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**Connection or Disconnection?
Tracking The Mediated Public Sphere In Everyday Life**

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Connection or Disconnection? Tracking The Mediated Public Sphere In Everyday Life

The decades-long debate on media and the public sphere has primarily been normative, rather than empirical, in character. We especially lack empirical research detailing how the mediated public sphere is enacted (*if it is*) in everyday life. There has been, we would argue, a significant gap in studying the experiential dimensions of citizenship (what it actually *feels* like to be a citizen (cf. LeBlanc, 1999)): indeed 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?

Deliberative democracy theory (Benhabib 1996; Cohen 1996), growing out of a critical engagement with Habermas's model, lies somewhere in this gap, as does the tradition of analysing the relations between conversation, public opinion and the mass media stemming from Tarde's early social psychology (Katz 1992). We are interested in the possibility that, as several scholars now argue, the problem with contemporary democracies lies in the displacement of public discussion: (Mayhew 1997; Eliasoph 1998). Not everyone, of course, is so negative. The large literature on Internet-based civic practice is well-known (Graber et al. 2004; Kahn and Kellner 2004). The American sociologist Michael Schudson argues more generally (1998: 298-299) that 'civic participation now takes place everywhere'. But significant concerns about the distribution of opportunities to participate in deliberation remain.

More recently, writers have begun to move beyond theoretical models of deliberative democracy towards detailing more precisely the practical preconditions for an effective democratic politics, bringing out the mediating role of everyday thoughts, conversation and activities that may, under certain conditions, bridge the private and public spheres (Livingstone 2005). Drawing on a well-known but in many ways unsatisfactory earlier literature (Almond and Verba, 1963), Peter Dahlgren has recently re-examined the notion of 'civic culture' as the key concept underlying the daily experience of citizenship (Dahlgren, 2003). What is most striking about Dahlgren's model of civic culture - a 'circuit' of six interlocking processes: values, affinity, knowledge, practices, identities and discussion (see chapter xx) - is the multiple *and often uncertain* relations it suggests between the imagining and understanding of civic life and its practice (both acts and talk). Since talk is only one of the model's dimensions, it is the articulations of talk to other elements that is crucial, as we shall examine in what follows.

The UK 'Public Connection' project¹

Our research question in the 'Public Connection' project 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).

These assumptions are detachable from each other. Some believe the first without the second, because they argue public connection is unlikely to be served by people's use of media (Robert Putnam's (2000) well-known *Bowling Alone* thesis takes that position in relation to television). Generally however it seems to us that many writers assume both, even if only tacitly - or at least that is our contention (there is no space to defend our view of the literature here). Consequently, our concern is with the empirical question: can we find evidence for those assumptions in how UK citizens think about their own practice?

The first assumption is important because it underlies most models of democracy: informed consent to political authority requires that people's attention to the public world can

be assumed, or at least one can assume an *orientation* to the public world which from time to time results in actual attention. When in this project we talk 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.²

We have been careful not to assume that a decline in attention to ‘politics’ in the traditional sense means lack of attention to ‘politics’ in general, let alone apathy. People’s understanding of what constitutes politics may be changing (Bennett 1998). The *media* landscape that may enable public connection is also changing. The multiplication and intense interlinking of media and media formats through digital convergence may lead to an intensification of public connection, as people become more skilful at adapting their media consumption to suit their everyday habits and pressures. Or it may lead to the fragmentation of the public sphere into a mass of specialist ‘sphericules’ (Gitlin, 1998) that can no longer connect sufficiently to form a shared public world. In this context, the question of where and how, and for what purpose, talk oriented to a public world occurs (including talk that might fit within the theoretical model of a public sphere) becomes crucial.

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. But our understanding of the public/private boundary is not 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 across England 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.³

The diaries were produced weekly for up to three months. We encouraged open reflection and avoided specific signals as to what people were to comment on. The diary data are particularly complex, our intention always being that the diary material would be ‘triangulated’ by interview data. For ease of exposition, we will draw mainly from the interview data in this chapter. Each diarist was interviewed face to face in their home by a member of the research team, both before and after the completion of the diaries, using a fairly open-ended interview schedule focused on questions of media consumption, daily activities, and political or civic interests. First, however, we will provide some context for our discussion of individual diarists by reviewing briefly the overall trends of our nationwide survey.

The Mediated Public Sphere in Action: survey background

In our survey age is by far the most significant demographic influence on media consumption, though class and gender do play a part. While newspaper readership does not vary according to class, television viewing is much higher among people from classes C2DE (manual laborers and the unemployed), and internet use is very significantly higher among those from ABC1 households (business, professional and administrative classes) and also among under-35 respondents. Men are more likely to read newspapers and access the internet than women, but read books less on average. Notably, radio consumption is not dependent on any demographic factor.

The types of public issue people say that they ‘keep up with’ vary more by demographic than any other factor – especially by age and gender – although some issues such as the environment (70% of all respondents), crime (67%), Iraq (63%) and health (66%) are heavily reported across all groups. The under 35s report following music, fashion, celebrity and reality

shows more than older respondents, who favour more traditional issue categories such as Westminster politics, the economy and local politics/ services. In terms of socioeconomic status, people from ABC1 households are more likely to follow international politics, the economy, health and European debates. More men than women follow trades unions, sports, international events, Iraq, the economy, Westminster and European debates, while women are more likely to follow celebrity gossip, health issues, fashion and reality shows, confirming broader arguments about the gendering of the public sphere.

Respondents overwhelmingly report that watching the news is important and a regular practice for them, while also agreeing that there is often too much media and that politics is too complicated. However age makes a difference: a feeling of duty to follow the news increases with age, as do practices of regular news consumption and understanding of issues. As to class, those from C2DE households exhibit a distinctly higher tendency to agree that there is no point in following the news, that politics is too complicated and that they have no influence over political decisions. Men are more likely to say they have a good understanding of issues and actively compared news sources, while more women than men agree that politics is too complicated to understand. People from ABC1 households tend overall to find media relevant, and agree that different sources of news give different accounts of events, while those from C2DE households are more likely to agree that media are irrelevant to their lives. Respondents over 55 and from ABC1 households are far more likely to agree that they know where they could find the information they needed about issues important to them. Once again, the general features of the mediated public sphere seemed stratified by gender, class and age.

Finally, as to talk, 85 percent of our respondents say they regularly talk to friends and 72 percent to family about issues. More broadly, we identified social expectation (which implies some form of discursive context in which issues are discussed, and in which a level of proficiency is expected) as an important contributing factor, if not for public actions generally (beyond the minimal action of voting), then certainly for engagement with the public world. In addition, although there is no room to discuss the detail here, we found that news engagement (not just news consumption but the 'value' of keeping up with the news) was a significant contributor to political interest.

Our sense, then, from our survey data, is not only do people acknowledge social reinforcements to follow a public world through media, but that engagement with media makes an important contribution, alongside the expected demographic factors, to explaining political interest. This broadly positive picture is useful context for the more uneven picture we gained from the qualitative data obtained from our diarists.

The Mediated Public Sphere in action: the diary phase data

Our data from the diary phase, as with our survey, covered a wide variety of themes, of which talk and the enactment of a mediated public sphere was only one. We were however interested from the outset in people's opportunities, through talk, to link their individual practices of media consumption to what other people do and think.

Most of our diarists said they talked about the public-type issues that they raised with us in their diaries: this broadly confirms our survey findings, but with an often fascinating degree of detail. For example this account of almost a mini-public sphere in a West London newsagents' shop which one diarist ran:

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. . . So we discuss all sorts of things. (woman, 51, shop owner, suburban West London)

There were many other positive accounts of talk with family friends and at work about public-related issues.

However, the detailed picture is more mixed. For some people the absence of people with whom to discuss the type of issues they wrote about was a constraint, for example this man with a masters degree in politics:

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 . . . it's quite scary to see how people are disinterested in it, particularly this generation. (man, 23, university administrator, West London suburb)

In some cases it was a more general social network that was missing. These are some issues to be borne in mind when considering the four diarists that follow.

They have been chosen to give an insight, through two contrasting pairings, of how possibilities for talk are always embedded in the context and constraints of people's everyday lives. We have chosen pairings whose diarists share some important things in common (the first pair - gender, retired status and at least a reasonable degree of privilege in socioeconomic terms; the second pair - gender, being at work and poor), while being sharply contrasted in other ways. In this way, we hope to take further the broader points that emerged from our survey discussion.

First case study

We first want to contrast two retired men,⁴ both from north of England suburbs who had very different relations to the mediated public sphere.

John, already quoted, was a retired chief executive of a major subsidiary of a publicly quoted financial services company. An early retirement package enabled him to buy a medium size house in an elite suburb of a major Northern city. While he was working, he had no time for media except the financial news; it was only in retirement that he had the time to consume news more broadly. His clear preference was for newspapers, with television being mainly relaxation. He strongly disliked new forms of television entertainment such as reality TV and celebrity-related fiction - 'every time you see the trailers for all these programmes, it's not life remotely as we live it' - and required media to keep him informed about the world:

And I'm just interested in what happens to the financial world in general, just to see what's developing. And I'm not a political animal but I'm interested in the country and the politics of the country and so forth. And worldwide events. I like to keep up to date and see what's going on. And I find that the newspaper generally gives you a more balanced coverage than television.

Expressed clearly here is a sense of a 'world' that exists independently of media, about which media, if carefully selected, provide a flow of information. The financial aspects of that world were something in which John still regarded himself as involved:

I read the business section everyday and I read all of it, partially because I'm interested and there's people who I still know and so forth. But also I still have money invested and I'm interested in how that's doing.

The 'public connection' sustained for him by media is not one *generated* by media. The same was true of the other dimension of his public world, his voluntary service as a magistrate judge in a local magistrates' court. This role required him to keep informed about aspects of government policy about which he had previously known little. It was a further incentive to consume media news more broadly.

Alfred's overall orientation to the mediated public sphere was quite different. He was a printer who had done well from his job and who lived in retirement in a comfortable but not elite suburb of another major Northern city. His manual occupation carried with it into

retirement no status within a wider public world, nor did he have any official voluntary role in retirement: his occupations were being a grandfather and everyday tasks: 'household activities you know, quite boring really'. In terms of media, his preference was for television and radio, not newspapers. Like John however he was interested in the factual dimension of media:

I like documentaries, I like the history, the history channel, I like anything to do with nature, geography, things like this stimulate me. I need to be stimulated and drama in particular, particularly, doesn't stimulate me because I don't, and for that reason I don't really read fiction. . . . To me it's, I like reading about real people and what people have done.

He also took great pleasure in talk radio, especially one presenter on a local radio station:

I'm an avid listener now. . . . He finds the alternative argument, whether he believes it or not, whether it's his thoughts on something or not, if somebody comes along waffling about certain issues he will very, very quickly find the alternative argument to it and argue it out with them and he very often wins. He more often than not he wins and he'll tell somebody eventually that frankly you're a pillock and get off my show, you know. (laughs) . . . Yeah, it's quite informative.

For Alfred, then, the public world to which media sustain his attention *was* the world presented by media: he has no independent access to a public world. That does not mean he had no interest in taking action on public issues: he intended to lobby for speed restrictions on his road to protect schoolchildren, and he had a civic sense that, if no one else did, he at least would sweep up the rubbish and leaves on the street near his house. But these were small scale actions, carried out with no link to anyone else. They did not alter the fact that for him the world of public issues was accessed almost entirely through media.

How were these broad contrasts reflected in these diarists' opportunities for talk themselves about public issues (vicarious talk alone cannot meet the participative ideal that underpins the public sphere model). Here there are both sharp differences and similarities between the two diarists. John, as we saw, was disappointed in his children's lack of interest in the public world (at least as he defined that world); nor it seems could he generally talk to his wife about that world, although it seems they did debate the rights and wrongs of the 2003 Iraq war . Other general opportunities for talk were limited to occasional discussions with friends: he was involved in various amateur sports networks but here talk about public issues was largely excluded:

The only topic that comes up when we play golf, holidays and that sort of thing tend to be talked about, but the only other thing and it invariably comes up is somebody will comment on something in the paper, involving crime, and the question of crime and punishment comes up. Ahh, people do talk about that.

Similarly 'conversations with neighbours tend to be trivial'. He did however have one significant outlet for discussion on public issues, the times before or between cases at the magistrates court:

I've discussed a lot at the magistrates. I usually go down and get there about half an hour before the court starts and everyone has a cup of coffee and you have a chat and there's about an hour and a half over lunch time and inevitably you lunch and generally talk to the people you've been sitting with. But you get a good cross section of views there cause there's all sorts of people magistrates. And it's very interesting to hear people's views.

These discussions involved, he said, a wide range of classes and occupations and provided clear opportunities to display knowledge about public issues.

This was what Alfred, equally clearly, lacked. He made no mention of discussions about public issues with family, even though he appeared close to his family. Most of his friends were at a local club he visited once a week, but there he had no scope to raise his interests in the environment, the Iraq war, pensions reform or the dangers of religious extremism:

Well, there's a lot of sport talked about you know and I'm not particularly sporty so I can't involve myself too much with that and a lot of people talk about holidays. I find that type of talk very shallow. I tend to back off a bit, it's not deep enough for me. I don't have great, I'm not really endowed with great wisdom or original thought or even much of a wordsmith really but I do find certain subjects a bit shallow.

It is easy to see why he appreciated the chance through talk radio to listen in on debate: the only time he had phoned in though was to ask about how to clean a copper kettle!

In spite of this crucial difference in John's and Alfred's relations to the mediated public sphere, there are similarities when we consider, finally, the links between talk and action. It is worth noting first, with Putnam in mind, that both were in clubs or networks that were in decline. There is no evidence however that this decline was of any consequence for these diarists' opportunities for or likelihood of political or civic action. In any case any thoughts of public action were *for both* cut across by a broader lack of political efficacy:

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 square and spout but nobody's take a bit of notice, would they? (John, Northern suburb, focus group, January 2005)

with the best will in the world sometimes you start to get an apathy about it, a weariness of it. A point where it comes to saying what more can you say, what more you know when you feel so, I think one of the troubles is that you feel so helpless as though you or I feel I could do something about it and I know damn well I can't and so as a result I can do nothing, whatever I think or say or do to anybody or write about is not going to make a scrap of difference and then you start, oh, what the hell. (Alfred, second interview)

What should we conclude from this diarist pairing? First, that media may to some degree provide opportunities for remote connection to debate that may compensate for a lack of opportunities to engage in face-to-face discussion; second, people may differ sharply in whether their public world exists independently of media, or emerges principally out of the practice of media consumption; third, regardless of the opportunities for engagement provided directly by certain roles or networks or virtually by media, any link to action about public issues may be cut across by an independent lack of efficacy. The habit of regularly consuming the news may, of course, still remain, provided it has been learnt in the first place; but that is much more likely among our older diarists than those younger.

Second case study

How much does public connection draw on a socially privileged position, in terms of age, gender or socioeconomic advantage? Let us consider a very different pairing, that of two working class women. Although from different generations, Kylie and Jane both have rather few material or social resources. Kylie is 24, unemployed since having her baby, though she does occasional office work nearby her home in a large South London council block. Jane, who lives in a small, relatively poor town in the South East of England, is 52, a part-time customer services assistant with adult children, one still at home, and a grandchild whom she cares for on a regular basis.

Jane's life is a reminder of the once-strong working class roots of the Labour movement in Britain, and her present disillusion with politics matches the wider decline in local labour and trade union participation. But, as her own reflections suggest, it would be unfair to label this 'apathy', for the origins of her disillusion lie in an informed critique of the changing practices of party politics. When we ask if she belongs to any groups, her answer starts with the past:

No, I used to do a lot of political, local political work... Um, I came from a really working class family. Brought up to believe in working class values and just basically went from there. And I think somebody, at one point, knocked on my mum's door, knowing that she was a [party name] voter and asked her, could they have the committee rooms in her house. And it went from there basically.

Being among the most politically active of our diarists, Jane recounts a life of strong political commitment, enacted locally but connected to the national. By contrast, Kylie seems, at first, typical of today's supposedly apathetic youth, especially when she tells us:

I just don't really understand it and therefore it just doesn't interest me. I haven't really got an opinion on anything to do with politics.

As we get to know her better, this turns out to be far from the case. Rather, she illustrates those young people for whom what counts as 'politics' is itself changing (Barnhurst, 1998; van Zoonen, 2001). For Jane, politics means traditional party politics. But though this is just what Kylie rejects, she does care, passionately, about the politics of global justice, while Jane expresses relatively little interest in the global.

Thus Kylie, sitting in her flat all day with her baby, consciously feels herself part of a suffering world, and her public connection is strongly emotional, framed by the 'global compassion' narrative of international news (Hoijer, 2004; Michalski et al, 2002). As she sees it, she has a responsibility,

... to *know*, yeah, to be aware of it and it's just all the children in Africa starving and the story I read ages ago, I think I actually mentioned it in there when he [her son] was first born about a little girl who was left on the roadside, yeah that really, even now, I always think about that. That really, really, really upsets me.

Similarly, talking about reading about the war in *The Mirror*, she breaks in –

Yeah, the one where they was raping, was it the soldiers or the prisons, the soldiers were raping the prisoners, that was in the paper and that really upset me.

A young women, spending a lot of time on her own, perhaps feeling vulnerable, and with a baby – one can see the personal roots of her sense of connection. But for Kylie, this emotional experience is how she connects to a wider world, and she does so through the media (Lunt & Stenner, 2005). Without the media, she says, "we'd never know anything of what's going on around us."

As Lance Bennett has argued (1998; see also Coleman, 2005), this new conception of politics bears a different relation to the media from that of traditional politics. Consider the different ways Jane and Kylie discuss their own relation to the media. For Jane, the media usefully report on politics, but politics itself is grounded in the daily conditions of working class life. For Kylie, the media are an essential *player* in a globally connected world: without the media, she has no public connection.

Jane reads the newspapers because "I do like to know roughly what's going on in the world or going on around". She likes the soaps, because through them, she feels her own problems to be shared – "it's not nice to know that other people have got problems, but you do know that you're not totally alone that way". But they are just one part of her life. By contrast,

the media form a constant backdrop, and focus, for Kylie's life: "I've got the radio on most of the time I'm in the house" and, as a matter of choice, "I watch a lot of documentaries and go through the paper in the morning". If there's "nothing much on" in the evening, she'll watch the ten o'clock news and then she'll read the newspaper. Thus it emerges that the news and documentaries enable Kylie to enact what she sees as her duty - to *know* what is happening in the world beyond her flat, indeed, to enact her duty to *care*:

I remember watching a programme about racism. That really, really upset me. Made me very angry when I watched that programme and just really made me realise how lucky I am even, you know it's not easy but compared to how some people have it.

One of Kylie's primary frames is that of luck. Though not obviously living in fortunate circumstances, she reminds herself daily, through her use of media, that she is lucky:

Yeah, I think it is important they [the media] make us aware of what's going on otherwise no one's gonna change. If you read the happy things everyday it doesn't make you feel, that you know it doesn't make you realise how lucky you are. You need, there's no point in putting all nice things in the paper if it's not the truth you know you need to know the truth and that's it.

She explains her sense of the imperative, the duty, to know what's going on in the world, in a striking sentence:

Even if it's hurting and it's horrible you need to know. It's just, I mean it's also if there are crimes I mean you put them in the paper. That's how you get people coming forward and things like that, don't ya?

Her added comment is also interesting, for it suggests that by informing us about the world, the media stimulate action from the public. This contrasts with Jane's sense that the media report what is happening but are not themselves agents in the public world. As agents in the world, Kylie sees the media, especially television and radio, as offering a first-person view of the world, allowing her to experience it 'directly':

Maybe it's 'cos they're there, if there's a war they'll be there and you'll see it going on, you can actually see it live, it's not just written down with a still picture, it's more you really do see what's going on. Demonstrations, they're more likely to be there at the scene actually reporting it and they have you know if there's something on they've got witnesses, they've got the police on the television speaking to them whereas the paper is just a source, a source and that's all you really see.

Mediated public connection, on a global stage, is an emotional experience. Indeed, even taking part in our project was, for Kylie, an emotional experience: "Yeah, yeah, it was upsetting. Sometimes it used to upset me a bit you know, reading the things and writing it all down it used to, sometimes I got angry about things."

It is other things that make Jane angry. As with the origins of her sense of public connection, Jane's growing frustration with politics is unrelated to the media. Rather, she is concerned with changes in the organisation of local politics, in the loss of a direct, face-to-face connection between politicians and the public. She frames this as a betrayal of the local roots of political commitment, comparing the process of political activism in her youth – canvassing votes, politicians walking the streets and meeting the people, sharing opinions – with the highly managed process of today's electioneering. Difficulties in her personal life have encouraged her to retrench, sustaining her once-proud political identity only in small ways – looking out for her elderly neighbours in her neighbourhood, chatting to customers at work, doing her best for her children and grandchild. But even these activities for Jane, have a civic flavour, they represent

'community': "I mean the lady that lives next door was there when I was born. She's 94. She was a friend of my mum's". And they are motivating: following the troubles her daughter has experienced, she hopes to volunteer for youth counselling – for "kids when they come out of care." - in the future. In short, Jane knows what's happening around her because she lives in her street, in her neighbourhood:

You know, if you're feeling really down I can just walk across the corner and find somebody to say hello to, and especially as I work in a supermarket I speak to so many people now, and it's not being alone, I suppose.

Kylie by contrast knows what is happening around her primarily because the media tell her (for example local radio alerting her to a childcare group of 'when they've got the blood donors coming down', or 'what's going on in the cinema'.

This is not to say that Kylie is disconnected from the local. Indeed, she has tried to become active in her neighbourhood association, initiating a petition to the local council for a play space for children in her block of flats. This gives her an insight into the apathy of others, frustrating the success of her petition: as she says, "all they've got to do is sign a bit of paper, really".

The contrast, however, goes to the heart of how the mediated public sphere works differently for different people. Jane's public connection is more routinely grounded in the local and the everyday, this providing the main route for her to connect with the wider world:

I just, basically my philosophy on life is that you treat others how you want to be treated. You know, and you make your connections every day living that way.

Kylie, by contrast, sees the local as a bracketing off of the wider world, fearing the local as a trap that narrows your world view:

I just think it's very important... in everybody's life that you are kept in touch and that you do read things and realise that it's not just about you know where you live and what goes on around you. It goes a lot deeper than that.

Asked to explain, she reveals how, for her, mediated public connection is all there is – without the intervention of the media, people would be uninformed and disconnected:

If there wasn't the papers and the news you wouldn't be aware of anything really, you wouldn't be aware whatever's going on all over the world, you just wouldn't know. Your world would just really revolve around [name of local area], that would be it, that's all I'd know about and it does go a lot further than that. There's a lot of things going on all over the world that you need to know about.

On Kylie's global stage, it is hard to sustain a sense of political efficacy. As she puts it, "I leave them to get on with it. Can't change anything, can I?". It is others – the media, other people – who will take action. This lack of translation from knowledge and caring to action is most evident in Kylie's lack of commitment to voting: "I won't, I won't vote. I won't want to follow it." We ask her why. Her answer, typically for her – though also here expressing a common view – concerns an *international* issue:

'Cos I don't really trust, I don't like what Blair's done when he's gone into Iraq, I just feel that, I understand that it was terrible what happened in America and I do understand that but I feel that Bush's got a vendetta against Saddam, he's using that to the best he can and I just don't, that's not what he was put in that position for. He's using his power, I think he's used it totally, he's just using it in a totally wrong way and I don't feel that Blair's, Blair's only reasoned argument for getting involved is that if we ever need America they'll

be there for us but that's not the answer, that's not the answer, that's not a good enough reason to do what he's doing out there.

Jane, however difficult her life, could not imagine *not* voting, indeed, "I don't think I've ever missed voting in any election". It is personal difficulties, combined with an informed critique of the political process, that keep her from political action. To her regret, her children – of similar ages to Kylie – do not even vote, though she and they routinely discuss politics and that is, for Jane, an important part of her life and of her civic responsibility as a parent.

The foregoing has brought out some key differences between these two women. We have seen how, for Jane, public connection has roots grounded in working class, and her personal history so that the media valuably report on, but do not fundamentally mediate, her sense of public connection, while for Kylie, public connection must be understood globally, with the media playing an essential role in making us transcend our local, personal spheres so as to recognise the common, emotional bonds that unite humanity. But they both share what Carol Gilligan has termed an *ethic of care* (1993; see also Livingstone, 1994; Stevenson 1997), namely a particular, typically gendered, approach to the public sphere which stresses empathetic and contextualised judgements of the actions of others, and which contrasts with the valorisation of principles – of judgement, and of rational-critical discourse. For Kylie, the ethic of care is *felt*, through an emotional identification with distant others; for Jane, the ethic of care is *lived*, through a face-to-face engagement with people living nearby; but for both, it provides a route to public connection. We note last, in this context, that both struggle to act in accordance with this ethic of care – Kylie is disempowered by the very scale of her commitment, for the media tell her about global suffering but hardly provide any means of taking action; Jane is disempowered by the loss of institutional mediation, for where once work, trade unions, and political parties offered a structure for translating talk into action, these have declined in power, and the media that take their place in informing and connecting us, provide the space for talk only.

Conclusion

We have shown how the mediated public sphere, as it is embedded in daily practice, is shaped by a number of constraints which cut across the obvious and positive point that media circulate discourse about public issues that might not otherwise come into people's daily experience. Our survey data presents the broader picture (although that too is stratified to varying degrees by demographic factors, both in relation to media consumption and social expectations related to news consumption). The diary data by contrast takes us closer to some hidden faultlines in this general picture. We have been concerned throughout with structural constraints linked to the *organisation* of talk, rather than the particular contents of media discourse, although there are hints in our survey data that interest in celebrity and reality TV (sometimes celebrated as potentially a positive sign of engagement with a mediated public sphere (Coleman 2003)) may operate at variance with interest in either traditional politics or broad public issues.

The mediated public sphere remains, as Habermas' revised model prescribes, a key element in any normative model of how participation in democracies might work. We must however study the contexts for public-related talk and media consumption that are actually available to citizens in their daily lives. Doing so, as we have begun to explore here, confirms that public-related talk is only one element in the more complex mix that, as Peter Dahlgren puts it, may build a 'civic culture' and that, even when talk is taken by itself, effective opportunities may be more unevenly distributed than first appears.

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Notes

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² The word 'public' is, of course, notoriously difficult, since it has a range of conflicting meanings (Weintraub and Kumar, 1997), but we cannot debate this, or defend our particular usage, here: see Couldry Livingstone and Markham (forthcoming), and cf Geuss (2001) and Elshtain (1997).

³ For details of our diary and survey samples, see Couldry Livingstone and Markham (forthcoming).

⁴ The elderly have been neglected in accounts of media consumption and popular culture: see Couldry (2000: 59). That is why we aimed in our project for as even an age sample as possible.