

MEDIA CONSUMPTION AND THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC CONNECTION: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND KEY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Media consumption matters. Media consumption (of old and new media) contributes importantly to people's possibilities for public connection and engagement in the democratic process. Yet important recent research gives limited emphasis to media consumption's specific contribution to democratic engagement. Our diaries illustrate the multiple ways in which media consumption contributes to public connection, while our survey shows news engagement contributes significantly to explaining political interest – itself a major predictor of voting. Encouraging a broad range of public-oriented media consumption, and the growth of related media literacy, should be central to wider strategies for reversing political disengagement.

Habits of news engagement. Habits of media consumption and news engagement are heavily stratified by age. The habits of an older generation (watching the evening TV news, reading a daily newspaper) remain important, although less prevalent among those under 30. While using the Internet for news is associated with being younger, it may not generate habits of news consumption as stable as those associated with traditional media; Internet use/access remains socially stratified. Yet traditional media's contribution is often ignored in favour of more recent developments. In considering media's role in reversing political disengagement, traditional media must be given as much weight as new media and habits of news-oriented internet use must be prioritized over general internet use.

Orientations away from public issues. While media consumption contributes to public connection, it does not ensure it, since many people's practices of media consumption are oriented away from public issues. While many diarists followed celebrity- or reality-based media, we found no evidence here of a route into broad public engagement; and cluster analysis of our survey data shows that following celebrity-type issues is associated with low news engagement. Strategies for reversing political disengagement that concentrate on popularizing politics for such audiences are unlikely to succeed; it would be more productive to focus on why those audiences (who come from all classes but are more likely to be young and female) are disengaged, and how to overcome this.

Missing Links. Media consumption's contribution to public connection is constrained by wider disarticulations: between talk about public issues and opportunities for acting upon them; between engagement in civic action and disengagement from politics. Our diaries offered disturbing evidence of civically active people who doubted whether their experience was being taken into account by policymakers, while our survey found a gap between being informed about civic issues and feeling able to influence local decisions. Beyond encouraging media literacy, government, media and political organizations, and other public bodies must create effective face-to-face opportunities for citizen involvement in policy formulation and implementation, where people know that their experience as citizens and literate media consumers will be listened to and taken into account.

Stratification. Media consumption, political interest, and disengagement are, according to our survey, all to varying degrees stratified by socioeconomic status, age and gender although news engagement is not, suggesting there are many routes to news engagement across classes and genders. All strategies for reversing political disengagement (whether or not media-related) must take account of this stratification and devise specific means of targeting those who are multiply disadvantaged (lack of economic and social resources; lack of opportunities to act; lack of access to the internet).

