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THE PRODUCTIVE ‘CONSUMER’ AND THE DISPERSED ‘CITIZEN’

NICK COULDRY

Manuel Castells offers a broadly optimistic account of the social impact of recent technological change, but at the end of ‘The Information Society’ he writes: ‘the network society increasingly appears to most people as a meta-social disorder’ (1996: 477). While I hold no particular brief for the notion of ‘network society’, Castells is surely right to foreground as problematic questions of scale and perspective, that is, our beliefs, or rather disbelief, about wider social structures. With this in mind, I want to look sceptically at two terms, whose interconnections have not always been sufficiently emphasised: the ‘consumer’ and the ‘citizen’. I will argue that you cannot get far in framing research into one without addressing the other; at a time when the lack of dialogue between major discourses on consumption and citizenship, the economy and public life, is obvious, we need research agendas (and policy agendas too) which look in unconventional places for connections across those divides and keep as many variables open as possible. To give substance to this rather abstract vision, I will explain the rationale of my own current research in this area.

Some (Almost) Ancient History

First I will draw on some rather distant history to introduce these issues. First, from the 1950s, it is worth recalling Katz and Lazarsfeld’s classic ‘two-step-flow’ model of media consumption in their book *Personal Influence* (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955). Their research seems old-fashioned now in many ways, especially its prestructured research field of local opinion leaders (mainly men) and interviewees (all women) whose consumption patterns and knowledge of the ‘wider’ world the opinion leaders were found to have shaped, mediating as it were the media’s original messages. But the general question Katz and Lazarsfeld raised remains relevant: how should we understand the actual information flows through which consumer goods and media messages get inserted into everyday life? In prioritising this question, they rejected the idea of ‘a radio listener shut up in his room with a self-sufficient supply of the world outside’ (1955: 40). That idea is only apparently archaic: a similarly flawed vision of the Internet surfer, trapped within her or his own virtual bubble, has stimulated anxieties for the future of democracy (Susstein, 2000): I call this the ‘plugged-in monad model’.

That model ignores a large region of everyday life: the flows of information and opinion that surround the acts of consumption and opinion formation, and the feedback loops that compete for influence or authority over our buying and thinking. A bold attempt in media and cultural studies to open up that region was Janice Radway’s call for work on what individual media consumers do ‘as active subjects . . . as producers of culture’, ‘the point of view of the active producing cultural worker who fashions narratives, stories, objects, and practices from myriad bits of prior cultural production’ (Radway, 1988: 361-2). The problem with Radway’s call to research was its generality: a study of nothing less than the ‘dispersed constitution of everyday life’ (1988: 368), but at least she rejected any closed-off notion of the consumer isolated from production. In a similar spirit, I want to start from what we can call ‘the productive consumer’.

Why might this hybrid figure be interesting? Let me recall here another piece of history, this time from the 1960s. Much talk now about consumption assumes an *a priori* boundary between consumption and ‘citizenship’ (note that ‘citizenship’ throughout this article is in scare quotes, to stand in not necessarily for current structures of formal politics within nation-states, but instead for a more loosely bounded zone (or zones) of public connection). Against that artificial separation, we can counterpose Albert Hirschman’s classic book *Exit, Voice and Loyalty*. As a critical voice within mainstream economic and political thought, Hirschman insisted that each discipline undermined itself by ignoring the other. Specifically, economic thought studied economic actors only at the point at which they exited markets (stopped buying), ignoring the dimension of voice: that is, the consumer’s desire, or need, to speak up about a product before the last resort of exit. Clearly, in an age of consumer boycotts intended as political signals and anti-logo activism, Hirschman’s argument against mainstream economics still has relevance, but it is equally interesting the other way round. Conventional political science has always concentrated on the dynamics of opinion expression within existing formal channels such as elections (that is, voice), but only recently has started addressing the dimension of exit: people giving up on expressing voice (stopping voting - if legally they have that option - or else, just giving up caring). Political science cannot avoid considering the consequences for political authority if the monad pulls the plug out of the wall.

However, the most interesting aspect of Hirschman’s book now is not his correction of economics from politics and vice versa, but his overall depiction of a broader research space beyond either economics or political science: the everyday space where people try to speak up for themselves or take action, and their beliefs about what difference their actions will make (if any). This leads to the question of trust. Trust, and the frameworks of belief on which it depends, fit uneasily into the exclusive boxes of consumption or citizenship. As Jeremy Rifkin has argued, trust is central both to successful economies and to successful democracies (2000: 244). Of course, you might say that is merely a matter of trusting the basic infrastructure will work, in the way we trust clocks and the electricity supply. But Rifkin pushes the point beyond formal system-centred trust to ‘social capital’ (Rifkin, 2000: 245), that is, the ‘connections among individuals . . . and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them’ (Putnam, 2000: 19). The norms of reciprocity or mutuality, of course, take very different forms in the economic and political spheres, but that does not mean we can neatly divide off the effects of the collapse of trust in one sphere from what goes on in the other. And what of the actions people take to repair trust, to refashion belief in larger forms of connection, when older forms fail? If, from the perspective of freedom, as Amartya Sen (1999) has powerfully argued, economically-based values are secondary to social or political values, then neither can trust in the economic system be sealed off from trust in (or more likely declining trust in) the political sphere. As Oscar Gandy (2002a) has recently argued, new forms of information flow and information storage raise crucial concerns about trust both for markets and politics: which, if any, institutions or groups can now be ‘trusted agents’ for the holding of personal information? How can we build new trusted agents, and where? Can trust in where our personal information is stored be divorced from new ideas (or perhaps the lack of new ideas) about where citizens feel they can belong?

The analysis of consumption cannot ignore emerging questions about the spaces of public connection and participation: who are, or should be, their key agents? What should participation consist in, and on what scale(s) should it act? What form can mutuality take? These are some of the questions behind the other term of my title, the ‘dispersed citizen’.

Productive ‘Consumer’ as Dispersed ‘Citizen’?

1. Connecting up to the present

Where does this historical detour lead us? Towards recognizing, I would argue, the importance of a hybrid object of research which crosses the divide Oscar Gandy (2002b) has called ‘the real digital divide’ between the languages of markets and politics. By framing things abstractly so far, my aim has been to keep in view a theme that would otherwise be hidden by that division: the production practices of consumers aimed at generating, or sustaining, through participation new spaces of public connection, new spaces of mutuality. I am not limiting these to the realm of formal politics: by using ‘citizen’ in scare quotes, I allow for debates about the scale or scales on which public connection should or can now work. Crucial here are precisely the possibilities for more dispersed symbolic production (image making, information distribution) embedded within new models of consumption; possible new hybrid forms of production/ consumption (themselves connected with aspects of the so-called ‘new economy’, although my argument won’t depend on that difficult term) ¹ that may tell us something significant for the current crisis in political and social ‘belonging’.

I should, at last, get more specific, but noting first the obstacle that large-scale models of the ‘network society’, or even the ‘new economy’, place in the way of getting specific. For Castells, for example, things are implicitly ‘either/ or’: either we analyse the vast space of network flows to which all the long-term causal power is reserved; or we analyse ‘local’ resistances to those flows, through which identities of struggle are formed, although their impacts necessarily are limited to a local setting. This way of framing the dynamics of change diverts attention from the possibilities emerging on other scales. We should look for new forms of local or at least sub-national networks that institute public connection for various purposes: for example, Websites or portals that collect information for consumption and civic activism on a relatively local scale, but with a ready link to larger or smaller scales. With these points made, let me explain my own research interests.

2. Tracking the Dispersed Citizen

First, I am about to embark with Sonia Livingstone planning on research about how individuals in Britain consider that they are connected to wider public spaces through their media use.² This research seeks to avoid all the assumptions that might usually be made in researching ‘citizenship’:

- (a) that the space of formal politics has a higher or prior status over other potential forms of public engagement;
- (b) that the space of ‘national’ connection has a higher or prior status over other potential spaces of connection;

- (c) that one form of media (say, television) is likely to matter more for sustaining this connection than others;
- (d) that the media available to people have a significant causal impact on their sense of connection (they may not);
- (e) that people have any such sense of public connection (they may not);
- (f) (as something assumed in the research, although this is not to say I would jettison it as a normative principle) that people should have any sense of wider public connection beyond the immediate context of their everyday lives.

By leaving open as many variables as possible,³ we would like, more positively, to respect people's own capacity to reflect critically on these difficult issues. There is no value any more, if there ever was, in research that assumes the researcher somehow has a radically different and 'better' perspective on the problems of everyday life. Listening to people's reflexivity means acknowledging that those we research may face many of the same puzzles as us, the researchers, particularly about the nature of the spaces to which we supposedly 'belong'. This is the research standpoint George Marcus has recently called 'complicity' (Marcus, 1999, discussed in Couldry (forthcoming)). As Marcus argues, a good way to express what is at stake in contemporary 'ethnographic' encounters is a 'mutual curiosity and anxiety' felt by both researcher and researched 'about their relationship to a "third" – that is, to the sites elsewhere that affect, or even determine, their experiences or knowledges here' (Marcus, 1999: 101). If 'citizenship' is now potentially dispersed across many practices and sites, then research must, in that spirit of complicity, be open to a range of images, languages and models of connection. The plugged-in monad, taking his or her nightly fix of publicly sponsored national news, cannot be artificially privileged, unless we exclude precisely what is at issue: the uncertain processes through which people are seeking public connections and public agency⁴ in new forms, including in the consumption domain.

3. New Networks of Trust

The research just described is a large-scale project combining local interviews with a broader survey. At a time of uncertainty about research agendas and priorities, however, this conventional approach needs to be supplemented with smaller-scale research that follows up local possibilities and innovations. So I am also interested in particular settings where people are generating new contexts of public communication and trust, whether as frameworks primarily for consumption or for citizenship participation (or both). Here the productive and distributional potential of the Internet is central without excluding the importance of other media.

In mapping out my own wider research priorities here, I have found very useful the work of sociologist Robert Wuthnow on what is truly ancient history: the long-term embedding of the printed book into social life in Western Europe and North America in the 17th and 18th centuries. The technological innovation of the printed book format is just the start of Wuthnow's analysis, which explores how over time (a long time) new forms of 'institutional framework' developed for reading and exchanging information obtained through books (new forms of church, school, political party), and new 'action sequences' developed as individuals organised their time and behaviour around the ready availability of printed books, newspapers and pamphlets (Wuthnow, 1987: 7). But of course we are only at the very beginning of the parallel

institutional architectures that may emerge around the Internet and mobile communications. Research has to improvise, then, to track the new 'institutional arrangements [that] restructure the contexts in which [cultural] producers and their audiences come together . . . and cultural production [will be able to] take place' (Wuthnow, 1987: 9).

One of the most interesting developments here are the new technological possibilities for distributing almost instantly through the Internet not only images and information but whole publishing structures. Because of software innovations and the ability to circulate them to others with sufficient technical knowledge, some new publishing formats have grown extremely fast across national borders such as the highly interactive Web interface on which the Indymedia network is based. This network is already a significant contributor to the emerging international public sphere (Downing, 2003). It challenges the long taken-for-granted hierarchy between a limited group of centrally positioned cultural 'producers' and a dispersed mass of 'consumers'. The Sydney-based software activist Matthew Arnison has been a crucial influence here, with his ideal of 'open publishing' (Arnison, 2002; Rennie, 2002); that is, an editing process transparent to, and in principle reversible by, readers. The point is not just to have readers 'interact' with a distant production process, but to have them become producers themselves.

This notion of 'open publishing' has relevance to all sorts of sites, including consumption portals, but its implications for social connection are provocatively summed up by Arnison himself: 'on the old one-way system, community media was the exception. On the net, community media is very much part of the mainstream' (Arnison, 2002: 6). Clearly such producer/ consumer models raise many questions: about (1) the actual social inclusiveness of those involved, (2) the dependance of such innovations on hidden subsidies (for example, a university base), (3) the stability of the new forms of trust on which they rely (by editors in contributors to keep to site guidelines and by contributors in editors to edit transparently). Australia right now seems a good place to research these themes: not only the work of Matthew Arnison and the Active.org sites he has helped design, but also *Australia Connects*, a self-proclaimed 'open dialogue about Australia's future' (www.conversations.com.au/c21c/auscon.htm).

We need lots of specific studies in this area, but romanticism about their likely long-term significance is unhelpful. The stark question remains: who uses them, and how much, in what context and to what end (cf Downing, forthcoming)? Those questions can be pushed beyond the language of traditional audience research: in what 'communicative ecology' (to use a term recently suggested by Don Slater and Jo Tacchi) will such sites and networks be sustained, if they are sustained? Or (less comfortingly) what new hierarchies will emerge in the wake of such sites, what old hierarchies will they silently reproduce? This is a topic that cries out for international comparative research.

It might be objected, however, that there is little apparent connection between my earlier quite abstract argument and this open-ended list of localised research possibilities. Where, for example, is the nation-state in all this? Can it safely be ignored? I am certainly not trying to argue that. At a time when we need to open up research questions, there is a strong argument for suspending assumptions about the

primacy of the state-framework: what, after all, may be emerging are new forms of public connection within and beyond the state. Even so, state initiatives in encouraging web-based connection are themselves interesting, for example those tentatively developed by the Blair government in the UK (see the recent consultation document: Office of the e-Envoy, 2002).

There remains, as yet, a great gulf between UK government rhetoric (encouraging new forms of democratic participation) and the reality. Suppose, encouraged by the warm words in that UK consultation paper, you visited the 'Citizens Space' section of the government site www.ukonline.gov.uk. You might well want first to click on 'how to contribute effectively'. But the first instruction you get is 'Be Brief': 'use one short sentence to explain each point you want to make'.⁵ Hardly an encouragement to open-ended deliberation! In fact, there's no mention of how you can get a response to your comments, still less a dialogue between government and citizen. We are, clearly, at the beginning of developments in this area: we cannot predict what patterns and conditions of interaction⁶ will become normalised, but it is unhelpful to confuse the myths of e-government with any likely reality.⁷

Some Wider Perspectives

To sum up so far: first, I argued we must frame research agendas beyond any arbitrary division between consumption and citizenship, the economy and politics, precisely to allow into view new practices which search for public connection across that divide. Second, in describing my own recent and planned research, I mapped out various possibilities, from larger-scale research (on people's sense of public connection through media consumption) to a more improvised micro-focus, that, taken together, will, I hope, track some of the complexity of a situation where both the technological forms and the social grounding of older frameworks of mediated public connection (the national radio and television audience, for example) are changing. New network forms are under construction,⁸ but their effective scale is far from clear. Imposing one (say, the national) scale of analysis ignores the point that scale is always a social construction, and one with political consequences (Harvey, 2000: 75-77). But how finally to think about the contribution to social civic and cultural space of large actors such as governments and corporations?

Let us conclude by suggesting three points about the role of such large actors. First, governments and other major players interested in influencing positively future forms of public connection should take seriously the impetus to technical and infrastructural innovation from the partial collapse of traditional frameworks of political and social connection. The French sociologist Alain Touraine has for some time called on sociology to redirect its priorities away from society's grand claims about itself, and instead to 'work . . . in close proximity to the emotions, dreams, and wounds of all those who assume the lives of [social] actors but are not acknowledged as such' (Touraine, 1988: 18). If Touraine is even half right, governments and major market players would do well to look closely at this space of experimentation also.

If so, a second question arises: what forms of subsidy will be most effective in stimulating new forms of public connection? Should governments be more active not just in creating basic information websites, but also in subsidising portals and networks where new forms of public connection can self-organise, facilitated, but not

directed, by the state? What architectures (both online structure and the social embedding of online opportunities) can generate and sustain new spaces of public connection and trust? And for whom? What indeed should 'subsidy' now mean in this context? Surely it cannot mean public service provision located in, and only in, the state?⁹

Third, in helping governments and commercial players address such questions, we need to know more about the developing interrelations between the never-simply-isolated process of consumption (production/ consumption) and the wider processes through which mutuality is fostered so that community, even against the odds, can emerge. The importance of this area (for example, questions of social capital and 'community') has been clear for some time,¹⁰ as has its irreducibility to formal political science or market functioning. But its difficulty is also clear. For we stand, here, directly in the gap with which I began, between local possibilities of connection and our wider sense of 'meta-social (dis)order'. This gap, of course, can be challenged. The different forms such challenges take in countless cultural and social conditions¹¹ requires the international exchange of research ideas, priorities, and results. The inter-disciplinary but sociologically-informed space of cultural studies is surely as good a place as any for such dialogue to take place

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¹ For different criticisms, see Garnham (2000); Barry and Slater (2002).

² The project is called 'Media Consumption and the Future of Public Connection' and will run from October 2003 to March 2006. Many thanks for the UK's Economics and Social Research Council for funding this research as part of its Cultures of Consumption programme.

³ See also the critical position of Toby Miller on the consumer/citizen binary (Miller, 1999).

⁴ Dubet (1994); Touraine (2000).

⁵ www.ukonline.go.uk/CitizenSpace/, consulted 18 November 2002.

⁶ 'Interactivity' is a slippery term: see McMillan (2002).

⁷ For a wider argument about the myth of 'the media' as our access-point to a social centre, see Couldry (2003a).

⁸ Note that the traditional public sphere model has recently adjusted to the importance of networks (Benhabib, 1995; Habermas, 1996).

⁹ Cf Downing (2002).

¹⁰ Wellman and Gulia (1999); Wellman et al. (2001).

¹¹ For some interesting recent work, see for example Lim (2003) on Indonesia, Morris and Meadows (2003) on Aboriginal communities in Australia, and Rodriguez (2003) on Chile.