Culture and Citizenship: The Missing Link?

Open University, 13 April 05

Tim Markham
London School of Economics

www.publicconnection.org
Assumptions about democratic politics

- That, in a democracy such as Britain, most people share an orientation to a public world where matters of common concern are, or at least should be, addressed.
- That this public connection is focussed principally on mediated versions of that public world.
42 people recruited (5 dropouts, 37 in final sample)
17 men and 20 women
<30 years (n=12), 30-50 years (n=12), 50+ (n=13)
Spread over six regions (inner city, suburban, rural)
2 upper middle class, 9 middle class, 13 lower middle, 8 upper working, 5 lower working class
28 white, 5 Afro-Caribbean, 3 South Asian, 1 mixed ethnicity
Singles, couples, parents, single parents, retired, etc.
7 media super-rich, 18 rich, 1 average, 11 media-poor
The Diaries

- Attempt to be as open and non-directive as possible
- Diary completed approximately weekly
- Over a period of 3 months
- Interviews before and after the diary
- 27 completed 10-12 weeks
- 16 written, 12 email, 3 tape, 6 mixture
- Nvivo coding and analysis
What to do with Iraq? It seems whatever happens there are always more problems with Iraq. If it's not Bin Laden, it's Saddam, if it's not him, it's some rebel group or another. Why can't we just back off and let them sort their own mess out because the UK and USA are obviously not helping. So many deaths of innocent people in Iraq, and in the suicide bombing, not a day goes by without a mention of another death in Iraq. Because of Iraq, the future is a long way away and what will happen when we do hand over? BBC news 24 brings us a lot of information and interviews on this subject.

Rash and Bottom Big news last week, and just like fashion it's all old this week. I saw Victoria Beckham on Ant & Dec's Saturday Night Takeaway, no direct mention of the incident. Oh but then...
Emerging Themes

1. Public Connection Sustained by Media Consumption:
   (a) constraints of practice: time and social context
“This was a busy week for me so I didn’t actually sit down and watch a news bulletin.... Consequently I only caught snatches of news items, and items that were being discussed in the staff room”

[33/D/5] (woman, aged 34, with two children, working as part-time teaching assistant, urban South of England)
“While I was serving customers in my shop I was trying to read the paper. “

[3/D/2] (woman, aged 51, shop owner with grown-up children, suburban West London)
“We’ve been extremely busy at work and seemingly every available minute is spent working – at the office and at home, so there’s no time for films, music, or T.V. Criminal.”

[22/D/23] (man, aged 52, teenage children, insurance broker, Northern suburb)
“I wouldn’t bother my arse to sort of stand up and argue about it because I’ve become so cynical. It’s a sad point, sad state of affairs but I’ve been in situations where people you know, you speak about politics at work and then people get on their high horse and you just think. . . . but then I don’t speak to politics about my parents, with my parents or my family. I’ve had to pull my sister by the hand and drag her down to the electoral booth to vote at election time. She’s totally not interested. I think people, I don't know, it’s quite scary to see how people are disinterested in it, particularly this generation.”

[4/I1/11-12] (Man, aged 23, university administrator, West London suburb)
“...my own children, I have to say really, not interested [in media news]. They don’t – nothing has much impact on them outside their own little bubble, as it were. My daughter would be interested because of the effect of the [Iraq War] on the price of petrol but, er, she wouldn’t be interested in any other impact of Iraq at all. And I mean they’re both bright, they went to university and so forth, but they, yeah, they are insular, both of them.”

[20/ I2/7] (Man, aged 64, retired financial services chief executive, Northern suburb)
“If I didn’t speak to everyone at work – during the week, I wouldn’t speak to anyone. [Husband works nights]. I mean the kids – my son’s never here . . . [daughter] goes to bed at 9, 10 o’clock at night...”

[12/12/31] (Woman, 45, two children, local government worker, South East London)
“We’ve got very limited time in the staff room so I mean it tends to be you know stupid things [we talk about] about what you’ve watched on telly or something light-hearted and fun. I mean the odd thing, I suppose, it is things like child deaths and things that you would say, oh, isn’t awful about but it doesn’t tend to be a lot of serious types of conversation. . . . we tend to talk as well about our own lives and things going on for us. So I can’t say I’ve had a conversation with anyone at school about Iraq. I mean I’ll talk to [name of boyfriend] about things sometimes but you don’t tend to talk to your friends about it really.”

[21/I2/11] (Woman, 30, primary school teacher, Northern suburb)
Emerging Themes

1. Public Connection Sustained by Media Consumption:
   (a) constraints of practice: time and social context
   (b) constraints of practice: drawing back from the news
“Not listened to Radio 4 today, but had [name] our local radio station on instead, many because the world news is too depressing. So I had daft and light entertainment today.”

[28/D/5] (woman, aged 46, hospitality events organiser, northern suburb)

“The media is here to stay, love it or leave it, but I can’t help wondering whether it was better to live in an age when you only knew what was happening in the next street or maybe village.”

[33/D/14] (woman, aged 34, with two children, working as part-time teaching assistant, urban South of England)
"You need to be able to turn the tv off, as awful as it is, and those awful things that happen in the world, you know sometimes I think well what can I do other than say, yeah, I don’t know. You know, when we see something terrible that’s happened in Africa, so you go and make a donation and that’s a good thing of seeing it on there, but I don’t know. I don’t have the answer because I can’t resolve it in my mind how, even how I feel about it, whether I want to watch something that I don’t like, or whether I should or whether I turn it off and go and read a magazine, I don’t know."

[24/I2/19] (woman, aged 27, marketing executive, Northern suburb)
“Yeah, I’ve always felt if I cast my vote you know that could be the one casting vote to swing the vote when I wouldn’t know exactly what I was talking about and I could be doing absolutely the worst thing.

[Interviewer:] So you don’t feel that you’re quite qualified in a way?

Yeah, or well informed enough to make that choice.”

[35/I1/15] (woman, aged 33, hairdresser, urban South of England)
Drawing back from the news

- “Have avoided newspapers, because as I predicted they are full of the Beckhams and real news is taking a back seat!”
  [10/D/8] (Woman, aged 39, unemployed, south East London)

- “No – I don’t believe we get all the facts...we get what people want us to see... I will never know what’s accurate... I won’t know what’s accurate. I’m a little civil servant – I will never know what’s accurate.”
  [12/I2/37-8] (Woman, 45, two children, local government worker, South East London)
Emerging Themes

2. Other Forms of Public Connection
“It’s like a village shop, so I know my customers, they know me. ... And you talk about the weather, and what’s been done and ... ask about the family, they ask me about my family ... And what’s the main issue, everyday issue. About the government or the – any kind of things you know? So it all depends on the – what kind of customers I get. Family – again, everyday problems ... Or if I need to sort out something with my finance, or shares ... Or mortgage, or remortgage, or future, or whatever....Kids problems – discuss that – and if one – with my other family members like my sister[name]. So we discuss all sorts of things.”

[3/11/20-23] (woman, aged 51, shop owner with grown-up children, suburban West London)
“[interviewer] Now do you tend to talk to people about what’s in the news? You said you know people talk about football but do you get a sense that there are issues?

If it’s on and I’m watching it with someone else probably, it’s not, like the war was such a massive thing that you do talk just generally but like other things, the Ian Huntley thing definitely that sort of quite upset me so I didn’t, I think probably did the whole nation so I didn’t really want to talk to many people about that, maybe to sort of mother, that’s about it. Football, if there’s like football things on the news and I’ll talk a lot more cos I think I’m more knowledgeable about it as well, so I like to.”

[36/I1/16-17] (Man, aged 25, student, urban South)
“Usher’s single ‘oh yeah’ is no. 1 in the top 40 charts as heard on radio one on Sunday and Top of the Pops, I’m glad about this as me and all the girls who love to get up and dance to it, favourite song at the moment…”

“Very unlike me this week. I don’t what is no 1 in the music charts. Hopefully next week I will have more to write.”

[35/D/1,7] (woman, aged 33, hairdresser, Urban South of England)
Conclusions

- The link between media consumption and action
- The importance of structured, connected action for ‘remaking publics’