RESEARCHING DIGITAL CONNECTION/ DISCONNECTION IN THE AGE OF PERSONALISED MEDIA

Paper delivered to ICA/IAMCR international conference on Digital Dynamics, Loughborough University, November 16-18 2003

NICK COULDRY
LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE

‘Agents shape their aspirations according to concrete indices of the accessible and the inaccessible, of what is and is not “for us”, a division as fundamental and as fundamentally recognized as that between the sacred and the profane . . . The relation to what is possible is a relation to power; and the sense of the probable future is constituted in the prolonged relationship with a world structured according to the categories of the possible (for us) and the impossible (for us), of what is appropriated in advance by and for others and what one can reasonably expect for oneself.’ (Bourdieu, The Logic of Practice, 1990: 64)

‘CHEBUTYKIN [reading the newspaper]. Balzac got married in Berdichev . . . I really must put that down in my little book. [Makes a note.] Balzac got married in Berdichev. [Carries on reading the newspaper.]’ (Chekhov, Three Sisters, 1980: 198)

Introduction

We have, it seems, moved beyond the notion of ‘Digital Divide’. This may have advantages. For, by itself, the description ‘digital divide’ always carried the promise of being superseded by the relatively simply fact of technological diffusion. So Benjamin Compaine (2001) and others have, rather glibly, argued that the Digital Divide is disappearing (and was always destined to disappear), at least in the most prosperous countries. Or, more subtly, it can be argued (Norris, 2001) that the Digital Divide has no particular features that distinguish it from preexisting socio-economic divides, whether on a national or a global scale, of which it simply represents a digital manifestation. Either way, the Digital Divide might appear destined to evaporate as a priority for research.

Yet this is hardly the end of the story. For, even though the Digital Divide (descriptively) is a relatively straightforward concept – ‘the differential access to and use of the Internet according to gender, income, race and location’ (Rice, 2002: 106) – the significance of the Digital Divide as a priority for policymakers’ and academics’ attention was always based on wider concerns: first, the concern with a threat to long-term market functioning from excessive barriers to consumer participation in the online economy; and, cutting across the first, the concern, at least of some governments and commentators, with the threat to long-term political and social functioning caused by the permanent exclusion from public discourse of those without effective access to the online world. In this paper, it is the second of these underlying concerns in which I am interested (although the first is of course important and has major consequences for the second). My interest, then, is in the close link between the Digital Divide and the question of social exclusion, or rather (as we might reasonably put it, since digital phenomena necessarily have a symbolic form) symbolic exclusion.
It is, however, precisely the symbolic dimensions to exclusion that have often been neglected, whether in accounts of the economy, the class system or technological change (cf Murdock, 2000: 24). Lacking home access to the Internet is not merely a material lack, any more than being able to go online from home is merely a material asset. For ‘the Internet’ symbolises something much vaster, a sense of the social universe that is there to be connected to. The Digital Divide, then, at least for those concerned with social and political exclusion, always involved more than material access; it has always been a symbolic divide. As such, it does not simply disappear just because a large majority acquire a basic digital connection, or even a basic capacity to use that connection. The Digital Divide, as symbolic divide, can only be assessed by considering, first, the nature and quality of online use, and, second, the ‘significance’ that use has for those involved. Symbolic significance, however, is not something lofty and intangible: the meanings of a practice are directly related to the consequences and value people expect from it. It was here that the chorus of increasingly upbeat Digital Divide assessments were interrupted by the US Childrens Partnership’s 2000 Report. This noted the lack of online content that made sense to US working class and ethnic minority users given their practical priorities (for example, job searching), and argued this lack of relevant content was itself an important and neglected divide, that could not be cured simply by putting more computers in schools, libraries and indeed homes (Childrens Partnership, 2000).

The Digital Divide, as symbolic divide, remains an important topic of research, even if (following Norris) we are sceptical about the extent to which lack of access to the Internet is, in itself, a sufficient causal explanation for social exclusion. The issue, rather, is: what are the changing forms which symbolic exclusion is taking in the era of digital media and media convergence? This requires looking at ‘connection’ more broadly than allowed by measures of Internet access, or even the distribution of basic Internet use. Indeed, as the opening two quotes suggest, the question of symbolic connection (the sense of being included, or not, in the narratives that pass for society’s ‘central’ narratives) arises at every stage in the history of communications technologies, whether in the pre-media societies that Bourdieu discussed in *The Logic of Practice* or in the newspaper-based media environment of pre-revolutionary Russia. Being the slipstream of an information flow, however large, hardly helps if that information is disconnected from your possibilities of action, including action as a citizen. Here is the potentially radical, if not fully intentional, legacy of Digital Divide debates, and it on this question I want to focus.

I will do so by introducing empirical research which with colleagues at the London School of Economics I have been developing since 2001 that has begun to address some of these questions. This has occurred in two stages: first, a small-scale research project conducted with Ana Langer in 2001-2 into the role of media in people’s sense of connection to public and civic space (the ‘Dispersed Citizen’ project), and second a larger project with Sonia Livingstone and Tim Markham ‘Media Consumption and the future of Public Connection’ which is now underway (October 2003-March 2006).

**The Quality of Public Connection**

**Design of the ‘Dispersed Citizen’ research**

Neither project has aimed directly at researching social exclusion or indeed the digital divide. Instead, they are a contribution towards investigating the effective ‘bottom line’ of most political science and indeed most media studies: that, whatever people’s local dissatisfactions
in a society such as Britain with aspects of politics, all but a small minority share a basic orientation towards the public world where politics takes place. We are interested, in other words, in the assumption of a certain level of shared ‘public connection’ based in shared media consumption is assumed; this is one aspect of the idea (constructed, not real) that elsewhere I have referred to as the ‘media frame’ (‘the media’ as ‘frame’ through which the social ‘world’ becomes available to us: cf Couldry, 2000, chapter 3). Powerful and pervasive though the assumption of ‘public connection’ is, there have been few, if any, empirical studies that have investigated whether it corresponds to how people think about their lives.

The ‘Dispersed Citizen’ study approached that large question via two more limited objectives in mind: first, to test out the contrasting advantages and disadvantages of panel-based research and direct interviews in researching people’s reflections on this difficult area, and, second, to develop across both methods a set of effective questions for stimulating those reflections. Later on, we will discuss a number of broader, substantive issues, but these immediate and limited aims are important in understanding how this first study was designed.

Our first source was questions on media and the public world cleared by the UK’s well-known Mass-Observation Archive.4 These were issued to the M-O A panel as part of its Autumn 2001 ‘Directive’. Some points that distinguish this situation from other panel-based research must be noted immediately. First, the M-O A keeps to a distinctive, ‘friendly’ style in its questions which has its basis in a long-standing, indeed historic, relationship with correspondents; this style of questioning is a little looser than a social science researcher would choose if s/he had an entirely free hand. Second, the M-O A’s current panel (250-300 people) is not, and does not claim to be, representative of the wider UK population, having a high proportion of women (approximately 70%), a very high proportion of older respondents (more than 90% over 40) and a high proportion living in London and the South-East (approximately 50%) (based on 2002 figures). Writing personal responses to M-O A directives is time-consuming, which weighs the panel’s demographics towards those with more free time, particularly the retired. In class terms, the balance is better, but still weighted away from the manual working-class. Unsurprisingly these features were reflected in the respondents to our questions (n=161), and the evidential implications of this are discussed further below.

Our second source for this initial study was 10 individual interviews conducted in London in April-June 2002, to test a comparable set of questions, although some weaknesses in the original M-O A questions were addressed and detailed questions on media access and media use added. Since overall representativeness was not our aim but rather the highlighting of issues for future research, interviewees were recruited through personal contacts of each researcher, with some snowballing, but in such a way as to balance age and gender deficiencies in the M-O A sample. The sample was composed of 50% men, with 8 interviewees out of 10 aged under 40.5 Also, the M-O A’s bias towards those with no or part-time work was effectively counteracted: 7 out of 10 interviewees were in full-time work, of whom 2 were professional working mothers in dual income families (seemingly uncommon in the M-O A panel). Also the low number of single people among the M-O A correspondents (just under 10%) was corrected (6 of the interviewees were single). However, correction for the M-O A sample’s class bias proved more difficult, with only one working-class interviewee obtained. Nor, because the interviews, for budget and time reasons, were all conducted in London, was it possible to correct for the M-O A panel’s regional bias. Finally, the interview sample did not achieve representativeness in terms of education; all but one had completed or were in the course of university education.
In spite of these limitations, a complex picture emerged from both M-O A responses and the more detailed interview material of the potential divide around the quality of people’s mediated connection to a public world; I come later to our strategy for moving beyond these limitations in the larger study now under way.

Responses from the Mass-Observation Archive Panel

What was initially striking about the M-O A responses was the high degree of dissatisfaction revealed with media and/or politics, often trenchantly expressed. Of the 161 correspondents, an overall majority (and majorities of both women and men correspondents) expressed dissatisfaction with how media provided information on public affairs and matters of citizenship.

Dissatisfaction with politics and/or media was not the only significant theme. A significant number (25: 17 women and 8 men) referred unprompted to their dislike of what they saw as the recent focus of media news (particularly the press) away from traditional ‘public affairs’ and towards media-focussed stories, especially celebrity stories. This was one reason why a substantial majority (44 to 17), when answering whether their ‘way of life’ was represented in Britain’s media, said that it was not - no trace here of the common cultural studies argument that celebrity narratives are indirect means of raising personal or public concerns. There were other reasons for feeling unrepresented, notably age and sickness (expected given the profile of the sample) but also as in the last example (a young recycling worker) social status:

‘I’m not very interested in lifestyle, celebrities, reality TV, etc, which probably means I miss more of the interesting stuff out when it is there’ (B2948)

‘My way of life is ignored by British media, as it is for millions of pensioners’ (G1041)

‘Basically my way of life is of no interest to the media.’ (Male, G2941)

Expressions of dissatisfaction seemed to be provoked by the deliberate vagueness (and intended neutrality) of the question we posed about the relation of media to public connection: ‘in your view, do you generally have available to you the information you need to be a full and active member of a democratic society?’ The term ‘full and active member of a democratic society’ caused some difficulties. For some, the notion of activity contradicted their life-circumstances too drastically (because they were sick or disabled); for others, the term was itself obscure or posed in the type of language they didn’t, or professed not to, understand. For still others the problem was not language but something more fundamental:

‘I cannot define what would be a full and active member of such a [i.e. a democratic] society because I do not think it really completely exists’ (C2570).

‘Well, we are not a democratic society, are we?’ (Male, L2393)

‘If my views counted for nothing after 50 years doing the job I knew about, why should they count about other things I know less about?’ (G1148, a 66 year-old retired nurse)
The disenchantment expressed here, particularly in the last quotation, involves many sources (including new ‘flexible’ work cultures) that have nothing to do, directly, with media. 8 Elsewhere the link was clearer:

‘To be an active democrat one needs a comprehensive view of world events and politics which the “media” as generally understood just do not provide’ (Male, W2117)

‘That is not to say that I don’t want to live in a democratic society but that I choose in democratic society not to be active and part of this is because I don’t feel confident that representation I am given is truthful’ (B2917, aged 25)

Our questions then had provoked the expression of a considerable degree of disaffection with very media-based connection to a public world that political science assumes to be in place. There were of course more positive comments. But, if we looked for consistency among those positive comments, it was in relation to new media, not old media. It was striking, for a mainly elderly sample, that many invested hope in new media (specifically the internet rather than the multi-channel television environment for which there was a notable lack of enthusiasm), for example:

‘the internet is the one technical innovation which is not controlled and restricted by hugely powerful groups or individuals, and in this respect I rejoice in the fact . . . the internet is a great mine of useful and accessible information’ (male, W2322).

A number of correspondents wrote about how the internet had enabled them to research information in completely new ways, and for some this was directly linked to their sense of connection with public issues (for example international issues). It would have been interesting to follow up these mixed signals of public (dis)connection among older sections of the population, but this would have required interviews direct with panel members, a practice from which M-O A rules quite reasonably protect them.

**Fleeting Connections: Evidence from our Early Interviews**

If our M-O A responses gave us a striking and something surprising suggestion of levels of disconnection among a very particular sector of the UK population, our interviews (targeted, as they were, at a contrasting demographic: younger, generally single, generally at work) offered contrasting, but complementary, evidence. In broad terms, there were traces in the interviews of similar themes to those in the M-O A sample: political dissatisfaction, media dissatisfaction, information overload, media selectivity, lack of representation, uncertainty about what being a full and active member of a democracy means. But interviews gave us a different window into people’s lives: whereas M-O A correspondents provided only a brief self-reported summary of media use and access, interviews allowed us to talk with people in more detail about their daily practice as media consumers, especially of news and politics. Rather than a broad sense of dissatisfaction (as with many from the M-O A panel), interviewee comments apart into a range of positions, which taken together presented a fascinating spectrum of how the relationship between private citizen/ media consumer and public world might be thought and imagined.

*The Time to Connect*
Media’s role in connecting people to a public world was a theme we generally avoided in our questions (since it was precisely that we wanted to test), but it was one interviewees raised themselves. For most, the main aim of media use was ‘connection’, generally connection to a public world but sometimes to a mixed private/public world. The notion of ‘connectedness’ emerged spontaneously in Maggie’s interview when discussing the relative importance of information or entertainment media functions:

‘... that isn’t the distinction I’d make. The one that occurs to me immediately is the distinction between wipe-out time . . . time for . . . [interviewer: Pure relaxation?] [Between] Pure relaxation time and connectedness time . . . yes and that would certainly cover accessing information time but it would also be stuff like, um, using the local newspaper to find out what’s happening locally or to get a sense of what’s going on.’

But what emerges here, cutting across the theme of connection, is a factor largely latent in the older (often retired) M-O A sample: time. For most interviewees, this was the main explicit constraint on their media use. Jane found significant media consumption incompatible with her busy acting career. Sally, a senior IT strategist who was married with three school-age children, was in some ways relaxed about information overload partly because it was a problem that had no solution. But she still made efforts to preserve a basic connection to a mediated stream of information for example by listening to the radio news on her mobile phone (‘just to fit a bit more in really’). Here, as elsewhere, it was time that emerged as the principal constraint on most interviewees’ media consumption.

Against this background, the Internet was universally valued as a resource that enabled more effective use of time. For most of the interviewees, one advantage of the Internet was its delivery of ‘instant’ connection: ‘With the Internet you could find out, you could find out absolutely everything at the push of a button and it’s there. . . . You’re not waiting till the next morning . . . you’re not waiting until the next news bulletin comes on to know’ (Andrew); ‘I want to know what’s happening now . . I don’t look to the web for analysis. . . . It’s when there’s some particular item that is breaking then and I want to know what’s happening’ (Maggie). The Internet’s responsiveness is not only a matter of speed, but directedness: the internet gave you the ‘ability to actually go out and get what you want sort of actively and decide what it is you want and search for it, as opposed to just sort of sit there and wait for it to come to you, yes, it’s made a huge difference’ (Beth). This brought with it a sense of control, or at least breadth:

‘I find it a lot easier to find out other people’s views in the world [through the Internet]. I was reading an article the other day . . . about the Israel thing [Israeli-Palestinian conflict] and its was actually an Israeli girl, aged 13, who’d posted something on the Internet saying . . . the newspapers are saying this but they’re not looking, look at what it’s . . . really like for me to live in fear surrounded by this. The news will give you only one side of the story.’ (Simon)

By contrast, the interactivity of the Internet as a space for the two-way exchange of ideas and information was much less often mentioned (the only exception was a student who had institutional access to the Internet). Interviewees’ use of the Internet was mainly instrumental: shopping, travel and health information; jobs; evaluating schools for their children.

Sometimes other media simulated the instantaneity of the Internet. The least well-resourced of the interviewees, Mick, used teletext as a sort of low-cost equivalent of the Internet’s instant
connection: ‘I get myself glued to Teletext first thing in the morning cause once I get out of
the bath, I like to sit there and look at that. And I think Teletext is a very good way of getting
information because they only have that one small page on each screen, they quite often just
report facts as they are. They don’t often put a bias on it’.

(Dis)connection: Old and New Style

If media’s role as source of connection was what was valued by most of those interviewed,
even if constrained by time, can we develop a tentative typology of how different
interviewees were connected?

Our interviewees could be divided into old-style connectors, new-style connectors and time
lackers, with a residual category of non-connectors. Like any typology, this is of course a
simplification.

The old-style connectors (Beth, Amanda and Maggie) were heavy consumers of news, relying
on and respecting broadsheets more than any other media although combining that with radio
and/or television (depending on their time constraints). They had a sense that their role as
citizens was heavily associated with a duty to be informed: ‘I feel very cut off if I don’t get a
good build-up of news every other day, at least’ (Amanda). They felt guilty if they were
unable to cope with the information load. Importantly their connection with the world through
media was dominated by the time patterns of traditional media (the newspaper delivery, the
news bulletin). The new-style connectors (Simon, Andrew, Panos) had an equally intense
sense of public connection through media, but within a quite different time structure. Each
had a high-speed 24/7 connection to the Internet. They used the internet almost constantly and
relied on it to be informed. They compared every other medium with the internet’s
capabilities (especially its flexibility and its vast range of sources, compared with traditional
media). An important working class variant of the new-style connector was Mick whose
economic resources and technical capability limited his use of the Internet, but who sought a
similar sense of continual, individually responsive, connection through the older technology
of Ceefax/ Teletext.

Although time was a constraint on media use for most interviewees, it was possible to identify
a separate category of people for whom time constraints were the primary shaper of how they
consumed media: time lackers (Sally, Jane). Both Jane and Sally’s possibilities of connection
were nonetheless severely constrained by time; yet they retained a sense of the importance of
connection. In this, they were distinct from the residual category of non-connectors to which
Salif belonged. Salif seemed to be basically uninterested in media’s ability to connect him to a
wider world, although he made an effort to show the opposite. He consumed TV mainly for
entertainment but appeared uncomfortable to confess it. What remained unclear, however, in
Salif’s case was how far this non-connection was based in a deeper disillusion.

It would be misleading however to suggest that our interviewees were more satisfied than the
M-O A panelists with the degree to which media connected them to a public world. Even
among connectors a sense of frustration was often significant:

‘Am I satisfied with their [the media’s] job? No, I’m not satisfied after thinking about that
. . but then again it’s, I don’t know where else to get my information from. So even if I’m
not satisfied, I don’t know what else I would do’ (Mick).
Even if, compared with the M-O A sample, fewer interviewees said they felt unrepresented by media, this wasn’t simply because they were positively satisfied. For Jane, representation was less important because her specialist interests in theatre and film prestructured her media use; in that sense general media were somewhat marginal to her life. Andrew, as a gay man, had a strong sense of being negatively stereotyped by the media. We must also allow for the possibility that the face-to-face interview situation discouraged the expression of such positions of conscious disconnection from media and/or the public domain, unlike the remote relationship of writing an anonymous diary.

Connection to What?

As noted in the introduction, the lasting legacy of the Digital Divide debate is a concern with how media access (or its absence) is linked with democratic engagement (or its absence). As with the M-O A panel, interviewees were asked whether in their view the media provided them with what they needed to be ‘full and active members of a democratic society’. Even if in retrospect this phrasing carried too heavy an implication of expected responsibility, the gaps and tensions in people’s responses were instructive.

Striking was the absence from most interviews of the national political sphere as a focus of attention or involvement. While for some ‘the national’ deserved a passing reference, it was generally as a cultural category, applicable on various scales (English, Scottish, British) and cut across by other identities (Muslim, Glaswegian, and so on). For Sally in particular, society (implicitly, national society) was important, not as a space of participation, but as a reference-point for understanding certain key values such as abiding by the law and participating in the work economy. At this point, the concept of ‘public connection’ merges into a broader notion of civic practice. By contrast, the person with the clearest sense of the national politics as a sphere of action was Mick, the most politically active of the sample: ‘I am an active member in society. I would, very much I believe in the class structure in the UK’. Aside, from Mick, only Andrew (who had experience of demonstrations for gay rights) and Simon (who had participated in Pro-Israel rallies) mentioned specific instances of political participation: even here these actions were not attached to formal national politics but to issues of identity.

Maggie, for example, reflected on this uncertainty through a metaphor whose abstractness is telling:

‘It’s like a pot which if everybody contributed to it, it would fill up. It’s a void into which you kind of put things in the hope that the bottom doesn’t get deeper . . .’

There is of course a range of issues at stake here about the sources of political and civic involvement.\textsuperscript{12} It was striking, however, that notwithstanding these uncertainties, Maggie insisted on holding onto the assumption of public ‘connection’ (the concept she had volunteered during the course of the interview):

‘I think there is a public world that I feel connected to. It almost feels a bit like an article of faith really . . . But I have no alternative but to believe that the public sphere exists because . . . I think if I felt otherwise, it would be too bleak to bear and . . . yes, I think that’s what I feel about it, it’s like a negative article of faith’ (added emphasis).

In sustaining that ‘negative faith’ in a public world that matters, Maggie saw the media’s contribution as crucial, but not in a positive sense: ‘I don’t like the level of cynicism that I get
from the media. . . . I don’t like the way politicians get panned roundly all the time. I just really really dislike it. So no, I think that the media presentation of that side of things is I found destructive of my own sense of involvement and destructive of my own sense of society’.

For Mick, by contrast, national media were a tool for reconstructing some sense of engagement, but at a much more local level. Mick’s aim was to generate public debate using whatever media materials came to hand:

‘I do it every single lunchtime. The caf that we go to . . . whatever the latest news story is, I always open up a discussion in the caf . . . if I want to find out what people are really thinking, I’ll spark off a debate in the caf. And we normally sit on the table with, there’s normally five or six from work but the caf is a big caf, it’s got about 30-40 people in it and no, I just, I ask people on the table next to me what they think.’

Andrew and Simon gave a similar sense of improvising a proto-public sphere around news topics within the collective accommodation where they lived as staff or students. This opens up a broader issue of how far people’s sense of mediated (dis)connection from the public world is itself further negotiated by action in people’s social networks, a point we have pursued in our current research.

**Conclusion**

The argument of this article has been that, whatever the changes in baseline figures for digital media access, the Digital Divide remains an important focus for research, provided it is translated into the question: what forms in an era when digital media are widely, but far from universally available, does symbolic exclusion take?

I have approached this obliquely by examining the results of a small-scale study that attempted to open up ways of researching people’s reflections on a topic distinct from, but closely related to, the symbolic dimensions of the digital divide: people’s sense (or not) of connection to a public world beyond their private zone, and the role of their personalised media consumption (including of online media) in sustaining that connection. Clearly this topic requires a larger-scale study than the one reported here. I have recently begun to work on this in a new ESRC-funded project with Sonia Livingstone and Tim Markham at LSE called ‘Media Consumption and the Future of Public Connection’.

What, then, are the implications of the earlier small-scale research for our current and other larger-scale research into public connection and, obliquely, for the question of the Digital Divide and symbolic exclusion?

First, a limitation of the earlier study is that its sample group almost certainly showed an untypically **high** level of connection. The interview sample was constructed through snowballing from people known to the two researchers, relying on interest in the broad theme of the research; only one person, as we saw, fell into the residual category of ‘non-connector’. A larger-scale study, obtaining its respondents at a greater remove, could expect to find a wider range of connection and disconnection. It will be vital in any future study to ensure a more representative range of classes and ages (although each of two ‘samples’ corrected for some of the faults of the other, both still under-represented working-class respondents). On the other hand, the difficulty only sporadically encountered here of middle-class interviewers
talking with working-class interviewees about the question of symbolic inclusion - that might be seen to be precisely what divides them - would inevitably be more prominent in a more representative study. This is one reason why in our new ESRC study we are opting for a mixture of qualitative approaches, some involving the presence of the researcher and others (such as diaries) compiled with the researcher absent (cf Bird, 2003).

Second, the earlier study deliberately (and consistently with the argument of the introduction) did not limit its questions to new media consumption. At a time when most people’s media consumption is a hybrid of old and new, and when the questions addressed are so large (connection, exclusion), a limitation to either old or new media consumption would seem unhelpful. Nonetheless differences did emerge between old- and new-style connectors, in terms of the temporal organisation of their media consumption and its embedding in news events. These differences were not however fundamental, the notion of immediate connection being common to each. The key in future research, I suggest, will be to look for practices relating to digital media (or linking digital and pre-digital media) which are stabilising into habits and naturalised forms. The habit of using the Internet at your work computer to check up-to-the-minute news may remain allied with the older habit of switching on the television news when you get home, but the combined habit is significant, as well as automatically dividing those who have an individual computer at their work from those who share computer resources at work or have none.

Third, it will be important to watch in future research for how (as in this study) the media consumption of even those who were explicit connectors was significantly constrained by extraneous factors, particularly time. The lack of time for connection cut across issues of resource, skill and desire for public connection for many of those interviewed. This is not simply a matter of objective measures (although time-diaries would no doubt be helpful here), but also the subjective sense of not having enough time to use media or pursue information. Any possibility of public connection through media therefore intersects with the everyday realities of the ‘time-famine society’ (Robinson and Godbey, 1997: 43).

Fourth, we need to look closely at the difficulties which individuals may have in articulating their sense (or otherwise) of public connection. Maggie’s notion of a ‘negative article of faith’ is striking, but we need to remember that Maggie was a highly articulate university graduate. Articulating the absence of available language, or puzzlement at the abstractness of connection, is hardly a straightforward thing to evoke in any respondent, any more than alienation is. There are dangers in two directions: on the one hand, of research subjects reaching a blank wall and being unable to go further in articulating a sense of disconnection for which they have no ready language; on the other hand, of rapport in the interview situation evoking a performance of ‘alienation’ that would not have occurred but for the dynamics of the interview encounter. Yet this difficulty cannot be evaded if we take seriously Oscar Gandy’s recent diagnosis of ‘the real digital divide’ as the disarticulation between consumption and the citizenship discourses. What if, as Gandy warns, we are moving towards a situation when ‘individuals . . . actually feel better about knowing less and less about the world around them’ (Gandy, 2002: 452)? The challenge however, while acknowledging that the ground rules of public connection may be changing, is to devise research strategies for tracking those changes in everyday discourse and sense-making. Once again, we need a range of methods and we need to allow time in the research process for reflection and self-correction by respondents.
Finally, and emerging from the previous points, is the importance of listening closely and without sentimentality to the contradictory, uncertain, unfolding reflexivity of our respondents. There is no way to research symbolic exclusion, whether manifested in relation to digital or other forms of media use, without close attention to the grain of people’s voices, and the discursive resources available to them to articulate the significance (or otherwise) that their media use has. There is a danger of course that such research ends up naturalising the very social division (between ‘articulate’, ‘connected’ researcher and less articulate, less well-connected research subject) that facilitates the research in the first place (Bourdieu, 2000); hence the importance of what George Marcus (1999) has called the ‘complicity’, shared between researcher and researched, in seeking to understand shared uncertainties and irresolution. One compelling thing about digital divide research – at least in the broader sense I have been considering here – is that this divide may be deep and broad enough to encompass most of us in some degree. Certainly, to recall my opening quotations, it is only by close attention to the complexity of people’s reflections on connection that we can understand how digital media are, or are not, involved in the continued reformulation of what is, or is not, ‘for us’; and only in this way will we be able to distinguish forms of digital media consumption that are merely the surface of a deeper disconnection (Chekhov’s Doctor jotting down useless items from a newspaper: by the play’s final act, he has lost interest in the wider world) from those which represent a real challenge to the historic asymmetries in the distribution of symbolic power.

References


### Table 1: MO Correspondents - Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>29.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>70.8</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2: MO Correspondents – Age by range

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Over 65</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>57.8</td>
<td>57.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-65</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>36.6</td>
<td>94.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-40</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>98.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-25</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3: MO Correspondents – Occupation status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation Status</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Active</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>26.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House wives</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>34.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part Time</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>39.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>55.8</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>98.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 4: Interviewees’ Socio-demographic data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Category*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Married + 3 child.</td>
<td>BA + postg. qualifications</td>
<td>Senior IT Strategist</td>
<td>Managerial &amp; professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>BA + postg. qualifications</td>
<td>Hall of Residence Manager</td>
<td>Managerial &amp; professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>BA (third year)</td>
<td>FT Student</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salif</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>PT call centre worker</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panos</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>BA (third year)</td>
<td>FT student</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>Financial Manager State School</td>
<td>Managerial &amp; professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maggie</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Married + 1 child.</td>
<td>BA + training as solicitor</td>
<td>Lawyer</td>
<td>Managerial &amp; professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mick</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Married + 2 child.</td>
<td>O Levels</td>
<td>Pest Controller</td>
<td>Lower supervisory &amp; technical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>Actress + PT work as ticket officer</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>Free lance marketing f/ arts organis.</td>
<td>Managerial &amp; professional</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


** All names changed.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Television*</th>
<th>Newspaper**</th>
<th>Local</th>
<th>Internet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>Cable (basic package)</td>
<td>G; I or O (Sun)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2 computers both with access + work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>Digital connection–not used</td>
<td>G and M</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1 computer w/ 24 hours access + work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon</td>
<td>Digital TV</td>
<td>TT &amp; DM; FT (on line)</td>
<td>Yes (ES)</td>
<td>1 computer w/ 24 hours access + univ.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salif</td>
<td>Cable</td>
<td>M (exceptionally)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>1 computer w/broadband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panos</td>
<td>Terrestrial + Greek Channel</td>
<td>G &amp; FT (on-line); O</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>1 computer w/ connection + univ.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>Terrestrial</td>
<td>ES, DM (Sat), O</td>
<td>Not much</td>
<td>1 computer w/ slow connection + work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maggie</td>
<td>Terrestrial</td>
<td>G &amp; O</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>4 computers w/access + work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mick</td>
<td>Terrestrial</td>
<td>S, MI, DS</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1 computer w/ connection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>Digital</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Occasion.</td>
<td>1 computer w/connection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>Terrestrial</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>Seldom</td>
<td>1 computer w/connection</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* All have radio

** G (The Guardian), I (The Independent), O (Observer), TH (The Times), M (Metro), DM (Daily Mail), ES (Evening Standard), S (Sun), MI (Mirror), DS (Daily Star).
Notes

1. There are, however, important exceptions to this neglect: for example, (within sociology and cultural studies) Sennett and Cobb (1972), Skeggs (1995), Sennett (1999), Young (1999), Walkerdine (1999) and Lembo (2000), and in work close to mainstream political science Eliasoph (1999).

2. Funded by STICERD, whose financial assistance is gratefully acknowledged.

3. Funded under the ESRC/AHRB Cultures of Consumption programme (grant no ???); again this financial assistance is gratefully acknowledged.

4. For materials on its early history, see Harrison and Madge (1986).

5. For more demographic detail, see Tables 1 to 5.

6. M-O A correspondents are women, unless noted.

7. This was not simply a matter of misunderstanding. One woman (J931), having said that “A full and active member of a democratic society” is the sort of sociologist speak people don’t understand’, then defined it precisely: ‘I assume it means someone understanding how government works and having all the information necessary to cast their vote responsibly and having the know-how to make their views count by being able to present them to others’.


10. On the significance for democracy of symbolic participation through media, particularly new media, see Bucy and Gregson (2001: especially 375).

11. Ceefax/ Teletext was mentioned as significant by 7 of the M-O A correspondents (4 women, 3 men).

12. Compare the huge political science literature that has developed from Almond and Verba (1963).

13. Project October 2003-March 2006, funded by the ESRC under the Cultures of Consumption Programme; this financial assistance is gratefully acknowledged.