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1

Democracy and the Presumption of Attention

Introduction

No amount of communication, however stylish and informative, will engage people in politics, unless they are paying attention, at least some of the time. If, with apologies to Plato (and his famous cave metaphor), we can imagine political events as projected onto a wall, then democracy depends on people's backs not already being turned away from that wall.

Two assumptions are involved here which provide, in effect, the bottom line of most political science and political theory, and indeed much media research. The first assumption is that, as citizens, we share an orientation to a public world where matters of shared concern are, or at least should be, addressed: we call this orientation 'public connection'.¹ The second assumption is that public connection is principally sustained by a convergence in the media people consume. Taken together, these two assumptions imply the notion of 'mediated public connection'. The question which this book investigates is whether mediated public connection exists beyond the academic literature and in the practice of everyday life.

'Public connection' is not literally the same as attention – no one believes that more than a small minority give their full and continuous attention to a public world (we discuss our use of the broader term 'public', rather than 'political' shortly). Public connection is rather a basic level of orientation that can reliably, particularly at times such as elections, be translated into attention. Mediated public connection might therefore seem like a very minimal assumption to make, and hardly worth investigating. But there are a number of reasons why this assumption is now worth exploring in some depth.

First, there are growing fears of a decline in engagement in the democratic process, especially among younger citizens, as measured by voting in national elections: the impact on the legitimacy of, say, the British political system if voter turnout in national elections regularly falls to around, or even below, 50 per cent should not be underestimated. While both the 2004 US Presidential election and the 2005 UK general election showed a slight improvement in turnouts (to 55 per cent and 61 per cent respectively) over immediately preceding elections, the 50 per cent danger point remains perilously close:² remember that since World War II voter turnout at UK general elections *never* dropped below 70 per cent until 2001 when it fell to 59 per cent (the previous lowest being in 1997: 71.4 per cent).³

Second, those fears are not allayed, or fully answered, by mainstream political science; indeed it is a puzzle that in the UK political interest remains relatively constant, even as propensity to vote falls (Electoral Commission 2005b: 31). At some level there is a disconnection. If political anthropologist Robin Leblanc is right to suggest political science tells us little about how people 'perceive their citizenship' (1999: 7), then now is a good time for research to address this experiential gap (Lister *et al.* 2003).

Third, 'public connection' may be both particularly complex and particularly threatened in an era of proliferating interpretations of what counts as 'political' and (returning to the second assumption we are investigating) when media outlets and delivery platforms are multiplying. As the complexity of being a citizen of an intensely mediated democracy increases, it is all the more important to listen to citizens' own reflections on these matters.

Concerns about the conditions of effective democracy are not new. They have been debated since Rousseau insisted citizens must be able to meet in general assembly (Rousseau 1973: 240, orig. 1762); concerns about organised communications' contribution to democracy go back almost as far (Garnham 1999). Indeed both sets of concerns have been replayed many times since:⁴ it was post-World-War-I fears, particularly in the USA, of the consequences of mass enfranchisement that prompted John Grierson to experiment with film as a new way of engaging the British population (Grant 1994: 17). Indeed, from a historical perspective, the last century has seen a 'persistent fear that media publics are essentially ungovernable' (Barnett 2003: 101). But we need to understand how such concerns are being lived out *now*, not just in the minds of theorists and policymakers but in the experience of citizens.

Some old fears of the ‘phantom’ nature of the public sphere may rest on false premises. Walter Lippman, for example, assumed that ‘the time each day is small when any of us is directly exposed to information from our unseen environment’ (1922: 63), hardly plausible today. But this does not mean that analogous problems are not being played out now in different forms. What if the intense mediation of political culture and the visual and interpretative sophistication it instils in citizens are altering the conditions under which a representative political system can retain its legitimacy? What if, after a period during the mid-to-late 20th century when regular attention to a public world through media could be assumed, we are seeing the first signs, adapting Jonathan Crary (1999), of a ‘regime of inattention’ with regard to politics?⁵

At this point it is worth emphasising that this study does more than register the mediation of contemporary political culture. It goes further by insisting that only by understanding the everyday practices of media *consumption* – and the way those practices fit into the other practices of everyday life – can we begin to understand the problem (if it is one) of public engagement. There is an essential link here from the way democratic systems reproduce themselves as social and cultural forms to the details, often banal details, of ‘ordinary consumption’ (Gronow and Warde 2001), including ordinary media consumption in all its complexity and variety.

In this chapter we first explain in more detail what we mean by ‘public connection’, acknowledging the philosophical complexities involved in any use of the term ‘public’. Then we review the hinterland of empirical and conceptual work – in political science, political sociology and political theory – that lies behind our notion of ‘public connection’. (Chapter 2 will perform the same task for ‘media consumption’.) In the last two sections, we review the various academic narratives of whether, and why, democratic engagement is under threat and the immediate context (including the policy context) for investigating this question in early 21st century Britain.

The idea of ‘public connection’

The term ‘public connection’ represents our attempt to capture one key empirical precondition of democratic engagement in a way that does *not* privilege in advance any particular definition of ‘politics’. ‘Public connection’ is at most a heuristic term – an abstraction that isolates a complex component of a working democracy. The term ‘public connection’ resonates with theories of participatory democracy which conceive

of the public sphere as a site where decisions and norms are collectively contested and redeemed,⁶ but it is prevalent more widely across political science and political theory, as we show later. Related assumptions are made right across media research (see Chapter 2).⁷ Sometimes the word ‘connection’ has fuzzy normative implications,⁸ which is why we emphasise we are using it purely as an analytic concept. For us, it is useful only if it captures an orientation – definitively ‘on’ or ‘off’ – that can be empirically established.

We use the word ‘public’ here – not ‘political’ – to allow for the complex disputes over the definition of ‘politics’ in contemporary life. Clearly for some people, perhaps many, ‘politics and public life [are] not necessarily the same thing’ (LeBlanc 1999: 200). For a start, ‘politics’ is for many people broader than its traditional definition, electoral politics. This is already clear from one of the more useful definitions of ‘politics’⁹ (‘politics’ as the ‘authoritative allocation of goods, services and values’: Easton 1965, quoted in Delli Carpini and Keater 1996: 12): many forms of political organisation in this sense operate outside electoral politics. But ‘public’ issues may themselves be broader than recognised in any established form of ‘politics’. We write therefore of public connection to capture an orientation to *any* of those issues affecting how we live together that require common resolution (Taylor 2004). Despite broad disagreements over what falls within the definition of ‘politics’ or ‘public’ issues, the underlying distinction between the ‘public’ (any issue that requires common resolution) and the purely ‘private’ remains important.

In defending this notion of ‘public’, and building it into the focus of our research, we are taking a normative position about which we want to be explicit. Just as ‘citizenship is not just another lifestyle choice’ (Delli Carpini and Keater 1996: 285), so too public issues (and potentially therefore politics itself) involve more than just ‘social belonging’ or expressions of identity.¹⁰ Something crucial remains at stake in the public/ private distinction, notwithstanding postmodernist thinkers¹¹ who celebrate its breakdown. Democracy requires, we believe, at some level the idea that those affected by decisions can participate in them, which in turn requires some (more or less satisfactory) demarcation of the types of decisions that are, or, just as important, are not public. The term ‘public’, as just outlined, grounds any notion of democratic engagement; there is nothing radical in dispensing with it or confusing its reference, since ‘public’ identifies precisely those ‘collective action problems’ (Pattie *et al.* 2004: 22) that require a common solution. So ‘public connection’ is not orientation to *any* collectively available space

whatsoever. To say this, however, does not mean defending a traditional notion of 'public' as electoral politics – we acknowledge the growing complexity of reference-points in today's public cultures and the new 'multiaxiality' of political communications¹² – but it is to reject claims that group identity, let alone individual consumption,¹³ sufficiently demarcate the issues in which citizens are expected, broadly, to engage. 'Public connection' is an orientation to a space where, in principle, problems about shared resources are or should be resolved, a space linked, at least indirectly, to some common frame of collective action about common resources.

We must note however the philosophical minefield we have just walked round: that is, the disputed status of the term 'public' itself. The notion of 'public connection' relies on us demarcating the idea of a 'public world': the open-ended set of things that are, or should be, the subject of 'public', not purely private, attention. Some notion of a 'public world' is familiar, for example, from John Dewey's (1946: 15) account of democracy, Jurgen Habermas's concept of the 'public sphere' (1989) and Hannah Arendt's account of a 'public realm' (1958: 52). But the apparently consensual nature of the public/private boundary was famously challenged by the feminist insistence that 'the personal is political', a challenge continued in recent research on 'intimate citizenship' (Berlant 1997; Warner 2002; Plummer 2003) and the political significance of an ethics of care (Gilligan 1993).

Some theoretical clarification is helpful here, drawing on the discussion of Jeff Weintraub (1997) and Raymond Geuss (2001). They point out that the term 'public' is confusing precisely because it condenses *more than one* type of public/private boundary: the first distinguishing issues that are broadly 'political' – matters of common *concern*, or 'common decision' (Taylor 2004: 104; cf Barber, 1984: 120–1) – from issues that are 'non-political' (of purely individual concern), whereas the second distinguishes the private *space* of individuals/families from public (or 'accessible') space. In this book we are concerned primarily with the first distinction, not the second; in principle, matters for common decision could come from any space, whether normally accessible to public entry or not. But the problems with the term 'public' arise, as Weintraub notes, because the two types of distinction are confused (inevitably, because their uses are intertwined, if separate: everything political must in principle be made visible, even if not everything visible need be political). Indeed, the two reference-points of 'public' are fused in much liberal thought, that unhelpfully reifies 'private experience' as immune from public intervention and beyond politics (Geuss 2001:1–3). We

can however retain the public/private distinction (in the first sense) as a reference-point, while relaxing the absoluteness of liberalism's interpretation.¹⁴

Returning then to the challenge of feminist and other arguments about intimate politics, they can be interpreted in two ways: either as rejecting any distinction between 'public' and 'private' matters or as contesting specific versions of where the public/private boundary should be drawn. Only the first challenges the notion of public connection itself, and it is a position few directly hold.¹⁵ The second argument implies the contestability and historicity, not pre-given naturalness, of how the public/private distinction is mapped onto daily life (Zaretsky 1976). We would not only acknowledge this, but emphasise that media institutions have been involved in constructing and reconstructing such boundaries (Flichy 1995); indeed some aspects of everyday life currently sit ambiguously between private and public status (Livingstone 2005a). We assume *only* the distinction between public and private issues is meaningful in everyday life; this is quite consistent with acknowledging that the distinction is *inherently contestable* (and often rightly contested, as feminism has shown).¹⁶ Perhaps, following Charles Taylor (2004), we can go further and say that the distinction between public and private issues is part of the 'social imaginary' of modernity. Indeed the public/private boundary may be an even more important reference-point when some political forces on the right (in the USA at least) are intent on collapsing the public into the merely private.¹⁷

Public connection: the conceptual and empirical background

We have introduced 'public connection' to capture a key assumption amongst writers who understand democracy as a structure of participation, not a façade for elite control. It is time now to look at that wider literature.

The background in political theory

Something like 'public connection' is necessary in most democratic theory, since it is implied by the notion of political participation itself. Some form of citizen participation has been intrinsic to democracy since the dawn of political theory (Aristotle 1981: Book III). Of course, there have been debates for almost as long as to the limits of actual popular participation. This is the basis for substantive disagreements between, crudely, 'representative' and 'participative' theories of democracy, and

between both of those and 'elite' models, which are more pessimistic about the feasibility of extensive popular participation. These disputes do not concern us here, since we are interested in an assumption – public connection – which is common to all such theories.

In liberal theories of democracy an assumption of 'public connection' is at least implicit. Robert Dahl argues that effective participation and enlightened understanding are necessary preconditions of a working democracy (1989: 108–14), implying a basic orientation to public affairs. Public connection receives great emphasis in social/ liberal approaches to democracy, for example T. H. Marshall (1992, orig. 1950) who incorporates within his account of citizenship a 'common culture' which citizens share. Cosmopolitan extensions of broadly liberal models make the same assumption, if only in telegraphic form.¹⁸

The notion of participation (and implicitly public connection) works very differently within republican political philosophy, where it is a core concept. Republicanism is distinguished by its emphasis on active citizen participation as the basis of democratic life.¹⁹ Republican theories vary of course on the degree of that necessary participation (similarly for communitarian models of democracy), but some notion of 'public connection' is universally implied. 'Public connection' is also assumed in models of deliberative democracy linked to Jürgen Habermas. Clearly some orientation to a world of public issues is a precondition for people to become involved from time to time in public deliberation, even in Habermas's (1996) more recent model of a 'networked' public sphere. A notion of 'public connection' is equally presumed in Iris Marion Young's difference-based model of participatory democracy (2000) and in civil society models of democracy.²⁰ In such writings, the emphasis is less on public connection itself (its presence is assumed) than on the institutional structures necessary to channel particular forms of democratic participation in complex societies. Finally, public connection is at least implicit (even if not explicitly developed) in 'radical' models of democracy as permanent contestation.²¹

However, there is one version of political theory where public connection is, on the face of it, absent: 'elite' models of democracy. Such models are characterised not necessarily by a disdain for participation, but by a pessimism about its contemporary feasibility; one type of liberalism (Page and Shapiro 1992)²² comes close to elite models in this respect. Classic here is Walter Lippman's discussion of the myth of democracy where, he argues, the citizen is at best a 'back-row spectator': 'men make no attempt to consider society as a whole'.²³ Along similar lines, Joseph Schumpeter (1943) argued for the 'unreality' of the modern ideal of

citizenship compared with actual practice, and Seymour Lipset (1963) argued that lower classes are inevitably disconnected from the sphere of political/civic action, while Samuel Huntington (1975: 114) notoriously claimed the *necessity* of apathy, if governments are to do their job. Lupia and McCubbins (1998: 36) put it even more starkly: ‘we assume people *choose* to have little information about politics’ (added emphasis).

It can, however, be argued²⁴ that even elite models of democracy rely upon something like public connection (an orientation that yields the potential for some, however intermittent, attention to politics), if democracy is to have any legitimacy. Similarly for quasi-elitist liberal approaches that downplay the necessity of active political participation, for example Michael Schudson’s notion (1998) of ‘monitorial citizenship’: how can we understand ‘monitoring’ without a shared orientation towards the space being monitored? Indeed this is the weakness of this last model, that by normalising general inattention to politics it risks making it permanent. What stands in the way is precisely the notion of an *orientation* to a public world that sometimes (but regularly enough) issues in actual attention.

The background in political science/sociology

In political science, ‘public connection’ intersects with strands in the important literature on ‘civic culture’. Here we must acknowledge Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba’s key concept of ‘participant political culture’ viz ‘orientation to political structure and process’ (1963: 29). There is, however, some ambiguity about the explanatory weight Almond and Verba put on this orientation, for they also argue that political ‘culture’ is based on a ‘necessary *myth*’ of citizen involvement (1963: 481),²⁵ but the idea that there is a dimension to political engagement which is orientational rather than based in specific knowledge originates here (1963: 15, 34).

In cultural citizenship models, the notion of political culture is given maximum emphasis, and so notions of ‘public connection’ are close to being explicit. We have in mind not only left models of ‘common culture’ (Williams 1961) as the basis of re-energised democracy and more recent work on cultural citizenship,²⁶ but also T. H. Marshall’s classic model of citizenship (which is at the roots of both). Marshall’s celebrated account is distinctive not just for its emphasis on complex historical dynamics, but for its insistence on multiple dimensions – civil, political and social. Citizenship, Marshall argues, acquired a cultural dimension through ‘the great extension of the area of common culture and common experience’ in the early 20th century (1992: 42). This

notion of an overarching public space is in fact surprisingly resilient in accounts of politics that emphasise 'difference'.²⁷

We are sympathetic to such versions of 'public connection' in political science and sociology as normative ideals, but sceptical about their empirical applicability. There is a great danger of exaggerating the degree of value consensus in complex societies (Mann 1970; Abercrombie *et al.* 1980). For that reason, we sharply distinguish 'public connection' from any value consensus, while remaining open to the possibility that public connection might under certain conditions lead to important shared values emerging. Here Peter Dahlgren's work, while still seeing a 'shared public culture' as the 'centre of gravity of politics' (2001: 85), usefully rethinks 'civic culture' in terms of a six-moment circuit of civic engagement: values, affinity, knowledge, practices, identities and discussion (Dahlgren 2003). This challenges not only Almond and Verba's model but also the implication of the Habermasian public sphere that formal public deliberation *in itself* is enough to ground effective democracy (Dahlgren 2005). Public connection is not explicit in Dahlgren's model but it is clearly implied, and we return to it in Chapter 3.

There remain accounts of politics and political engagement where 'public connection' receives apparently no emphasis. Leaving aside Foucauldian political sociology (Rose 1999; Isin 2002), where attention is on how the *possibility* of political discourse is produced, potentially more problematic are accounts of civic and political engagement that bypass the cognitive and emotive dimensions of individuals' public orientation, and concentrate on citizens' material incentives to act. Here Pattie *et al.* (2004) summarise five different models of the factors that support active citizenship. They distinguish broadly between 'choice-based' and 'structural-based' models: the former split into 'cognitive engagement' or 'general incentives to act' whereas structural theories of citizenship can be divided into the 'civic voluntarism' model, the 'equity-fairness' model and the 'social capital' model. It is striking – and apparently undermines the salience of both 'public connection' and media consumption – that mediated attention only features explicitly at two points in their survey: positively in the 'cognitive engagement' model, and negatively in the 'social capital' model. But the incompatibility with our approach is only apparent, since Pattie's discussion highlights the causal factors *isolated* by particular models of citizenship; they are not concerned (as we are) with background, often latent, assumptions. From the latter perspective, it is difficult to see how citizens can assess the material benefits of becoming civically involved without

an orientation to a public world by reference to which they make their choices.

'Public connection', then, (whether explicitly emphasised or not) is a key assumption in accounts of how democracy does, or should, work. What makes investigating public connection urgent, however, is the sense of writers and policymakers in many countries that democracy is no longer working effectively.

Accounts of the crisis of democracy

These concerns have come in overlapping waves over many decades, and each is relevant to the UK's current situation.

The *first* wave of concern regarding the preconditions for effective democracy related to the skills of citizens. An influential early argument was that these could only develop through regular civic involvement; Mill and Rousseau saw crucial links between voluntary association or local community action and wider interest in politics (Pateman 1970), a point developed further in the 20th century by John Dewey (1946) among others. A version emerged in Almond and Verba's (1963: 144) 'capillary action' model of democratic activism spreading from local to national. Here what matters most for democratic engagement is the learned practice of acting with others in public. On this account, the threat to democracy comes from the decline of such practices, although national differences in social norms of voluntary action are important (Skocpol and Fiorina 1999). A variation of this argument emphasises civic education. Many writers have identified 'cultural', particularly educational, factors as essential preconditions for an engaged citizenry, whether in republican and liberal accounts of 'civic education'²⁸ and 'civic literacy',²⁹ or in T. H. Marshall's historical model of citizenship (1992: 34). The UK government's recent introduction of citizenship education into the national school curriculum is a practical application of this argument.

Account must, however, be taken of a major counter-argument which emphasises the *social* stratification of political culture. That education is marked by social stratification is well established, and the consequences for civic engagement have long been noted.³⁰ Concern about social segmentation of course goes much wider than debates about the workings of politics,³¹ but the argument is that political culture at all levels is stratified. Particularly powerful was Carole Pateman's critique of Almond and Verba's civic culture research (1989: 76, 77): in the UK and the USA the working class was, she argued, socially prepared for its 'not very

civic place' in the democratic polity. Similarly, but in greater sociological detail, David Croteau (1995: 103, 172) has analysed the lack of 'cultural context' for working class people to be engaged in politics.³² The same broad argument can be extended to other dimensions: age and gender,³³ ethnicity,³⁴ and occupational status.³⁵ A parallel argument can be made for more specific areas, such as involvement in voluntary organisations (Skocpol and Fiorina 1999: 499–504). Such arguments lead Michael delli Carpini and Scott Keater (1996: 60) to ask, how democratic is US or indeed any democratic society, *and for whom?* We hope to cast some light on this question.

The concern with systematic exclusion from politics has generated responses both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, communitarianism (Sandel 1982; Walzer 1983; Taylor 1989) rejects the Rawlsian theory of justice in which the basic units of society are discrete, atomised individuals and argues that preceding individual deliberative positions are the natural communities of which each of us is a member. In policy-making, communitarianism has been associated in the UK most strongly with the social inclusion agenda. We are, however, cautious about any assumptions that there are natural 'communities' in contemporary Britain.

A *second* wave of concern at democratic decline that grows out of such responses to the first centres on the question of 'social capital', brought to prominence particularly by Robert Putnam's work (Putnam 2000). While there are many reference-points for 'social capital' (from family and friends to membership of social groups to networks of acquaintances), 'the idea' it has been claimed 'at the core of the theory of social capital is extremely simple: social networks matter' (Putnam 2002: 6). Starting out from the general fabric of social interaction, as the foundation of civic activity, Putnam is concerned with both the overall decline in social trust and the uneven distribution of the resources (social 'capital') that build on social trust, and the long-term implications of each for effective democracy. Putnam is specifically concerned with the decline of formal associations, captured in his famous image of 'bowling alone'. In the late 1990s such arguments had considerable resonance in USA, UK and other countries' policy circles, and that influence has recently developed into a broader concern with measures that will restore 'respect' within communities.³⁶

There have, however, been many fundamental critiques of Putnam's thesis. Ignoring disagreements as to whether social capital and civic involvement *have* declined in particular countries such as the USA and UK (Hall 2002; Wuthnow 2002), the most important criticisms for

our purposes are: exaggerating the importance of formal associations in social life generally (compared with other forms of organisation, not least online networks),³⁷ ignoring the disjunctures between voluntary activities and the actual space of politics,³⁸ and exaggerating the importance of horizontal trust for political engagement.³⁹ In addition, Putnam's well-known isolation of high levels of television consumption as negatively correlated with social capital and civic participation has been heavily criticised (Norris 2000) for ignoring the *positive* correlation between television consumption and public engagement for many people (see Chapter 8).

Our own position, given this intense debate, is to look for the social preconditions of declining engagement not just in the formal associations whose reduction Putnam laments but more widely in the organisation of everyday practice. Not only is the evidence for a tight relationship between social trust, civic involvement and political engagement increasingly ambiguous,⁴⁰ but the contribution of *mediated* networks and practices (including those online) needs to be investigated. It is striking, for example, that the UK Electoral Commission's recent *Audit of Political Engagement* (2004a) suggests a split between 'good causes [i.e. non-political] activism' and propensity to vote: even if social trust/ capital contributes to the former, it need not contribute to the latter. A more helpful concept than 'social capital' for unlocking the social preconditions of democratic engagement may be Etienne Wenger's (1998) 'communities of practice'. For, as Wenger argues, it is 'communities of practice' that provide the 'social configurations in which our enterprises are defined *as worth pursuing* and our participation is recognisable *as competence*' (1998: 5, added emphases). Whatever our levels of interpersonal trust and social capital, we need access to communities of practice which specifically *make sense* of citizenship as something individuals can and should do. Whether UK citizens have such access is an open question.

A *third* wave of concern about democracy's future focuses not on individuals' skill or resources, but on the features of public discourse that undermine it as a shared space of debate. This is the other side of the 'common culture' argument. A recent argument is that the Internet is leading to the fragmentation of publics (Gitlin 1998; Sunstein 2001). This is not a new debate, since John Dewey (1946) had feared the consequences of 'too much public' leading to the impossibility of any 'public' identifying itself as such, but it is intensified by the increasing specialisation of political discourse itself (Mayhew 1997; Blumler and Kavanagh 1999; Bennett and Manheim 2006). The argument is

as much about the separation of each of us from each other, as about the separation of political elites from ordinary citizens. What if the world of online consumption means that increasingly 'individuals... [will] actually feel better about knowing less and less about the world around them' (Gandy 2002: 452)? The only answer, we propose, is to investigate how and to what extent people remain oriented to a public world through media.

Any such study must, however, take account of broader sociological analyses of democratic decline. One foregrounds overlapping factors within the nation-state which have undermined any coherent model for citizenship (Walzer 1974: 605–6). Sociologists and historians have long acknowledged that citizenship is multi-causal and geographically specific (Tilly 1997); T. H. Marshall's model of the development of citizenship in Britain was similarly complex. The relevance of Marshall's model is however threatened by the fears of a growing gulf between public and private spheres, between civic commitment and consumerism, indeed a collapse of 'the social' itself (Bauman 1999; Touraine 2000). Two detailed accounts, one by a political scientist and one by a sociologist, of the complex intersections between work and leisure, public and private practices, are important here. Lance Bennett (Bennett 1998: 755) in an essay on the 'uncivic culture' suggests that people's psychological investments and values have over time been reorientated away from central political and economic institutions to local and personal projects, for a variety of reasons including increased economic and labour market instability.⁴¹ The sociologist Bryan Turner, by contrast, traces 'the erosion of citizenship' to the marginalization of workers from decision-making through changes in education, rationalisation of the voluntary sector and many other factors; as a result, Marshall's model of citizenship has become a 'thin' model instead of a 'thick' one (Turner 2001: 203). Leaving aside Turner's simplistic blaming of a 'passive world of television' (2001: 203), his suggestion that the matrix of linked practices which make citizenship meaningful has unravelled is powerful. Thomas Janoski expresses a similar point: 'citizenship presumes some determinate community or civil society with some connections and networks between people and groups, and some norms and values that provide meaning to their lives' (1998: 24). So where is that 'determinate community' now?

At this point, a final wave of concern intervenes, arguing that globalisation has seen the supersession by transnational flows of the 'mythic compact' of nation-state-focussed politics (Miller 2002). Some argue that the very concept of 'citizenship' (implying a bounded national

territory) should be replaced by a transnational notion of ‘denizenship’ (Soysal 1994),⁴² or that globalization has outmoded the national arena for citizenship (Roche 2002). More plausibly and less drastically, Saskia Sassen insists upon the ‘partial embedding of global in national’ (Sassen 2002); this transforms our practical understanding of ‘citizenship’ and replaces an older ‘bounded’ notion of politics with an ‘infinite’ model of politics operating across and without regard to national boundaries (Dahlgren 2005: 154).⁴³ The local, however, remains important (Cammaerts and Van Audenhove 2005), creating a new risk that a global civil society will increasingly move out of reach of people’s lifeworlds.⁴⁴ The point, as ever, is that we should not assume theory is the best vantage-point from which to predict how these contradictions are experienced in practice: we need detailed evidence from people’s reflections on their daily lives.

Finally, against these concerns at the decline of democracy, we must register an important counter-argument. What if, instead of declining, political orientation is simply taking new, more dispersed forms? Russell Dalton (Dalton 2000; Dalton and Wattenberg 2003) has sought to test empirically current diagnoses of disengagement, rejecting both the traditional idealised view of the democratic citizen and the ‘realist’ conception of the ‘deferential’ voter in traditional political science of the 1950s. Against this, Dalton argues that changes to social structures encourage political participation – albeit not in the form of traditional electoral politics.⁴⁵ He argues for an *increase* in community activism and participation in referenda, concluding that contemporary western societies are characterised not by disengagement but transformations in the reference-points of public practice, towards life-style-oriented issues.⁴⁶ Is it here that a new ‘determinate community’ is emerging?

The current UK and international context

The debate remains unresolved. As Pharr Putnam and Dalton put it in a review of the international evidence, while there is ‘no evidence of declining commitment to the principle of democratic government . . . by almost any measure political alienation [from electoral systems] soared over the last three decades’ (2000: 7, 9). A recent international Gallup/World Service survey (BBC Press Office 2005) is equally bleak, suggesting that only in Scandinavia and South Africa do a majority of citizens believe their country is run by the will of the people.

In the UK concerns have until recently been targeted on the young, and with good reason. After a significant decline in young people voting

in the 2001 general election (Hansard Society 2001), various research has confirmed that young people's interest in the political process is low.⁴⁷ In the 2005 UK general election only 37 per cent of 18–24 year olds and 48 per cent of 25–34 year olds voted (Electoral Commission 2005b). While below-50 per cent turnout among the under 24s is not unique to the UK,⁴⁸ the 'generation gap' in voting propensity appears particularly wide in the UK (and also Japan).⁴⁹ More recently, concerns have been registered about other groups: less than 50 per cent of Class C2Ds currently consider themselves certain to vote (Electoral Commission 2006: 15), confirming earlier concerns that political disengagement is crucially linked to deprivation,⁵⁰ while less than 47 per cent of ethnic minorities voted in the 2005 election.⁵¹

There is however a broader problem here, not limited to one population sector. The BBC (2002: 22) has voiced concern about 'political disconnection' amongst the whole UK population, while one online survey reported that 72 per cent of UK citizens felt 'disconnected' from their political representatives (Coleman 2005). Not surprisingly the problem of 'disconnection' is now regularly noted in the literature,⁵² and concern about voter disengagement was registered by both journalist commentators and leading politicians during the 2005 election.⁵³ But the issue of disconnection is complex, as the example of young people shows: disinclination to vote may be distinct from unwillingness to follow politics through media or disinterest in political issues,⁵⁴ while some researchers point to considerable civic activism among the young alongside their disenchantment from the formal political system.⁵⁵ Nor do such disconnections occur in a vacuum: for the national press, it appears, *reduced* the priority it gave to election news in 2005, while media's established practice rarely represents 'ordinary' citizens as active agents in political deliberation.⁵⁶

The problem of democratic engagement rightly therefore exercises governments and policymakers, but ways forward are anything but clear. One possibility is restoring the electorate's trust in politicians and the political process, and here hopes are sometimes invested in new technological possibilities (blogging and the mobile phone, or more broadly online interactivity).⁵⁷ UK e-government initiatives play back the language of 'connection' (for example the 'Government connect project' or the direct.gov.uk site), but it is unclear whether they make any difference: according to one recent survey, only 3 per cent and 5 per cent of Internet *users* (not the general population) email their MP or councillor.⁵⁸ Even at its boldest, the New Labour government's vision of an e-democracy acknowledged that 'the notion of a formal space

on the web where any one can initiate policy ideas, contribute evidence or debate with others is a long way off'.⁵⁹ While the BBC's Action Network has tried to facilitate online engagement in civic and political activism, its success is still unclear. Nor have experiments in e-voting clearly solved disengagement problems, and they are beset with their own difficulties.

Indeed there is an increasing momentum behind the view that the problem of democratic engagement is not amenable to a 'quick fix'. Some critics have suggested that it is government trust in voters as much as voters' trust in government that needs to be boosted,⁶⁰ while The Power Report (Power 2006) moves away from the Putnamesque idea that the problem is a decline in voluntary association membership, towards a more disturbing conclusion: that civic engagement remains healthy in Britain, but those who are civically engaged remain nonetheless disengaged from, indeed despairing of, Britain's *political* process. We return to these concerns later.

There are important comparative issues here. In our conclusion we note parallels between our research and research from Europe and the USA. But the problem of disengagement affects each country from very different historical starting-points. What are the distinctive features of the British situation?

First, Britain is broadly an elitist, not a participative, democracy:

in which citizens have traditionally thought of themselves as 'subjects'. In such a context, it may seem natural [for citizens] to place a strong emphasis on civility and the preservation of community norms while downplaying the importance of those political duties which involve considerable political participation. (Conover *et al.* 1991: 814)

In Britain the link between citizen engagement and government action has *usually*, not *exceptionally*, been problematic, and the agenda of 'community norms' cannot, automatically, be assumed to encourage 'naturally' an agenda of political participation or engagement. Trust in political institutions in Britain has been low for a long time,⁶¹ which makes less surprising our finding (Chapter 8) that levels of political trust contribute little to the explanation of political engagement or public connection. This also helps us understand how the increase in centralising pressures on UK local government over the past three decades (Mulgan 2006) has generated relatively little protest, even as it has reduced opportunities for local civic activism. Over the longer-term still,

the character of Britain as an 'elitist' democracy must be linked to the relative weakness in Britain (compared, say, with the USA) of religious or other civil society institutions as independent political actors. This, we must remember, is the historical context that shapes whether experiments in encouraging citizen involvement, online political innovations (Moveon.org)⁶² or global civil society movements (Indymedia) will become integrated into political and civic culture in Britain. Certainly people's political engagements may go beyond the national framework with all its limitations,⁶³ but the national setting may still be a major constraining force.

It is in any case vital to contextualise our study of mediated public connection in the space of *action-opportunities* available to citizens; this is the material context in which (mediated) public connection has meaning, if at all. For people's orientation to a world beyond the private to matter, it must have some link with practice:⁶⁴ a democracy of citizens must be based on more than 'myth' (Eder 2001). But, as with the notion of 'the public', we need to be as open as possible on where, and in what specific forms, those action-opportunities may occur. In this context, we will think of civil society both as including the space of media (Cohen 1999) and allowing for a broader range of 'communities of practice' than the formal associations with which Putnam was principally concerned. It is crucial also to consider to what extent this space of action is acknowledged as legitimate (or not) by government. Since citizenship is oriented ultimately towards what governments do, citizens' commitments must be recognised by governments or in a struggle with governments (Young 2000: 189–90): otherwise citizenship is indeed based on 'myth'.

Finally, in thinking about Britain's distinctive context, we need to remember the complexity of the UK's media audience. Britain, of course, has a distinctive media history: long established public broadcasting, an even longer established newspaper market, with the relatively slow introduction of high-speed, unlimited-access domestic online use (no free local dial-up as in the USA or heavy investment in broadband installation as in South Korea). These distinctive conditions are shaping Britain's entry to the digital media age. Perhaps broadband will change everything as a connected majority⁶⁵ start to link together in unexpected ways! But even here we need to note the established evidence from the USA that broadband internet users differ by being *less*, not more, concerned about solidarity with other users (Pew 2002).

In any case, technological change is not the only factor, since history, in the sedimented form of *habits* of news consumption, remains vital in shaping how change occurs: so the older habit, for example, of watching

TV news bulletins at a fixed time and having a newspaper delivered to one's door is not trivial, even if it is destined to decline, even disappear, in the long-term. It is worth remembering that the third term in Albert Hirschman's famous dialectic of 'exit' and 'voice' was '*loyalty*': loyalty which 'holds exit at bay and activates voice . . . [so serving] the socially useful purpose of preventing deterioration from becoming cumulative, as it so often does when there is no barrier to exit' (1969: 78–9). Loyalty, or 'habit' – and its social stratifications – will be a major factor in later chapters.

Conclusion

We have established so far that the notion of public connection underlies most political science and political theory, but a complex set of social changes require that we no longer take it as a given. In Chapter 2 we examine what media consumption contributes both to the assumption of public connection and its reality.

Notes

1. For earlier papers developing the notion of 'public connection', see Couldry and Langer (2003; 2005).
2. The US figure is a percentage of voting-age population (2000 figure: 51 %), based on US Census Bureau (2004). We choose this figure because of the uncertainties over figures for registered voters in the USA: 64 % of US voters registered to vote turned out in 2004 (<http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/voting/004986.html>).
3. UK Election Statistics 1945–2003 (2003).
4. Lippman (1925), Schumpeter (1943), Kierkegaard (1962).
5. Cf Dimaggio *et al.* (2001) on the link between attention scarcity and information abundance.
6. Benhabib (1996b: 68); Cohen (1999: 59).
7. See for example Blumler and Gurevitch's (1995: 24) insistence on the need for 'mutual orientations to communication content' in a democracy.
8. Coleman (2003).
9. Contrast looser definitions of 'politics' as 'public-spiritedness' (Eliasoph 1998: 16), or power relations (Bhavnani 1991: 52).
10. But contrast Garcia Canclini (2001: 20), Costera Meijer (1998), Hermes (1998), van Zoonen (2003).
11. Ankersmit (1996), Pels (2003).
12. Delli Carpini and Williams (2001).
13. Cf Barber (1999), Elster (1999: 10–11).
14. Indeed many non-liberal versions of democratic theory do so: Unger's (1998: 248) progressive democracy theory where the distinction makes room for the notion of social property, Charles Taylor's communitarian rethinking

of the public sphere as 'the locus of a discussion... in which [a] society can come to a common mind about important matters' (2004: 87), and Van Gunsteren's 'neorepublican' framework that draws on post-structuralist theory (1998: 136–8).

15. See for a recent example Gerson (2004), but also note Elshstain's (1997) critique of those who reject the public/private boundary explicitly while holding onto it implicitly. We acknowledge however the broader issue of secularism. Within Islamic thought or Christian evangelism we might expect a very different view of the public/private divide, since the division between secular (public?) everyday life and individual (private?) religious practice is not recognised. But such questions are not of primary importance in the overwhelmingly secular context of UK public life.
16. Fraser (1992); Phillips (1996); Young (2000).
17. Berlant (1997: 3); Giroux (2001).
18. Held (1995) on 'cultural rights' and Beck (2000b) on the cultural basis of mediated global politics.
19. Barber (1984: 132) on 'political community'; Dewey (1993: 110) on democracy as a 'mode of conjoint communicated experience'.
20. See Cohen and Arato (1992: 456) on 'communicative coordination'; and Walzer (1998: 308) on 'connection' as basis of mutual responsibility; and see generally Keane (1998).
21. See Rasmussen and Brown (2002: 179) on representation and Mouffe (2000: 13) on the 'common symbolic space' of politics.
22. Drawing on the liberal idea of the 'naturally inactive citizen' (Pateman 1989).
23. Lippman (1925: 13–14, 45), cf Lippman (1922).
24. Zolo (1992: 130); Bucy and Gregson (2001).
25. Pateman (1989) critiques Almond and Verba for a purely nominal notion of political participation, that masks deep forms of gender/ class stratification in political engagement.
26. Stevenson (1997); Murdock (1999).
27. Cf Narayan (1997: 65) who retains a notion of 'shared national life' in her feminist account of citizenship.
28. Dewey (1946); Almond and Verba (1963: 34); Barber (1984); Delli Carpini and Keater (1996).
29. Miller (2002).
30. Almond and Verba (1963: 379), Verba *et al.* (1995), Nie *et al.* (1996).
31. Young (1999) on 'the exclusive society'; Graham and Marvin (2001) on 'splintered urbanisms'.
32. See Conover and Shearing (2004) on how civic discourse does not treat various groups equally as actors.
33. Bhavnani (1991); Delli Carpini and Keater (1996); Pattie *et al.* (2004: 75, 85, 103).
34. Bhavnani (1991).
35. On work status as the basis of social connection see Croteau (1995) and, Wilson (1996).
36. An example of Putnam's influence on UK policy is a 'social capital' survey within the London Borough of Camden (Khan and Muir 2006). On the new 'respect' initiative, see extensive reports in the UK press on 11 January 2006 of a Tony Blair speech on 10 January.

37. See theoretically Cohen (1999), Meyer and Tarrow (1998), Fine and Harrington (2004), and for empirical support Hill and Matsubayashi (2005), Thiess-Morse and Hibbing (2005). For online community, see Wellman and Hampton (1999).
38. Eliasoph (1998: 236).
39. Milner (2002: 23, 37) cf Barbalet (2000).
40. A recent collection (Putnam 2002) confirms these doubts.
41. Cf Croteau (1995: 190); Boggs (1997); Putnam (2000: chapter 5).
42. For counter-views, see Dahrendorf (1974); Preuss (1995); Miller (2000).
43. Cf Held (1995); Hermes (1998); Beck (2000a).
44. Stevenson (1997: 44–6); Miller (2000); Schlesinger and Kevin (2000).
45. Beck (1997); Tarrow (2000).
46. Compare on the shift towards ‘postmaterialist values’ Inglehart (1997: 305).
47. Livingstone *et al.* (2005); Haste (2005); Electoral Commission (2004c).
48. See Keater *et al.* (2002) for the US where voting in this age group has been below 50% since 1992.
49. Electoral Commission (2004c: 8–9).
50. Electoral Commission (2005a: 9).
51. Electoral Commission (2005b: 25).
52. Electoral Commission (2004c); MORI (2004: 6).
53. Cook (2005); Moore (2005).
54. Electoral Commission (2004c: 12); Haste (2005: 7–9).
55. Morris *et al.* (2003); MORI (2004: 5, 14).
56. See respectively Loughborough University (2005) and Lewis *et al.* (2005: 49).
57. Coleman (2005); for pessimism, see Sunstein (2000), Dahlgren (2001).
58. The Oxford Internet Survey Report (2005: 28).
59. Office of the E-Envoy (2002: 37).
60. Toynbee (2005).
61. Kavanagh (1989), Topf (1989).
62. For online civic engagement by young people in the USA, see Center for Social Media (2004).
63. For interesting discussions of scales within and beyond the nation, see Schlesinger (2003) and, Held (2004: 114).
64. Cf in republican democracy theory Pateman (1970), Barber (1984) and Bader (1995).
65. Broadband connection had reached 31% of the overall UK population by July 2005 (www.statistics.gov.uk/cgi/nugget_print.asp?ID=1367), still some way short of a majority but the level of broadband connection has since been rising fast.

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