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## **CULTURE AND CITIZENSHIP: THE MISSING LINK?**

**NICK COULDRY**

### ***Keywords***

Culture/citizenship    public connection    media consumption    cultural studies

### ***Abstract***

This article argues that, instead of assuming we know what ‘cultural citizenship’ involves, we should investigate more closely the uncertainties about what constitutes the ‘culture’ (or cultures) of citizenship. The article argues for the distinctive contribution of cultural studies to the problem of democratic engagement, as usually framed within political science, and reports some preliminary findings from the recently completed ‘Media Consumption and the Future of Public Connection’ project.

### ***Biography***

Nick Couldry is Reader in Media, Communications and Culture at the London School of Economics and the author or editor of six books, including *Inside Culture* (Sage 2000) and *Listening Beyond the Echoes: Media, Ethics and Agency in an Uncertain World* (Paradigm Books 2006).

‘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***

What is at stake in the term ‘culture’ when applied to the area of citizenship? In this article I will make a sharp distinction between the notion of ‘cultural citizenship’ (about which I am cautious) and investigating studying the ‘culture’ of citizenship, which I suggest is more productive.

The term ‘cultural citizenship’ (Stevenson, 1997; Hermes, 1998; Turner, 2001) has been used 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'.

I am pressing this point about 'cultural citizenship' only to suggest that using the term too freely may obscure a more interesting set of questions. Initially, the relationship between culture and citizenship 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 (what he calls 'the great expansion [in the 20th century] of the area of common culture and common experience': Marshall (1992): 8, 16, 44). We find traces of this notion in Nick Stevenson's early discussion of cultural citizenship (1997: 42, 49) and Bryan Turner's (2002: 12) definition of 'cultural citizenship' as 'the capacity to participate effectively, creatively and successfully within a national culture'.<sup>1</sup>

But this apparently straightforward notion of cultural citizenship - as cultural entitlement - quickly runs into two major problems, as Turner himself notes (2002: 12-14): first, in an era of global movement we are no longer clear about the scale on which such cultural entitlements should be thought about (certainly 'the nation' can no longer be assumed to be the only scale relevant here: Hermes, 1998: 159, cf Beck 2000); 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, 2002: 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 scale and shared frame of reference for belonging.

I pose these questions to suggest not that the idea of 'shared culture' is misguided or that the notion of cultural citizenship is in principle unhelpful (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) that we know how, and on what scale, 'shared culture' might contribute to the practice of citizenship. Interestingly, Nick Stevenson's recent work on cultural citizenship loosens its ties to the idea of a shared national culture and develops a cosmopolitan approach (Stevenson 2003, especially 333, 340). As he puts it, 'cultural citizenship above all is the attempt to foster dialogue, complexity and communication in place of silence and homogeneity' (2003: 345). This is a valuable point, but it remains at a normative level. It is unclear how it can guide us in confronting the 'curious emptiness at the heart of everyday political talk' that Joke Hermes found in Holland in the weeks after the murder of the filmmaker Theo Van Gogh (Hermes 2005). For, as Hermes suggests, such emptiness disrupts the whole space in which we think about culture and citizenship together, even it is specifically politics that is directly challenged: 'in politics, home of the citizenships with a capital C, what those citizenships stand for, what meaning they have concretely to many is absolutely unclear' (Hermes, 2005: 9). It is significant perhaps that Stevenson addresses normatively and Hermes empirically the same challenge of listening to voices from outside the mainstream ethnic majority. It is in such cases, as Etienne Balibar has argued, that particular frameworks of citizenship are most challenged, requiring a rethinking that he calls a 'politics of politics' (Balibar 2004: 115). Such a rethinking

of the substance of politics must surely affect how we think about the culture of citizenship as well.

We need, perhaps, to adopt a less prescriptive approach to the possible interrelations between ‘culture’ and ‘citizenship’ (perhaps bracketing the term ‘cultural citizenship’ for now), making room to ask: 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?

After exploring further the theoretical setting for these questions, I want to introduce in the second half of the article an approach to this difficult question 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’.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Cultural citizenship/ the ‘culture’ of citizenship***

#### *The ‘cultural’ citizen: chimaera or reality?*

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 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 (2002: 4)? ‘what counts as community and solidarity’ asks Anthony Elliott (2002: 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): 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 (Miller 1999)! Some sociologists would argue, certainly, that those connecting practices between public and private spheres presupposed by citizenship are disappearing. Bryan Turner (2001) (cf Bennett 1998) 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!).

While not everyone of course is so negative (for example Schudson 1998), there are sufficient uncertainties to undermine any claims to certainty about who or where is the ‘cultural’ citizen.

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### *Models and absences*

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 critically on a well-known earlier literature (Almond and Verba, 1963), Peter Dahlgren has recently reexamined the notion of ‘civic culture’:

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)

The multi-dimensional model Dahlgren offers of civic culture involves 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 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. These are important advances on previous normative accounts of civic engagement (the public sphere and deliberative democracy theories: cf Dahlgren 2005), because it grasps the multiple dimensions which must be articulated if a stable ‘culture’ of citizenship is to be created. At the same time, some questions need to be raised and I will concentrate in Dahlgren’s model in particular.<sup>3</sup>

First of all, we might ask with regards to the circuit of civic culture, whether it is really a ‘circuit’. That term implies a required order in which you must go round the circuit and the equal weight of every element in the circuit (so that you can enter it at any point). But we might doubt this: is discussion as fundamental as ‘practice’, for example? Are ‘values’ a key causal element in stabilising the wider circuit, or are they a dispensable epiphenomenon? Is there a natural grouping of the six elements into three: values, identities/ affinity/ knowledge and practices/ discussion? Second, there are some uncertainties of reference in Dahlgren’s model: while some civic practices such as voting are clearly important in all circumstances, the role of other practices is less clear, and we must also ask whether certain other practices, or domains of practice, undermine the circuit. Third, the question of scale is left unspecified: is the

circuit positive whatever scale it first appears on, with a circuit on one scale automatically generating circuits on other scales, or can an achieved circuit on one scale (say the local) undermine the possibility of a circuit on another scale (say, the national)? Fourth, the role of media consumption in this circuit needs further delineation: it seems to contribute to a number of elements (affinity, knowledge, discussion) but it is unclear to what extent in each case media are a satisfactory substitute for face-to-face actions and experience - sometimes they may be but at other times perhaps not. Fifth, is the circuit of civic culture (once established for an individual or group) then stable, or is it liable to decline, and if so, which elements contribute most to that risk of decline? What element in the circuit makes most difference by its absence?

That said, Peter Dahlgren's model has been of crucial importance for us in orientating the empirical research project to which I shortly want to turn. First, however, I want to make some broader links to cultural studies' research on agency and politics.

### *The contribution of cultural studies*

By a 'cultural studies' approach, I mean here not only an emphasis on cultural consumption or popular culture (although the significance of those 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: Bourdieu 1998, Sennett and Cobb 1972, cf Skeggs, 1997; Lembo 2000; Young 1999).<sup>4</sup>

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 counteract 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; Benhabib, 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's 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; Barnhurst 1998) 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).<sup>5</sup>

### *The ‘Public Connection’ project*

How then might this sceptical approach to understanding the ‘culture’ of citizenship be applied in empirical research? I want to illustrate this during the rest of the article by drawing on the ‘Media Consumption and the Future of Public Connection’ project on which I have been working with my LSE colleagues Sonia Livingstone and Tim Markham since autumn 2003. I have space here only to select some themes that bear upon the theoretical question from which I started: how can we understand the preconditions of a ‘culture’ of citizenship?<sup>6</sup> First, let me provide some background on the project’s design and its methodology.

#### *The idea of the project*

Our aims in the ‘Public Connection’ project are best explained by reference to two connected and widely made assumptions about democratic politics:

- 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 media consumption, resulting in ‘mediated public connection’).

Most writers about politics make both assumptions, although they are detachable from each other. Some believe the first without believing the second, arguing 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 for 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 and act?

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 talking 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. However much people differ over exactly what counts as the public world and what doesn't, most people, we suspect, at least make sense of the 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 to defend this working assumption, but I would suggest that even political theory that emphasises the fluidity and multivalence of the public/private boundary still ends up by reaffirming its significance (for example Geuss, 2001). In addition, the famous feminist slogan 'the personal is political' can be seen as, not undermining the public/private boundary completely, but rather offering a specific 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 project's understanding of the public/private boundary is not prescriptive. The point of our research has been to ask people what lies on the other side of the line from things 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 their relation to a public world via media, 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) conducted in summer 2005.<sup>7</sup>

Our research was, then, based on the hunch that the 'culture' of citizenship (whatever it is) 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. There is of course a trade-off between the intensive research process necessary to obtain such fine-grained detail and claims to representativeness, but I do not have space to consider the nationwide survey that we conducted to address this issue. The article concentrates on the qualitative phase of our project.

Why diaries? There is nothing new of course about using diaries in social research. But our questions for diarists were rather different from those normally addressed in diary-based research. Some research uses 'diaries' – often daily or even every few hours – to find out 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 perfectly valid, this does not allow for people's subjective reflections about whatever is being measured, how *they* understand the questions being addressed. More important, the frequent, highly structured, 'minimal' diary method is too intrusive to be feasible for long unless there are close pre-existing links with the people being researched; as a result, this high-intensity diary method cannot generally be used to track changes over a longer period. But our aim was to understand how people's thinking about the public world developed as they reflected for an extended period, and the tensions about the citizen's position in the mediated public sphere that emerged over time;<sup>8</sup> so a weekly diary was our preferred choice.

We were well aware that our choice of the diary method might have different implications for different respondents. There may be gender-related or other issues that affect whether a diary seems an appropriate or natural form of self-expression for different people (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. 5 people used voice recorders and many used emails to supplement, or to replace, hard copy diaries. To round out the process of reflection, however, we interviewed diarists (and more than three-quarters agreed to this) a few months after their diary was completed, and (at the end of the second interview process, by now almost a year after initial recruitment) a third of the diarists participated in local focus groups – overall a good rate of attrition.<sup>9</sup>

### *Emergent themes*

Our project focussed on one of the preconditions of civic culture (the orientation to a public world we call ‘public connection’), not civic culture overall. So we did not address explicitly all the dimensions of Peter Dahlgren’s civic culture model, although our data ranged across aspects of both the background practices which sustain public connection (talk, knowledge acquisition and use) and the articulated public values or affinities isolated in his model. Indeed it was the possible connections – or disconnections – between elements that interested us: we suspected that the conditions that undermine or weaken public connection are subtle, perhaps not articulated, and as much to do with how particular public-oriented practices are articulated with the rest of daily life, as with how people think explicitly about the world beyond the private.

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. For others, time was a key constraint, but much less so that we had expected from our pilot study. While time might be a factor restricting involvement in civic activities, it was unlikely to prevent diarists achieving a level of media consumption sufficient to sustain an orientation to a public world: there is enough media around of many sorts for most individuals to access the level of information they feel they need (even if quality is more difficult to control).

### Social opportunities

A more important factor for the quality of people’s ‘mediated public connection’ was the availability of social opportunities to put to use elsewhere the public knowledge or information gained from media consumption. 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:

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. . . . my sister . . . 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. (Man, aged 23, university administrator, West London suburb, diary)<sup>10</sup>

An older man commenting on his son and daughter implied he too lacked the chance to discuss with family the public issues in which he was interested:

. . . 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. (Man, aged 64, retired financial services chief executive, Northern suburb)

Such judgements about others' public connection tended to be made by men, not women, but that does not necessarily mean that women always had social contexts in which to talk about public issues, only perhaps that women tended to be less judgemental about the implications of the absence of such a context. 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:

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 . . . (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. . . . 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. (Woman, 30, primary school teacher, Northern suburb)

Most of our diarists had some opportunity to talk about public-related issues but, as Eliasoph (1998) has argued, it was the distribution of those opportunities that was as important as the opportunity per se. That distribution is related to social status: a retired businessperson, for example, may have the opportunity to discuss public issues at the magistrates' court where s/he sits as a magistrate, whereas a retired manual worker may lack such outlets.

Work could, in special cases, provide a sort of 'public sphere' operating in parallel to people's media consumption, as in this description of a West London newsagents' shop by its owner:

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. ... So we discuss all sorts of things. (woman, aged 51, shop owner with grown-up children, suburban West London).

This diarist made clear however that this was mainly conversation that happened around her, rather than something to which she felt able to contribute, let alone direct.

Obviously the availability of particular types of talk-context varies greatly between individuals. But there is a larger pattern in what our diarist told us: a near-complete absence of talk which (as reported to us, at least) led to any action involving public-type issues.<sup>11</sup> This suggests that talk and practice (two elements of Dahlgren's linked circuit of civic culture) may operate almost independently from each other. This is not to say of course that talk or deliberation that led to action would be insignificant, if it occurred – the point however is that this seems to be the exception, not the norm.

#### drawing back from the news

As people produced their dairies, a number of factors emerged which reduced their media consumption about public-related issues or led them to keep it isolated from the rest of their life. The sense that the news was too awful to watch regularly, or to reflect on in detail in a diary, was common both among men and 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. (woman, aged 46, hospitality events organiser, second northern suburb)

I am afraid that I am in danger of becoming bad news weary and developing an ostrich attitude. (man, aged 67, retired printer, second northern suburb, diary)

Sometimes it was celebrity culture, not depressing international news, from which people wanted to escape:

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

In rare cases this push/pull process led to more general reflections about the place of media in people's lives:

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. (woman, aged 34, part-time teaching assistant, urban South of England, diary)

There was an important contextual factor for the common desire to escape from the news: 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. Interestingly the same period coincided with the height of speculations about David Beckham's extra-marital affairs, and the relative priority media accorded to these two types of stories provoked much critical reflection.

There are overlaps here between people's reasons for withdrawing from media consumption and explanations for people's withdrawal from interest in politics (cf Croteau, 1995): feelings of the pointlessness of one's own actions, but also a fear of involvement that stems lack of knowledge:

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. (woman, aged 33, hairdresser, urban South of England)

Or take this comment from a focus group:

there's really very little an individual can do. In fact, nothing that an individual can do. I could feel as strongly as I like about an issue and my wife's always complaining that I do feel strongly about an issue and do nothing about it because there's nothing you can do about it. Well I suppose I could do, I could stand in the middle of [city name] and spout but nobody's take a bit of notice, would they? (focus group, northern suburb – quoting the retired chief executive mentioned earlier)

Along constraints to connection, we must also place alternative forms of public connection.

#### other forms of 'public connection'

We tried to avoid in our research the assumption that media were the only way in which people could sustain public connection. Diarists were encouraged to write or speak about public issues that had arisen for them otherwise than in the media; some did, 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 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!

It would certainly be misleading to ignore that, for some diarists, media provide a vivid sense of a collective connection which however is not 'public' in the sense of

relating to issues about shared resources of concerns that need resolution. Sometimes it is music that provides this space, as registered (both positively and negatively) in 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. (woman, aged 33, hairdresser, Urban South of England, diary)

Sport is ambiguous here. For many it is pure entertainment, and this entertainment may be purely individual in focus, not linking to any wider collective sense. For one diarist, however, a 25-year old marketing student from a Southern town, the world of sport was literally coterminous with the public world for him: there was nothing public he referred to over 12 weeks, or in our interview, that was not sport-related.

Celebrity and reality TV also provided a clear focus of collective involvement for some diarists, even those with little other sense of a collective world beyond the private sphere:

I would say that I do keep up to date with what's going on. Maybe mainly the gossipy side of the media, you know like Heat and Ok magazine, yes I get those every week. So I tend to keep up with who's doing what with who and where and what have you. What girl isn't in to that really? (woman, 29, airport administrator, Northern suburb)

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, a bit sad really that over the last few years we measure the summer by when 'Big Brother is on'. (woman, 34, administration clerk, Midlands rural)

We did not find however any case where this sense of collective connection through media – important pleasure though it may be, we make no judgement on that – connected with any discussion, action or thought about issues of public concern. This runs contrary to the hopes of some (Coleman 2003) that if politicians could connect with 'reality TV' viewers, engagement with politics might be broadened.

### summary

Even though media provides many flexible opportunities for sustaining public connection, the 'Public Connection' study suggests that the space of civic culture is stratified, constrained, shaped as much by disconnections as connections. Media are important, but not always in a way that sustains public connection. Finding such disconnections is perhaps another way of registering the 'emptiness' that Joke Hermes found at the heart of everyday political discourse in Holland.

### *Conclusion*

Where does this leave us in relation to our original question about how to identify a/the ‘culture’ of citizenship? Disconnection, we might argue, arises at the level of individual trajectories through the complex web of private and public worlds; maybe it represents a rational individual choice given the profound disinterest of democratic governments in the detailed opinions of their populations.<sup>12</sup> Is that, perhaps, all there is to say? If so, the search for a ‘culture’ of citizenship would indeed be a search for a chimaera, as Toby Miller suspected.

There remains, I suggest, a great deal more to say, because the space of civic culture is crossed by misrecognitions that are not ‘natural’ or even necessary, but constructed and contingent. Here is a 27-year-old marketing executive from a Northern suburb who loves *Big Brother* and celebrity culture. She described without prompting a work-related conference (she markets a software package to a major UK public service in the context of New Labour’s neoliberal strategy of marketisation):

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, got 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.

This diarist freely admitted her disinterest in politics, and her intermittent engagement with any world of public issues, but talked passionately about the marketing mission of her company and strategy for winning over customers in the public service to which it was a supplier. Her language is the language of political mobilisation, but the ends are private, not political – a gulf whose strangeness, as she told the story, did not escape her.

I would not claim to put this and the other material presented in this paper together into a neat and coherent picture of how a ‘culture’ of citizenship is enacted in contemporary British lives. Instead, adapting a phrase of Adorno’s, I have presented at best some ‘torn’ fragments of a larger, highly fractured space: the uncertain space where people engage with, or disengage from, public worlds through the media they consume. In considering how that space is ‘torn’, we must note fragmentations of discourse (the emptiness of which Hermes writes) but also fragmentations of (the space of) action: actions which look as if they are part of a public connection and yet cannot in practice be understood that way. In that sense, the dimension of ‘practice’ in Dahlgren’s (2003) circuit of ‘civic culture’ is hardly simple. Even if public connection (a basic precondition for civic culture or a ‘culture’ of citizenship) exists, people still need somewhere where they can put acquired knowledge about a public world to use or, if they lack that space, they need some residual social status that somehow underwrites the meaningfulness of consuming media to connect to a world beyond the private. Such opportunities are unevenly shared, not because individuals make free

choices, but because they are differently positioned in a wider distribution of resources.

As one respondent in our pilot research, a retired female nurse, put it memorably (in response to questions we asked of the UK Mass Observation panel): ‘if my views counted for nothing after fifty years doing the job I knew about, why should they count about other things I know less about?’<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nick Stevenson has since adjusted his position somewhat as we shall see.

<sup>2</sup> This article began life as a paper presented at the Making Sense of Culture conference organised by the Institute of Cultural Theory, University of Manchester, January 2005. Thanks to the organisers, to Joke Hermes for suggesting the panel, and to the audience for their comments.

<sup>3</sup> I will be drawing here on discussion between the Public Connection team in October 2003: thanks here to Sonia Livingstone and Tim Markham.

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

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

<sup>6</sup> Funded under the ESRC/ AHRC Cultures of Consumption programme (project number RES-143-25-0011), whose financial support is gratefully acknowledged. I would emphasise that the particular 'cultural studies' interpretation which I give to the project here is mine, rather than necessarily a collective view.

<sup>7</sup> For a related pilot study ('The Dispersed Citizen' project, 2001-2), see Couldry and Langer (2005).

<sup>8</sup> In emphasising uncertainties and tensions in this way, our project was influenced by George Marcus' recent notion of 'complicity' (1999) in anthropological research.

<sup>9</sup> For more details on our sample and methodology, see Couldry Livingstone and Markham (forthcoming) or visit the project website: [www.publicconnection.org](http://www.publicconnection.org)

<sup>10</sup> Quotes are from interviews unless indicated otherwise. I take most quotes from interviews, not diaries, because diary material is more complex to interpret than the interviews, and there is no space here to discuss the specific interpretative issues the diaries raise. See Couldry Livingstone and Markham (forthcoming).

<sup>11</sup> We found one case: people talking at a party who then decided to lobby for local recycling support and collections.

<sup>12</sup> This argument has been made powerfully in relation to citizens under 18 (Buckingham 2000).

<sup>13</sup> Quoted from Couldry and Langer (2005: 244) which provides further background on the methodology of this pilot research and the context of this response.