matters:

- Age (older)
- SES (higher)
- Political interest (more)
- Political trust (more)
- Social capital/ local involvement (more)
- Political efficacy (knowing where to get information) (more)

But so does media consumption:

- News engagement (more)
- Time spent reading a newspaper (less)
- Time spent listening to the radio (more)

(NB no influence of TV viewing)



And political interest



Public connection matters:

- SES (higher)
- Social capital/ local involvement (more)

But again, so does media consumption:

- News engagement (more)
- Time spent reading a newspaper (more)
- Whether listen to radio news regularly (more)
- Whether access news online regularly (more)

(NB no influence for political trust. But complex relation with TV viewing:

- for light viewers, more viewing → more political interest
- for heavy viewers, more viewing → less political interest)



Other links between public and private worlds?



Following single-issue concerns (environment, poverty, health):

- makes a small contribution to voting
- makes a larger contribution to political interest

Following celebrity:

- has no influence on voting
- has a negative influence on political interest

What about talk?

- Makes no difference to voting
- Makes a little difference to political interest
(i.e. for some, talk constructively links private to public,
for others it is irrelevant)



- Of those naming an issue on their mind, 55% took a related action
- Most common actions: signing a petition (31%), contacting MP/ councillor (21%), local meeting (19%), personal protest (11%)
- Those who didn't act blamed lack of time, feeling it would make no difference, and the view that they are 'not that kind of person'
- Less likely to act: those low in political interest, political efficacy and social expectations
- More likely to act: middle classes, and those more distrustful of politics and media
- Those who did not act: more likely to watch TV news, less listening to radio and reading
(but, amount of media consumption unrelated to amount of action)



Sources of disconnection

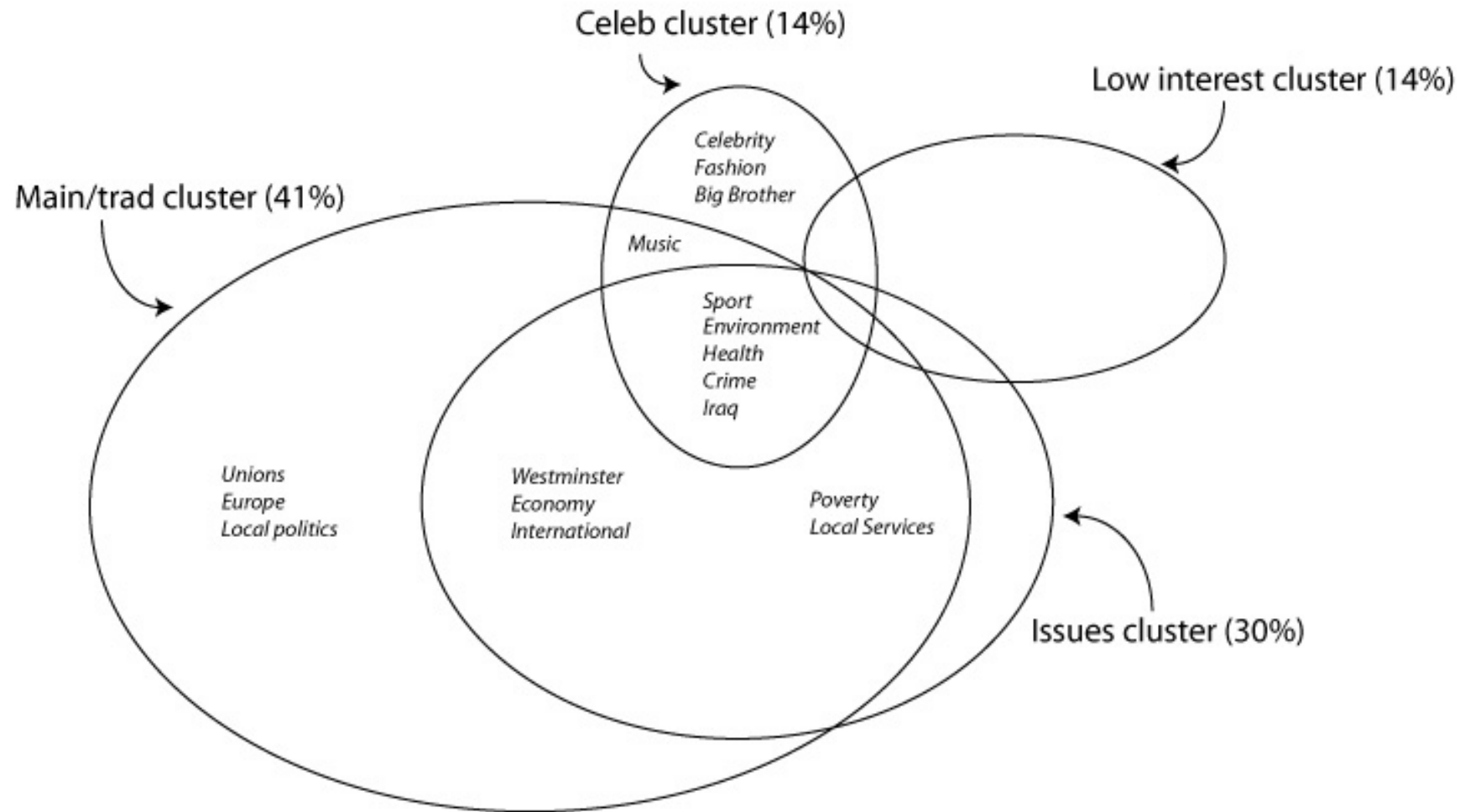


Those who are more disengaged (scale) are:

- lower SES
- older
- lower in political interest and efficacy
- read local paper more and books less
- watch more TV

➔ But overall, the variables we've measured suggest different types of people in terms of public connection . . .

Clusters of respondents by themes named in survey





Types of people by interest



- **Traditional:** 57% are men, average age 43, more middle class, higher social capital and efficacy, and more newspapers/radio
- **Issues:** More women than men, average age and class, low media trust, more likely to consider media irrelevant
- **Celebrity:** three quarters are women, average age 32, less likely to vote. Social capital low, media trust comparatively high
- **Low interest:** lower socioeconomic status, least likely to vote, low efficacy and social capital, likely to consider media irrelevant



Predicting voting and political interest



	Voting	Political interest
Political interest	0.243 ***	n/a
Age	0.286 ***	n.s.
Political trust	0.085 ***	n.s.
Social capital (local involvement)	0.060 *	0.102 ***
SES	-0.059 *	-0.117 ***
News engagement	0.091 **	0.371***
Knowing where to go to get information	0.066 *	n.s.
Time spent reading a newspaper	-0.077 **	0.093 ***
Time spent listening to the radio	0.060 *	n.s.
Whether listen to radio news regularly	n.s.	0.075 **
Whether access news online regularly	n.s.	0.062 *

N=996. *=significant at p<0.05, ** at p<0.01, ***=p<0.005

Key survey variables

Factor	Question	% Pop
Voting	You generally vote in national elections	82
Political Interest	You are generally interested in what's going on in politics	65
Political Trust	You trust politicians to tell the truth	21
	You trust politicians to deal with the things that matter	45
	You trust the government to do what is right	43
Social Capital	You play an active role in voluntary, local or political organisations	18
	You are involved in voluntary work	28
	Being involved in your neighbourhood is important to you	62
Political Efficacy	You feel that you can influence decisions in your are	39
	People like us have no say in what the government does	56
	You can affect things by getting involved in issues you care about	69
	Sometimes you feel strongly about an issue but don't know what to do	74
Media Literacy	You know where to go to get the information that you need	82
	Different sources of news give different accounts of what's going on	79
	You generally compare the news on different channels/papers/websites	59
News Engagement	You follow the news to understand what's going on in the world	90
	You follow the news to know what other people are talking about	76
	It's your duty to keep up with what's going on in the world	70
	It's a regular part of your day to keep up with the news	80
	You have a pretty good understanding of issues facing our country	81
Media Trust	You trust the television to report the news fairly	68
	You trust the press to report the news fairly	40
	You trust the internet to report the news fairly	36
	You trust the media to cover the things that matter to you	65
Public Connection	Which of the following do you generally follow/keep up to date with?	...
	Which public issue has been esp. important to you in past 3 months?	72
Action	For that public issue (above), have you done any of these things ...?	55

Survey population: demographic breakdown

	GENDER		AGE						SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS				
	Male	Fem	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	AB	C1	C2	D	E
N	488	529	112	173	203	173	152	203	254	295	213	85	170
%	48	52	11	17	20	17	15	20	25	29	21	8	17

The Public Connection Diarists





The everyday reality of mediated public connection



‘I’ll always watch the news...I think the day that I stop watching it, will be a sad day’ (Jonathan, 23, university administrator)

but other examples across age, class, gender, media habits ...

‘I need the radio 24 hours. Every hour I have to listen to news just to find it out what’s happening’ (Gundeep, 48, garage manager)

‘I’m compulsive, I have to pick up any paper that I see and have a look through it’ (Enid, 63, part-time school assistant)

‘I think it is important they make us aware of what’s going on otherwise no one’s gonna change ... Even if it’s hurting and it’s horrible you need to know’ (Kylie, 24, unemployed)



The everyday reality of mediated public connection



But similar habits of media use may be put to very different ends e.g. websurfing at work - for news or social diversion?

‘We like anything light-hearted and diverting to entertain us, especially when we’re so busy.... . We haven’t talked about the budget or anything serious’ (Beccy, 27, marketing executive)

... and diarists’ sense of connection may be subject to strain:

- **lack of social reinforcement**

‘it’s quite scary to see how people are disinterested in [politics]’ (Jonathan)

- **sense of not being taken into account**

‘I’ve become disenchanted because I’ve just felt as though well what use is the political system that we’re in at the moment’ (Jonathan)



Overall patterns

Media world connectors v public world connectors

Henry (52, insurance worker) vs. Edward (64, retired chief executive)

Kylie (24, unemployed) vs. Jane (52, supermarket assistant)

Plus many positions in between



Dynamics of connection / disconnection



- Mediated public connection links media consumption to public orientation
- Various positive/ negative factors and feedback loops (e.g. talk + values) affect each element and the links between them
- Absence of mediated public connection is not necessarily a 'lack' – can be linked e.g. to strong orientation to family or social life



Other possibilities

The weakly connected

- ‘Some weeks I think I really don’ t know what’ s going on in the world and you make more of an effort to switch the news on and other weeks, you think, oh, I’ m not really interested’
(Marie, 34, p/t accounts clerk)
- ‘I did used to like to watch the news to catch up on things. But then it got so depressing and everything was about war and I stopped watching it cause I thought I don’ t want to know’
(Lesley, 39, p/t secretary at special needs school)



Alternative routes to a public sphere



Ethnicity and an alternative public sphere?

No consistent picture:

- Gundeep – Sikh cultural community in West London, but no sense of alternative route into public or political issues
- Eric (47, computer programmer and lay preacher)
...and Vincent (23, musician)

Both had strong sense of Afro-Caribbean community linked to public world through church



Alternative routes to a public sphere



- **Big Brother and celebrity culture generally**

‘I do keep up to date with what's going on... mainly the gossipy side of the media, you know like Heat and Ok magazine, yes I get those every week. What girl isn't in to that really?’ (Janet, 29, airport administrator)

‘As Big Brother started on Friday it now seems the ‘official’ start of summer and when it ends all my friends always comment well that’s summer over’. (Marie)

- **Male treatment of politics as entertainment**

‘My hero of the moment is a guy called Boris Johnson ... he stood up in Parliament a few weeks ago ... and he was doing one of his speeches. And . . . they were curling up cause he’s so funny but he makes a point, you know, in a humorous way which is what appeals to me’. (Harry, 69, retired bank information systems manager)



Alternative routes to a public sphere



- **Sport**

For one diarist, Ross (25, graphic design student), football not only a passion but constitutes everything that is public. Footballing world not only entertaining but a sphere with its own principles, value framework and ways of arguing

- **But overall few, if any, links from celebrity type issues to wider public issues**

(concerns at news priority given to Beckham sex scandal over Iraq/ Madrid bombings a special case . . .)



Media literacy

Background – 21 active internet users in our diarist sample but **only one** used internet as main news source (Josh, 23 year old architecture student – compare 2005 Pew study: 24% of US population)

High level of expressed political mistrust, but media trust more complex (formal expressions of mistrust, but many trust/ don't question media in practice . . . issue of dependency)

But many examples also of media literacy

- Questioning media's values
- Questioning media facts/ presentation of arguments
- (rarer) reflecting critically on media practice overall



Media literacy

Some concern at close relationship between government and media (compare findings of Power Report)

Specific concerns at media standards and accountability

‘Coming from an evidence-based area of work, I like to see the evidence before I can pass a comment if you like. But for me, the media ... should be truthful and honest and trustworthy. Sadly, I don't think that they are’ (Sheila, 47, senior health protection nurse)



The context of public connection: talk and action



General points

- No absence of debate: private discussions and semi public settings e.g. the newspaper shop:

‘It’ s like a small village shop . . . Mine is the only shop on the road so they all come and talk to me’ (Pavarti, 51, runs newsagent)

- Some constraints on talk about politics (avoiding ‘doom and gloom’ on social occasions)



The context of public connection: talk and action



- Reasonable degree of public action – a quarter of the diarists are involved in some form of local organisation or voluntary work – although practice of local activism rare and limited

‘Yes, I’m still actively involved in . . . just trying to see the way forward for the community. I mean there’s so much that can be done for so little amount of money and I think it’s just raising awareness really.’ (Christine, 46, business events coordinator)

- Web surprisingly **not** salient as space of action (only one reference to online discussion, none to blogging)



The context of public connection: talk and action



But key missing links . . .

- **Lack of evidence of links between talk about issues and action**
- **Only one case where an effective local context for public action**
- **Disturbing gap between civic activism/ engagement and political disengagement/ despair**

‘[Policy’s] all a top thing – it’s not at the bottom at all. The reality at the bottom is still totally different. What the politicians are concerned with is that very top layer of presentation through the media of one sort or another to the public’ (Edward)



Satisfied distance or troubled closeness



While some people say they need to remain publicly connected:

‘I don’ t like being uninformed...I just don’ t like not knowing’ (Josh)

. . . others are relaxed:

‘It just seems like it’s a little bit of another world. You know, they’re supposed to be making decisions on behalf of all of us but it doesn’t generally seem that way’ (Andrea)

Individualistic rationalisations of this distance?

‘I think there’s a hell of a lot of choice out there and I think ... it’s up to me to go and find out and be informed. ... I think everybody would have their own line’ (Beccy)

‘You need to be able to turn the TV off, as awful as it is ... in life you do have to do what you’ve got to do and if you’ve had a bad day at work you’ve got to do whatever... it takes ... to make you go back there the next day’ (Beccy)



Satisfied distance or troubled closeness



...Or troubled closeness?

‘We don’t seem to ... be aware of everything we need, I don’t think the message is put across’

‘Why should I have all these unanswered questions, I live in this country and what Tony Blair decides to do does affect me so therefore I should have the information’

(Samantha, 33, runs beauty parlour)



Satisfied distance or troubled closeness



Voices of the engaged but sceptical

'We want to be entertained, we don't want aircraft flying over our backyard and we're happy to do something about that but we're not really interested in correcting what to me are some of the greater evils like this too cosy relationship between government and the media ... There's an alarming degree of apathy I suspect and I don't see it getting any better'.

(Bill, 61, retired managing director)

'I used to be quite a believer in democracy. I'm not so sure these days and I'm probably as suspicious of politicians as I am of the media I think. I think a lot of it is a game'. (Sheila)

Overall Conclusions and Policy Recommendations





Overall conclusions

- ***Limits of our study?***
 - Qualitative fieldwork mainly done in 2004 (possible shifts since then?)
 - Intensive fieldwork country-wide required small qualitative sample
 - Nature of diary format made recruiting Ds more difficult (locally-based follow-up studies can be demographically targeted)
- ***Distinctiveness of our study?***
 - Diary research open in its assumptions and diary data unusually detailed and reflexive
 - Survey brings together questions on media consumption and political engagement
- ***What is distinctive about the UK context?***
 - Long history of public service broadcasting and market-based press
 - relatively late growth in high volume online access at home (but recent rise in 2005/6 towards critical mass of home broadband)



Overall conclusions

What is distinctive about the UK context? (cont.)

- Political trust low for many decades (UK an 'elitist' democracy: Conover Crewe and Shearing, *Journal of Politics* 53(3) 1991)
- Long-term centralising pressures on local government and weakening contexts for local community activism
- Relative weakness of religious or other civil society institutions

Contrast with linked US diary-based study

- Andrea Press and Bruce Williams, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (NSF funded)
- Locally-based study before and after US presidential election 2004
- Religion as major context for thinking about public/ political
- New media central to most US diarists' media consumption
- Greater sense of local civic activism (maybe specific to study location)



Policy recommendations



1. *Media consumption matters*

. . . and should receive greater priority in strategies to reverse political disengagement

2. *Habits of news engagement*

. . . Habits – their patterns, contexts and differences - also matter

Policy needs to focus on

- both traditional media and new media
- news-oriented internet use rather than general internet use

Contexts for new habits of news consumption must be generated



Policy recommendations

3. *Orientations away from public issues*

- generally
 - the complex case of celebrity- and reality-based media
- 'Popularising' politics for such audiences less productive than addressing cases of their disengagement*

4. *Missing links*

- between talk and public action
- civic engagement and political disengagement

Need to create more opportunities for citizen involvement in policy formulation/ implementation (especially face-to-face). Role of broadcast media in sponsoring such opportunities.



Policy recommendations



5. *Social Stratification*

- of media consumption, political interest and disengagement with intense stratification of internet access/ use/ literacy
social stratification, and situation of multiply disadvantaged, must be reflected in strategies for reversing disengagement
- but news engagement not socially stratified in survey and mediated public connection found in diarists across classes, genders, ages
There are many routes to public connection . . .



www.publicconnection.org

