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Tracking The Reflexivity of The (Dis)Engaged Citizen: Some Methodological Reflections

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Abstract:

The relationship between governments and citizens in many contemporary democracies is haunted by uncertainty and sociologists face the task of listening effectively to citizens' own reflections on this uncertain relationship. This article reflects on the qualitative methodology of a recently completed UK project which used a combination of diary and multiple interviews/ focus groups to track over a fieldwork period of up to a year citizens' reflections on their relationship to a public world and the contribution to this of their media consumption. In particular, the article considers how the project's multiple methods enabled multiple angles on the inevitable artificiality and performative dimension of the diary process, resulting in rich data on people's complex reflections on the uncertain position of the contemporary citizen.

Tracking The Reflexivity of The (Dis)Engaged Citizen: Some Methodological Reflections

‘We are witnessing the end of the close correspondence between all the registers of collective life – the economic, the social, the political and the cultural – that were once unified within the framework of the nation’. (Touraine, 2001, p. 103)

If Alain Touraine is right,¹ two things are particularly difficult. For governments and citizens it is particularly difficult to know what their mutual relationship should be, and on what basis an effective democracy of participating citizens can be sustained.² For sociologists it is particularly difficult to know where and how to listen to citizens’ own accounts of what it feels like to be a citizen (or not).

In this article we address both questions through a discussion of a recent research project where we investigated the extent to which UK citizens regard themselves as orientated towards a public world where issues requiring public resolution are, or should take place, and whether their media consumption contributes to that orientation. We used a combination of diaries and interviews, which we believe is of wider methodological interest.

Our argument briefly introduces the main features of our research project, then offers a detailed account of our methodological choices. But first we must comment on the broad context for the methodological approach we outline later in the article. Our research was based within media sociology and, in its approach, has been much more sympathetic to political sociology and anthropology, rather than traditional political science, although it has drawn in places on the branch of communication research most closely allied to political science (political communications). We support the general criticism of political science that, even when it appears to attend to questions of citizens’ engagement with democratic processes (Almond and Verba, 1963; Putnam, 2000), it fails to give an account of the experiential dimension of citizenship (LeBlanc, 1999) or the hidden cultural hierarchies which shape that experience (Croteau, 1995; Pateman, 1989). Recent work on citizenship (Isin and Turner, 2002; Stevenson, 2003) has greatly expanded the theoretical frame within which we understand the nature and boundaries of politics,³ but here it is the empirical failings of political science with which we are concerned. Empirically, the problem is partly methodological: political science’ overwhelming emphasis on survey methods has blocked a consideration of more subtle citizen reflexivity. Some recent media sociology⁴ has begun to correct this gap – Barnhurst, 1998; Buckingham, 2000; Schrøder & Phillips, 2005 – but there is as yet no consensus on methodological approaches. At the same time, media sociologist Peter Dahlgren (2003) has emphasized the need for a multi-dimensional approach to understanding the dynamics of civic culture. Although Dahlgren does not consider methodological implications directly, it is clear that to achieve his aim we need research tools that can track how multiple aspects of citizens’ practice *interrelate* over time and on a routine basis. We have aimed to develop this insight through our methodology.

Also relevant to our methodology is the anthropologist George Marcus’ recent rethinking (Marcus, 1999) of what ‘thick description’ can mean in today’s complex cultural spaces. Marcus abandons the idea that what is feasible or desirable in fieldwork is ‘rapport’ - a close *fit* between ethnographer’s and interlocutor’s understandings of the world within the ethnographic situation. Instead Marcus (1999, p. 87) argues for ‘complicity’, highlighting the questioning and curiosity that ethnographer and interlocutor share. Most interesting is Marcus’ insight into how both researcher and researched *share an uncertainty* (a lack of complete knowledge) about the forces that shape their practice and the location (and direction) of those forces:

a sense of being *here* where major transformations are under way that are tied to things happening simultaneously *elsewhere*, but not having a certainty or authoritative representation of what those connections are. (1999, p. 97, original emphasis)

Although a political application is not Marcus' intention, we could hardly ask for a better characterization of the contradictory situation of the contemporary citizen. The resulting role of qualitative research is to try, even if we often fail, to make sense of our location – that is the location of all of us as citizens - in 'places [that are] simultaneously and complexly connected, by intended and unintended consequences' (1998, p. 551).

When, as our research project did, we ask also about how media consumption serves to sustain, or undermine, our relation as individual citizens to a domain of public issues, the uncertainty (and the need for complicity with our research 'subjects') is multiplied. The ambiguity of media's role in everyday life⁵ was something Raymond Williams grasped three decades ago when he characterized media as:

a form of unevenly shared consciousness of persistently external events. It is what appears to happen, in these powerfully transmitted and mediated ways, in a world within which we have no other perceptible connections but we feel is *at once central and marginal to our lives*. (1973, p. 295-96, added emphasis)

Marcus' notion of complicity therefore can serve well beyond anthropology as a theoretical reference-point for our attempts to listen carefully to citizens' reflections on their often problematic relationship to the democratic process.

The Public Connection project: some background

Our research question in the 'Public Connection' project⁶ is best explained in terms of two connected and widely made assumptions about democratic politics that we have been trying to 'test'. First, in a 'mature' 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'). Second, this public connection is focussed principally on mediated versions of that public world (so that 'public connection' is principally sustained by a convergence in what media people consume, in other words, by shared or overlapping shared media consumption).

The word 'public' is, of course, notoriously difficult, since it has a range of conflicting meanings (Weintraub & Kumar, 1997), with two related types of boundary in particular overlapping: the boundary between public and private space (a boundary which turns on the question of what is publicly accessible) and the boundary between public and private issues (which turns on what types of issue need, or do not need, to be resolved collectively). In our research, we have been primarily interested in the second type of boundary. Our working assumption has been that the public/private boundary in this sense remains meaningful in spite of many other levels of disagreement over the content and definition of politics. There is no space to defend this working assumption, but we would suggest that even political theory that emphasizes the fluidity and multivalence of the public/private boundary still ends up by reaffirming its significance (for example, Geuss, 2001). To summarize, when in this project we talk of '*public*' connection, we mean by 'public' things or issues regarded as of shared concern, not purely private concern, matters that in principle citizens *need* to discuss in a world of limited resources (Taylor, 2004). Our understanding of the public/private boundary has not however been prescriptive. The point of our research has been to ask people: 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 produce a diary for 3 months during 2004 that reflected on those questions; 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 June 2005. The survey provided data on media consumption, attitudes to media and politics, and public actions, and also the contexts in which all of these occur, allowing the diary data to be 'triangulated'. Crucial to our method was combining self-produced data (cf Bird, 2003) – tracing respondents' own reflections as they developed under the pressures of everyday life and alongside changing public events – and semi-structured interviews, conducted not just in advance of the diaries but after their completion, when the diarists could be invited to reflect on the accuracy and meaning of their reflections. Our idea, against the grain of so much political science that is exclusively based on dominated by survey methodology, was that we needed to listen to respondents' own voices produced and recorded in their own time.

Diary methodology

The diary literature

The use of diary methodology in social science research goes back to the 1920s⁷. Time-use diaries became established as the most prominent form from the 1960s, and time-use research achieved broader prominence in the 1980s.⁸ However, by the 1970s, the limitations of time-use diaries were already acknowledged (De Grazia, 1962; Robinson & Converse, 1972). Criticisms of time-use diaries focused on low response rates, their reliance on clock-oriented time, so overriding the subjective experience of time (Gershuny & Sullivan, 1998) respondents' difficulty in reliably estimating time actually spent on habitual activities, and those diaries' crudeness as analytic tools – especially the inability to generate accounts of simultaneous events, and the arbitrariness of the relative importance assigned to the various tasks involved. Nonetheless, the countervailing benefits of diaries were also clear. First, data were collected closer to the time of the event reported; second, diaries produced detailed information (allowing the sociologist to refine ever more detailed questions during the course of the diary process); third, diaries could produce evidence of seasonal variations in time-use such that diary-based studies could 'control' for the season in which research took place (Fleeson et al., 2002). Most important for our research, self-produced time-diaries generated evidence about the context (social or otherwise) of everyday action that would not otherwise be available. Lively debate continues on the classic time-use diary's usefulness (Thiele et al., 2002).

Time-use, however, was only one area where diaries became an established research tool. In medical research, a substantial literature developed (Elliott, 1997; Stensland & Malterud, 1999; Thiele et al., 2002) for example to monitor individual response to drug use. This literature did not always make links with the sociological literature on time-use, but nonetheless contains useful insights. Elliott (1997), for example, provides an interesting justification for the *combined diary-interview* (that is, a diary process contextualized by a linked interview) in observing phenomena (such as patients' coping strategies) that the presence of a researcher would distort (1997, para 2.8). Elliott notes the complex interrelations between interview and diary data, with some interviewees being more predisposed than others to talk about their diary-writing (1997, para 4.3), and with the diary evidence providing a way round some patients' embarrassment at talking directly about their illness (1997, para 4.21). The relevance of these points to our own combined diary-interview will become clear later. In addition, time-diaries are used in a variety of fields including economics, social policy, criminology, anthropology and psychology.⁹

Underlying this range is a basic distinction between 'subjective' and 'objective' approaches. By contrast with the 'objective' approach so far described, researchers using a 'subjective' approach have avoided constraining the *objects* of reflection (Jones, 2000; Meth, 2003). The emphasis here is on 'the twin principles of giving voice and empowerment' (Meth 2003), which generates the 'narrative' diary style more common in ethnographic approaches where the researcher must be as unobtrusive as possible in collecting data. (More rarely, researchers augment objective time-diaries with subjective measures (Ujimoto, 1990), though most research tends to emphasize one pole or the other.) If we take, for example, the case of pain diaries (from nursing and psychology), they may in principle be either subjective or objective, since they are designed to track subjective responses to objective conditions. 'Objectivists' might argue that specific and regular prompting of responses generates more differentiated data, but Gershuny and Sullivan (2004) argue that overly prescriptive instructions or too frequent observations 'produce' the regularity they claim to measure; more subjective pain-diaries can also address broader topics (for example Keefe et al., 2001 on pain and religion).¹⁰

While the details of the medical literature do not concern us here, the underlying polarisation (between instructing diarists to report the facts without reflection, and inviting them to reflect on anything in whatever form appeals) is highly relevant to the methodological choices we faced, because we wanted through diaries to combine 'subjective' reflection with some 'objective' structure for reflection. There was little direct precedent for this particular hybrid approach, but Bell (1998), for example, discusses the interpretative structure which a researcher should impose on otherwise unstructured data. In any case, *only* such a hybrid approach (combining *some* openness with *some* structure) can track reflexive practice of a particular, rather than completely general, nature.

Diary form

Central to the methodological aims of the project was to track participants' own reflections over time about a set of themes which are complex and open to a variety of interpretations. The diary format is important in this regard as it allows the research to proceed, as far as possible, in the absence of the researchers, rather than having participants simply respond to questions or prompts. This is not to suggest that one-on-one interviews are not effective: rapport between interviewer and interviewee may produce data not otherwise accessible, for instance (Lindlof & Grodin, 1990). However, interviews have certain key limitations. Beyond the problems of overcoming the power dynamic which pervades any interview situation, there also a less detectable aspect of interviews by which responses that appear to be entirely spontaneous are inevitably structured, whether it be by anticipation of expectation or the simple need to frame a narrative. 'Researcher-absent' data (Bird 2003) does not claim or seek to remove such constraints, but rather aims, over an extended period, to access the subtle processes by which reflexivity emerges. Thus, while a diarist's stance on a particular issue may not be explicitly reversed, the complex, sometimes conflicted ways in which opinions are formed and questioned can be tracked.

The 'Public Connection' diaries were kept for up to twelve weeks, book-ended by interviews and followed by focus groups in most of the recruitment areas. This meant that the contact period with diarists sometimes extended to a year, often leading to diarists expressing significant insight into their own consumption and reflective practices. Some thought they watched more news than they actually do, for example, while others gave more negative observations of their issue selection – Stuart (61, retired bank manager in northern English city), for one, noticed towards the end that 'you tend to harp on' about the same issues. Others went further, writing at a second-order level about *why* they followed certain stories and lost interest in others, and how their opinions formed and changed with time.

The physical layout of the diary pages, designed to encourage open reflection and avoid prescription, is shown in Figure 1.

<Figure 1 about here>

No instructions were given as to length or style, other than that diarists should write in whatever way best suited them. This led to a range of approaches and voices, from literary to conversational, and from journalistic to polemical – the implications and contextualizing potential of which we return to below. Weekly submission was also intended to encourage reflection. Daily diaries are certainly more common in social scientific research (however, see Havens & Schervish, 2001, for a weekly diary precedent), but the literature suggests that boredom and frustration are likely to accompany any daily diary of more than a few weeks. As well as the nature of the themes necessitating a longer period of participation, the extended period also allowed us to track the consequences for diarists' public connection of any major changes in personal circumstances.

Contextualizing interviews and focus groups

The interviews were designed to give context to the diaries and control for artificiality and performance. The first interview emphasized the openness of the project's themes and our desire to hear *their* voice rather than anything informed by our own assumptions. On the practical level it also gathered logistical and personal details – living arrangements, neighborhood and so on – to form a backdrop against which the diaries could be read. We stressed that we did hold any particular medium or genre to be more important than any other, and indeed that we also wanted to know if the media in general were not important to the diarist. This led to some diaries where the media are barely mentioned, and others where the relative importance of mediated and non-mediated topics was weighed.

The second interview was designed, in part, to allow for us to establish how typical the participation period had been for the diarists. Perhaps more importantly, however, it gave diarists the opportunity to explain the experience of writing the diary – where it fitted into their everyday practices, how it was put together (spontaneously or cumulatively, for instance), and whether they felt bored or resentful or more confident and time went on. It also allowed us to understand the thinking underlying issue selection and omission – whether there was an element of meeting perceived expectation, for example, or whether a particular subject is for the diarist intuitively a public issue. Finally, focus groups were carried out in order to bring together diarists who had so far been isolated in the research process, to see to what extent that social context influenced their reflections. The aim was to stimulate open discussion around the issues they and other diarists raised, and to that extent our focus groups were very different from the classic use of focus groups in media research, aimed at testing how audiences interpret particular media texts.

Demographic factors

We were aware from the beginning that the data generated by the diary method would vary according to demographic factors. Bird (2003) suggests, for instance, that women are more likely than men to be comfortable with keeping a diary. The sample had a slight under-representation of men under fifty, though this may be explicable by time constraints. We considered alternatives to the word 'diary' – 'report', 'consultation', 'reflection' and so on – but decided that each has its own conceptual baggage which again may be structured according to demographic factors. The term 'diary' best summed up the personally-styled, self-analytical, informal recording of thoughts and actions that we wanted. That said, there were gendered variations in style: women referred more frequently to social contexts and wrote with a greater sense of narrative complicity, while men were more likely (though there were exceptions) to present an issue and their opinion on it more

formally. The variety of data gathered suggests that the diary format successfully enabled a disparate range of people to articulate their reflections in a way that made sense to them.

Diary medium

Participants could choose to write, type, email or orally record their diaries, according to what would most easily fit into their routine. This influenced the style of diaries considerably: email, for instance, was more popular among younger participants and those who worked full-time, but the style of a message sent out during a lunch-break was markedly different from a diary written on a Sunday night from clippings collected during the week. Diaries spoken into voice recorders tended to be less structured, but often saw the diarist reflect on their relation to a particular issue in great depth. The recorders were also useful in broadening the sample demographically (all three who used this option were non-white). We gave diarists the option of having their diaries sent back to them before the second interview, leading to a further level of reflexivity. Some were genuinely surprised by what they had written, while others expressed a clear sense of how their diaries developed over a period of several months. The drop-out rate was low for a project of this duration: only five out of forty-two recruited diarists pulled out without making a significant contribution, while an overwhelming majority found a style of diary production that they could maintain.

Performance and Discursive Context

However at ease a diarist might be in making sense of the themes of connection and disconnection, being asked to make these reflections explicit was always going to be artificial to some degree and invoke certain expectations about what was required. That is, reflecting on the project's themes of orientation and connection is not a 'natural' process for most, and even though participants were asked to relate their thoughts to their everyday experiences, there will necessarily be something 'foreign' about it. This also applies to the methodology itself: only one of our diarists (Arvind, 40, former bakery worker in southern English city) had kept anything like a diary before. At a broader level it can also be argued that *any* narrative recorded in installments over time will acquire an artificially stable, abstracted narrative voice. Hirschauer (2001) terms this over-contextualization, and suggests that it is an inevitable consequence of both structured reflection and a context which appears to require narrative consistency. Practically, feedback – sufficient to allay feelings of insecurity or to limit routinization, but not so much as to appear as prescription or criticism – helped to control these factors. Our reflexive aim was not to strip away the artificiality of the diaries to reveal the 'true' or 'natural' voice underneath the performance, but rather to interpret and contextualize the performance which accompanies both reflection on the project's themes and the writing or recording process itself.

The first step in meeting this aim is to recognize the different forms that performance takes. Some of our participants treated the diary as a literary endeavor, and accordingly set about constructing a distinctive narrative voice. Harry (69, retired information systems manager in west London suburb), for example, wrote about his father's involvement in local council politics when he was young, as a way of painting a vivid context for his own thoughts on politics which followed. This does not imply that Harry's contributions should be interpreted as only literary, nor indeed that his father's influence is key. It reveals rather that his reflections tend to be located in long-term context, weighed against past experience rather than reacting immediately to public issues, as other diarists were more likely to do.

Others appeared to recite the reflective processes of specific types of news media: one typed a headline verbatim from a newspaper, and responded to it in the style of a tabloid editorial, while

some wrote in a more formal style or actively questioned whether their writing was appropriate for an academic study. Some of the diaries came to resemble personal correspondences with individual researchers, and a good proportion appear entirely unfiltered, unconstrained by formal structure and candid. Even in the 'stream of consciousness' cases, however, a degree of artificiality is guaranteed by the fact of their being asked to reflect on specific themes. As with the more recognizable forms of performance, the aim was again to note and interpret any apparent artificiality so as to establish criteria for drawing broader trends from the diaries. We emphasized that we had no expectation in them of news engagement or public orientation; since the overall levels of interest in news and politics (and public actions) registered amongst our diarists and our survey sample are broadly comparable, this suggests our strategy was successful. By contrast, diarists who displayed the opposite tendency – alienation from news and public issues – might also have been performing in a cynical mode in order to meet expectations, perhaps a perceived social expectation. This was where our *multiple* data sources were crucial: we were able to look for consistency across diaries, interviews, focus groups and diarists' accounts of their own practice, and pick up performance elements in one setting not reproduced elsewhere. Again, the task of the researcher is not to discount performative modes of reflection, but to catalogue them and their links to other practices and expressed opinions, both within the diarist's own words and the rest of the sample.

We also considered it important to establish diarists' discursive context, for two reasons. First, the presence or absence of a regular context for talking about issues may be an important factor in contemporary democracies, as Eliasoph (1998) has argued. Second, it goes some way to explaining how a diarist's reflections are enacted (or not) in everyday practice, and thus contribute to the evidential data of the diary. We asked all our diarists whether they talked to anyone else about the issues they raised with us in their diary, and asked them, if possible, to note this talk in the diary itself. It was found that the vast majority of participants report talking, including talking about issues, on a regular basis – thirty-three out of thirty-seven diarists. There are some interesting cases where diarists explicitly complained about the lack of 'serious' or 'relevant' conversation with their families, friends or colleagues, or where a diarist might make a point of stressing that conversation with friends is strictly and deliberately unconnected from news stories or 'public' issues. This aside, however, it is clear that social context for reflection, discussion and action is an important dimension of orientation to a public world, and it becomes necessary to establish criteria for evidence of this context. It might be argued that there is a socially more acceptable response to prompts in interviews: in brief, social interaction is easily overstated. The complexity lies in the discursive structure that individual participants give their diaries. In the more 'narrative' accounts, diarists use social context to lend an entry color; this in itself is evidence enough of discourse, but its absence in other diaries is not necessarily proof of an absence of discursive context. Likewise with general satisfaction, several diarists were aware that the form of their diaries was making them sound more like 'angry old men' than they actually saw themselves, as Paul contextualizes his comments about the health service:

I'm being an angry old man again but recent personal things, I mean my mother-in-law, she was, had to go in hospital recently and it seemed terrible. (Paul, 55, company secretary in rural Midlands, second interview)

In response to these potential distortions, it becomes necessary to construct social context and satisfaction carefully: while all respondents might say in the abstract that they talk about issues socially, only some will *connect* specific issues with discursive interaction, for instance. Likewise, while there may be an absence of references to conversation in some diaries, it is only in specific cases that the absence is made explicit and tied to broader feelings of frustration, say, or alienation. It is a matter, then, of collecting and collating explicit evidence of *links* between social interaction or isolation on the one hand, and reflections, consumptions or practices on the other.

A far clearer picture of discursive context often emerged in the second interview, when participants were asked if they spoke not only of issues but of the diary process itself to their family, friends and colleagues. In some cases – especially those where social encounters were weaved in seamlessly with commentary in the diaries – this was a natural point of discussion. For one diarist in particular (Susan, 62, office manager for a retirement home in a northern English city), mention of being involved in the project energized an engaged discursive context which did not otherwise exist within a leisure group. For those that did not speak about the diary to anyone else, there was sometimes a sense that expressing views in the diary was easier, because it was semi-directed and sanctioned, than talking in their social networks – whether through lack of confidence or lack of interested others. The lack of a satisfactory context in which to discuss issues was commented upon by four diarists, and indeed doing the diary was seen as a means of expression or outlet which was otherwise precluded from them. This points not only to the phenomenon of alienation, but to a *reflexive* alienation which is one of the key themes this project attempts to investigate.

The Evidential Value of the Public Connection Diaries

Having discussed the methodological issues we faced in interpreting and contextualizing the diary data, let us now turn to the particular forms that collected data about media consumption and public connection or disconnection took. First, the weekly cycle of the diaries produced a particular range of data, different from what one would expect from daily reports. Diaries in our project were usually produced at the end of the week although, in several cases, on the basis of notes or cuttings accumulated throughout the week. This meant that producing the data already involved a higher level of sifting by memory and subsequent reflection, and even the most report-like diaries involved a degree of generalization and typification:

This week again has been mainly news items found in the *Mail, Metro Newspaper* (part of the Mail Group) and television. I've also read various articles from computer magazine *ComputerActive*. I've listened to various Radio Shows, mainly on Radio 2 and local shows, most of the "music and topics" variety. (Henry, 52, insurance underwriter in northern English city, diary)

The priority was to access people's processes of reflecting on media use rather than cataloguing consumption habits, and the more indirect style of the weekly diary produced a rich sense of how differently people use the media, both to orientate themselves to a public world, and for purposes not related to public issues. A comparison of two diarists (Andrea, 25, a children's nurse in rural Midlands; and Patrick, 52, a warehouse manager in a southern English city) whose reflexivity was in the mid-range of our diarists illustrates the subtlety and complexity of different forms of reflection, consumption and connection. Both of these diarists had a fairly terse writing style, perhaps due to time constraints, and the time-frame of these diaries overlapped for ten of the twelve weeks they contributed. However, the ways in which each diarist used the media differed sharply: Andrea was weakly connected through the media to a public world, while Patrick was clearly oriented towards an unmediated public world.

Andrea's diary consistently took the form of brief comments on lead stories (often headlines), offering no link to an underlying issue; the interpretative context was almost always the media's latest framing of that story. While she followed media in general terms, in only one case did Andrea say in the diary that she was following a particular *issue* or story (a short-lived scandal involving local footballers). Andrea offered in her diary no criticism of the factual basis of media coverage, although she often commented on the moral appropriateness of a story being aired in public. The following illustrates her narrative form:

Main topic of discussion with family, friends and work friends was programme 'The Foetus.'
Very emotive topic of abortion, mixed views from people. Programme was made to show

truth and because topic is supposedly so hush-hush, but I felt it was unnecessary. Did not change my own personal views but images shown were very unpleasant.

By contrast, Patrick's diary, while even less expansive, always presented the context of a preexisting issue in which a particular item emerged. Media as such, and specific media sources, were rarely referred to: instead he referred to 'issues', 'debates' and 'talking points locally'. He also criticized media bias underlying the factual basis of several media stories. This is an extract from the same week as Andrea's above:

There has been a lot of debate this week about the proposed referendum, people are drawing their own conclusions on how they are going to vote. Without any clear information about what they are voting for. Clearly the media is going to have a large part to play, as they portray the details for us to make up our minds. The majority of us are in a quandary because of the political bias of the media, with certain newspapers their allegiance is to certain parties.

There is a clear contrast here between media use whose rhythms appear shaped purely by media flows, and media use that appears directed by an existing position on issues that the media are presenting. These distinct forms of use were consistent throughout both diaries, and fully corroborated in interviews. Andrea explained that because of her irregular work shifts and young child, her default mode of media consumption was 'catching up' on programs she had missed. She said that she did not track local or national news actively, and when asked in the second interview whether there was any one issues she was currently following, she responded in the negative. Her partner brought the newspaper (the *Sun*) each evening, and often tried to direct her news consumption:

I mean as soon as I sit down to read the paper, like I say, my partner reads it at work and he'll come in flipping pages and say, look at that story and drive you mad cause I just sat down to try and read it myself and he'll say look at that. (first interview)

Indeed her media consumption overall was not something either she or her friends ever considered ('I couldn't actually tell you what newspapers [my friends read] or if any of my friends read newspapers'); it was taken-for-granted *background* to the rest of life.

By contrast, Patrick had a considerably more critical attitude towards the media. He made it clear that a proportion of his consumption was purely for relaxation, but made the distinction that he disliked media genres that he considered 'far from reality', such as soaps and crime dramas. He preferred 'factual' programs, always watching the television news, listening to the local news and reading a national paper – all linked to his strong interest in politics and both the local and national level. Patrick also differed in his reflections on keeping the diary. While Andrea enjoyed it and always found a range of stories to comment upon, for Patrick the process became tedious because 'the news was predominantly about Iraq'. This frustrated his desire to give a report that was both varied and actual and he was specifically frustrated because the Iraq war was a major issue on which, as a long-time Labour supporter, he disagreed with the New Labour government. Unlike Andrea, he had in advance a sense of what issues he would have liked to be covered more during the diary phase:

The other interesting issue come out of it was Gaddafi and Blair meeting. And I was surprised it was that small in the news to be perfectly honest cause it was just sort of one day it was there and then Pow! It was gone. (second interview)

The issue-orientation of his media use, in any case, was clear. Both diarists, if to varying degrees, were connected via media to a world beyond the private, then, but in very different ways. Not only did public issues play a different part in each diarist's 'public world' – for Andrea in a way that was completely subsumed in media narratives with a weak link to public orientation; for Patrick through a strong link to his broader engagement with the public world – but their media use was differently shaped and directed.

Criteria for orientation to a public world or its absence

Next, let us turn to how we interpreted data as establishing the absence or presence of orientation to a public world. First, it is worth emphasizing that our diary method aimed to avoid imposing pre-established criteria for what counts as ‘public’ and instead investigated how diarists themselves understood their relation to whatever counted as ‘public’ to them, and how that relation was enacted in everyday practice. Certain types of engagement with, or disengagement from, an assumed public world, may generate little in the way of concrete evidence, precisely because they are seen as unproblematic and taken-for-granted, whereas an orientation that is limited or conflicted, for example because of a lack of discursive or action context, may be more clearly signposted.

One useful criterion for establishing orientation is the absence or presence of a *frame* through which the diarist interprets media or public events. To this end diarists’ descriptive or explanatory language, including their points of reference or sources of authority, were catalogued. We also looked for the *links* diarists made both between topics and from issues to possibilities of discursive activity or public action. This approach also proved helpful in resolving one of the more complex interpretative challenges we faced: distinguishing evidence of mere regularity in media consumption from evidence of the *active* following of an issue, that is, an active orientation. In these cases it was a matter of establishing what links a diarist regularly made, if any, between the issues they mentioned and any other context (another issue or reflection, a social context, or an action of any sort, whether private or public). It seemed significant that some diarists mentioned topics without mentioning or even implying any wider context, while others routinely made such connections (for more discussion see Authors forthcoming: chapter 6).

Finally, care had to be taken when interpreting the reflexivity which emerged to varying degrees in the diaries. Explicit self-reflection tended to occur in the context of *conflicted* orientation: most commonly, self-awareness of a knowledge lack on an issue, or frustration at the lack of an action context. Observed reflexivity can, however, also be indicative of an element of artificiality or meeting perceived expectations. Signs of self-discounting were also common in some diarists but could be purely habitual, rather than providing substantive evidence of a diarist’s disengagement. Equally, a *lack* of reflexivity (about how a diarist understands, interprets and acts on an issue) requires careful interpretation: it was perhaps too tempting to interpret a lack of registered interest in public issues as alienation, when it may rather be a sign of a distant relationship to the public world which is unproblematic for that diarist (see Authors forthcoming, chapter 7). Our approach, as with performance, was to establish context and patterns of reflexivity, not relying heavily on evidence of reflexivity or its absence to draw direct conclusions about a diarist’s orientation towards or turning away from a public world, but rather being aware of how observed reflexivity may contribute to an overall sense of a participant’s relationship to a public world.

Conclusion

We have shown in detail the methodological benefits of the combined diary-interview (that is a long-term open-ended and self-produced diary, contextualized by semi-structured interviews with the diarist before and after the time of diary production) in generating a subtle and multi-perspectival account of how particular citizens experience and reflect upon their citizenship in the context of everyday life. The aim of such a method is to take seriously respondents’ status as thinking individuals, an aim often neglected in mainstream political science, but highlighted in important work on its margins (Gamson, 1992). The diary method of course brings an artificiality of its own, but the point of the hybrid diary-interview method is to provide multiple angles from which the artificial constructions that shape the process of diary production can be registered and systematically analyzed, in some case by posing this question directly to the diarists themselves.

The result we believe is to contribute in a practical way to research into the dilemmas and contradictions of contemporary citizenship which for example Touraine's work (2000) has done much to explore, in particular through an account of the individual strategies of citizens to develop practices that make sense of their situation and its ambiguities. We have not had space here to discuss in more detail our substantive results (Authors forthcoming) which discuss those ambiguities and uncertainties in more detail. We have however, we hope, established the usefulness of the methodological approach we have adopted.

So far we have applied this approach in the context of a project looking at the public orientations of the general range of UK citizens. It would equally be possible to apply the method to more specific groups (those already involved in civic, political or media activism; or those in disadvantaged communities, perhaps best approached through more local community links). Our method will also, we hope, prove useful to researchers in other countries, facilitating comparative research into current levels of democratic engagement and citizen reflexivity. Indeed our methodology was applied in very much the same form by a US project (Authors forthcoming) based at the University of [deleted for anonymity] with diaries produced around the time of the US 2004 presidential election. More generally the methodological strategy adopted here will, we hope, open up paths for other researchers into the complex and contradictory experiences of contemporary citizenship.

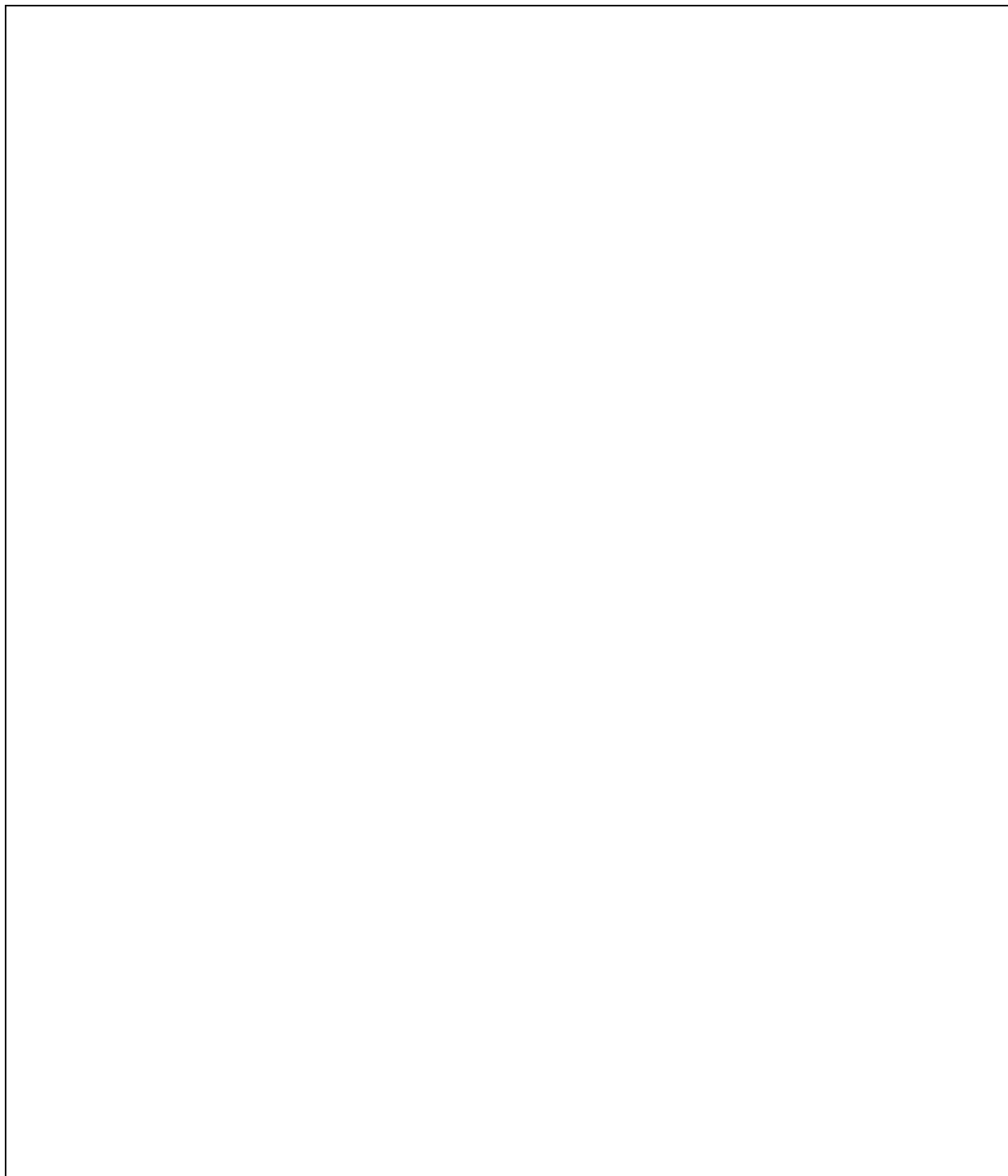
Figure 1: diary format

Diarist No: __

Week No: __

MEDIA CONSUMPTION AND THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC CONNECTION

Date: / / 2004



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Notes

¹ Cf. Bennett (1998); Turner (2001).

² For an interesting recent policy-focussed report that highlights such concerns, see Power Report (2006).

³ For detailed consideration of this and other related theoretical literatures, see Authors (forthcoming 2007, chapter 1).

⁴ Also in the social policy field, cf. Lister et al. (2003).

⁵ Cf. Lefebvre (1991) on the power-related ambiguity of 'everyday life'.

⁶ We gratefully acknowledge support under the ESRC/ AHRC Cultures of Consumption programme (project number [deleted for anonymity]): for fuller discussion of the project see Authors (forthcoming 2007) and [website].

⁷ Federally funded studies of (mainly rural) women in the US were prominent early examples: for discussion, see Gershuny & Sullivan (1998), Vanek (1974).

⁸ For discussion see Gershuny and Sullivan (1998); Gershuny (2004).

⁹ Especially significant are the edited collections of Campbell and Converse (1972) and Szalai (1972).

¹⁰ See generally Stensland and Malterud (1999), Griffiths and Jordan (1998); Schwebel et al. (2002); Cruise et al. (1996); Grant et al. (2002).