



# Media Consumption: the future of public connection

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**Low voter turnouts have intensified UK government concern about declining public engagement with the democratic process. Meanwhile the multiplying range of digital media risks fragmenting the national audience. What does everyday media use contribute to people's sense of themselves as connected to a public world, where issues of shared importance are resolved? This is the question we set out to explore by asking people across England to produce a diary for three months during 2004, interviewing those diarists on a number of occasions, and then conducting a nationwide survey in 2005 on the emerging themes.**

## KEY FINDINGS

- 1 Most people have public connection, and for all but a few, media helps sustain it.
- 1 Our survey showed a minority are broadly disconnected from both political process and media, although they are high media consumers.
- 1 Celebrity (including 'reality' TV) is an important focus for some – particularly women. However such diarists made no links between celebrity culture and public issues of any sort and in our survey followers of celebrity culture are least likely to vote.
- 1 People generally have opportunities to talk about public issues, but those opportunities do not link to taking action on those issues.
- 1 Even the most civic diarists may fail to link their civic activism to the wider democratic process, because of a sense their experience is not taken into account.

## HIGHLIGHTS

### Connecting media and public worlds

Most diarists are connected to some sort of public world, and generally this connection is sustained by media consumption. Our research aimed to be responsive to the many public worlds which can sustain people's sense of connection, from traditional politics and local communities to entertainment, 'reality' television and online communities.

Habits are important. Regular news consumption, for example, might compensate for political disillusion or the absence of social contexts to support public connection. Many people feel a duty or social expectation to keep up with the news even if they find it relentlessly depressing – and for most, this still means watching the television news or reading a national newspaper rather than new media.

*'I think it is important they make us aware of what's going on otherwise no one's gonna change... Even if it's hurting and it's horrible you need to know'*

*Kylie, 24, unemployed*

For others, the media give ample reason to turn away from the public world. This may be due to 'compassion fatigue', or the need to relax and switch off after a tough day at work, or because of a feeling that the news is overloaded with irrelevant stories – celebrity in particular was picked out by diarists.

Perhaps more important, however, is the distinction between these sorts of people for whom media makes the difference between connection and disconnection, and those who are *already* oriented towards or turned away from the public world, making the role of the media incidental. Interestingly, primary orientations that would otherwise be seen as positive (to family and social networks) were most likely to be associated with this weak type of connection.

There are many people who follow the latest celebrity gossip or *Big Brother* as part of their media consumption routines, and this can often be the catalyst for social conversations or talk at work.

*'We like anything light-hearted and diverting to entertain us, especially when we're so busy... We haven't talked about the budget or anything serious'*

*Beccy, 27, marketing executive*

However, while celebrity may be diverting or entertaining, for our diarists it is not something which sustains connection to a public world in which issues of shared concern are discussed and resolved. The same is true for those diarists whose primary interests are sport or music.

## Findings: Media Consumption: the future of public connection

Figure 1:  
Media attitudes  
by gender and  
socioeconomic  
status (per cent  
who agree or  
strongly agree)

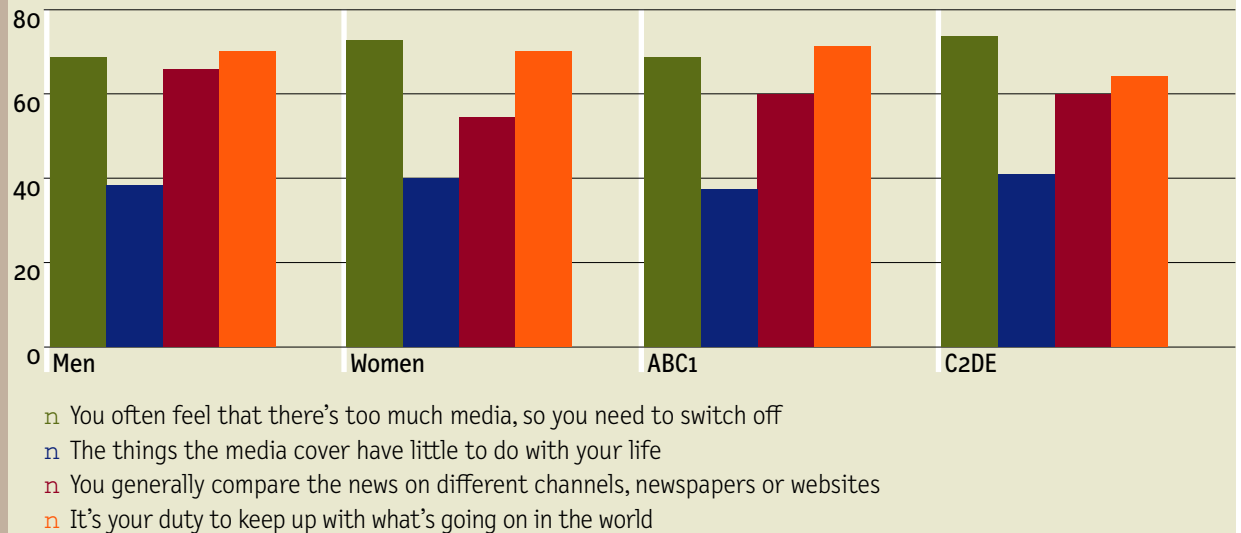
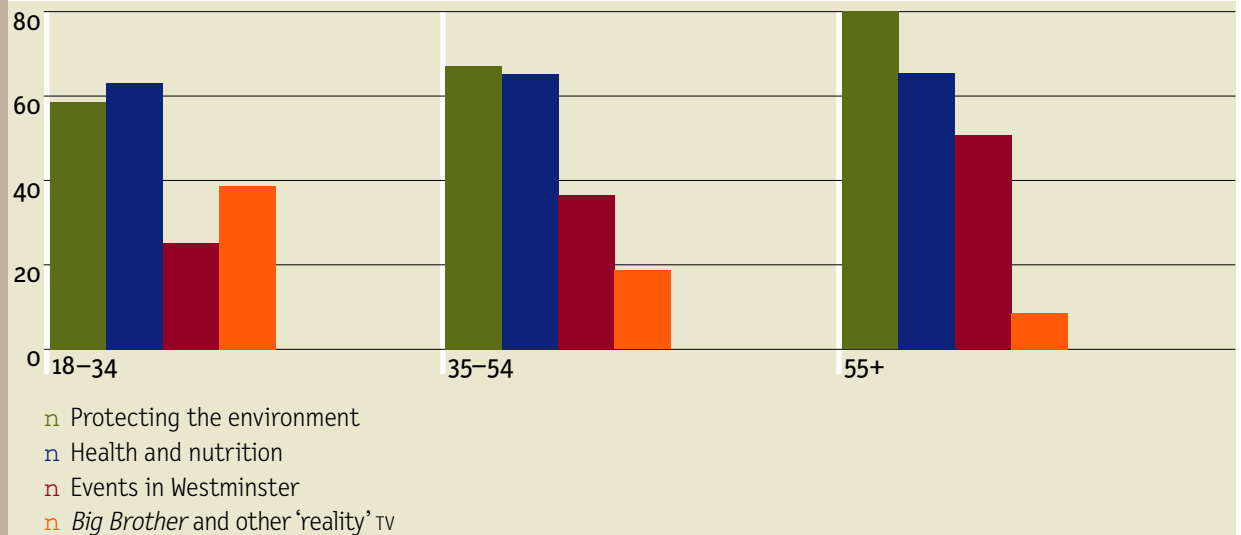


Figure 2:  
Which things do  
you generally  
follow or keep up  
with? By age (per  
cent who say yes)



Most diarists had everyday contexts to talk about public issues, and while some are reluctant to discuss controversial issues, many enjoy debating issues with friends or family. Some people are frustrated that they can't talk about 'serious' things socially.

Significantly, however there was little connection in diarists' accounts between talk and action. While people do talk, and many do in one way or another act publicly, there is scant evidence that people decide to act on the basis of their discussions with family and friends. And even where people are civically active, they don't appear to see this as being linked to the political process.

Turning to the *Public Connection Survey*, most people have mediated public connection (70% consider it a duty to keep up with what's going on in the world), but there is an unconnected minority: 23% consider there's no point watching the news (particularly older and working class people). Yet 80% make watching the news a regular part of their day, even though 44% consider politics has little connection with their life and 40% say the same about the things media cover.

Significant gaps emerge when politics is put under the microscope. 65% say they are interested in politics, but only 21% trust politicians to tell the truth; 81% say they know where to get the information they need, yet 55% feel 'people like us' have no say in what government do. As with the diarists, opportunity structures for action are missing: 73% say they sometimes feel strongly about something but don't know what to do about it.

More important than how much media people consume is *what* they consume, and what their attitudes to the media are. Those who think it is important to keep up with what's going on in the world are likely to be more media literate – and they are also more likely to be interested in politics and to vote. This goes against the claim that the media 'dumb down' politics. However, the one in seven people (mainly women) who particularly follow celebrity culture are also the least likely to vote, while the one in seven who have little interest in keeping up with *any* issues are the most likely to be disengaged from the public world.

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Figure 3:  
Which things do you generally follow or keep up with? By gender and socioeconomic status (per cent who say yes)

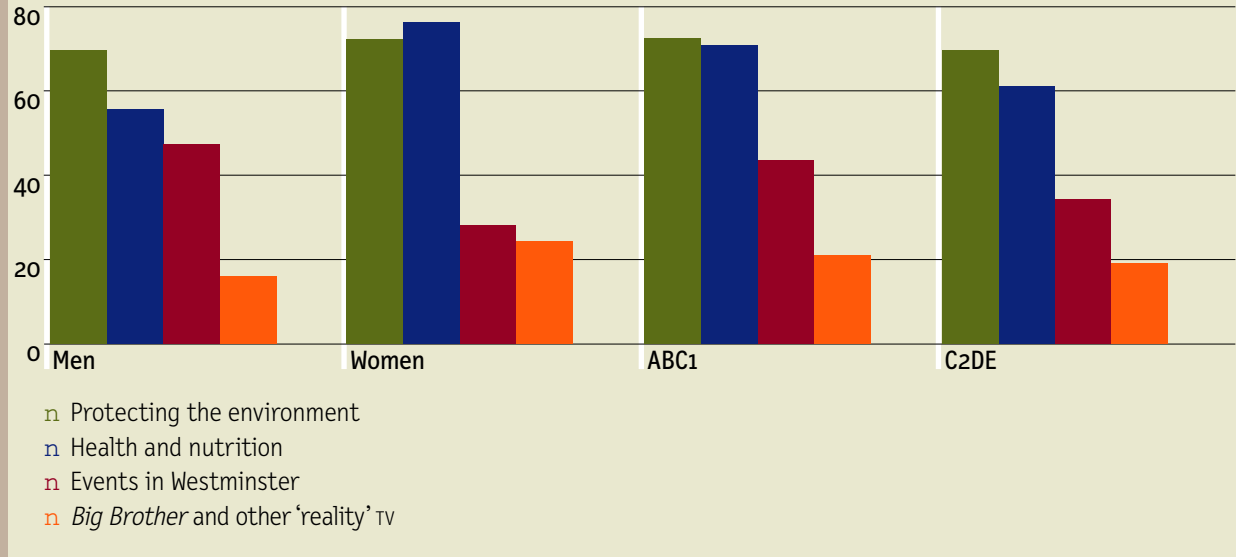
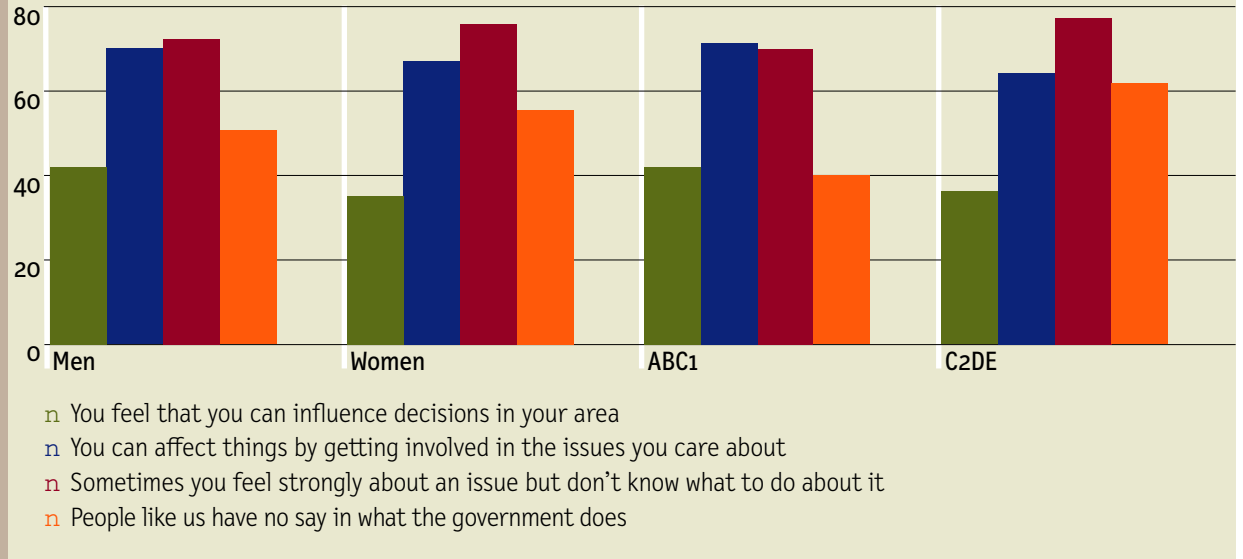


Figure 4:  
Political attitudes by gender and socioeconomic status



**I'll always watch the news...I think the day I stop watching it will be a sad day**



Jonathan, 23, university administrator

### MESSAGES FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Three policy recommendations emerge from the findings:

First, the debate about political disengagement needs to focus much more consistently than before on the consequences of media use – too little account has been taken of people's everyday habits of using media to orientate themselves, or not, towards a public world, through news, documentary and other means. Media consumption plays a subtle role in shaping both engagement with, and disengagement from, a public

world. Crucially it is at the level of **habit**, not the simple availability of media technologies, that media make a difference. Encouraging public-oriented media consumption (across both traditional *and* online media), as well as supporting the growth of media literacy, is central to reversing political disengagement.

Second, mediated public connection by itself is of limited value unless the wider context in which we follow the public world through media is modified. Many citizens, like our diarists, may have a great deal to say about the conduct of public life; yet as the recent *Power Report* (February 2006, visit: [www.powerinquiry.org/report/index.php](http://www.powerinquiry.org/report/index.php)) also noted, opportunities for their views to be taken into account are rare. More such opportunities must be created. Online media are important facilitators, but traditional media also have much to offer, and face-to-face opportunities to speak up and be heard remain crucial.

Third, opportunities for greater citizen involvement are needed in the media process. As our diary data brought out, citizens are well aware of the close interrelations between media and government, and

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are troubled by them, yet have few, if any opportunities, to have these concerns registered. Citizens need more opportunities to attend public fora where they can communicate to media professionals their views about how media present public life: such discussions need to be taken into account both by media professionals and by politicians who are closely involved in the media process.

### BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

*Media Consumption: the future of public connection* was funded by the ESRC/AHRC Cultures of Consumption research programme and ran from October 2003 to March 2005 (grant number: RES-143-25-0011).

The project team – Nick Couldry, Sonia Livingstone and Tim Markham – was based in the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics.

We recruited 37 diarists from six contrasting English regions to produce weekly diaries for three months during 2004. Diarists were interviewed before and after their diaries and participated in regional focus groups. Based on the diary findings, we designed a national telephone survey, conducted by ICM Research in June 2005.

### PUBLICATIONS INCLUDE

- Couldry N., Livingstone S. and Markham T. *Media Consumption and Public Engagement* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, forthcoming 2006).
- Couldry N. 'Culture and Citizenship: The Missing Link?', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 9(3) (2006), pp. 321–339.
- Couldry N., and Markham T. 'Public Connection through Media Consumption: Between Oversocialization and Desocialization?', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 603 (forthcoming 2006).

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## CULTURES OF CONSUMPTION RESEARCH PROGRAMME

The Cultures of Consumption Programme funds research on the changing nature of consumption in a global context. The Programme investigates the different forms, development and consequences of consumption, past and present. Research projects cover a wide range of subjects, from UK public services to drugs in east Africa, London's fashionable West End to global consumer politics. The £5 million Cultures of Consumption Programme is the first to bring together experts from the social sciences and the arts and humanities. It is co-funded by the ESRC and the AHRC.

The aims of the Cultures of Consumption Programme are:

- 1 to understand the practice, ethics and knowledge of consumption
- 1 to assess the changing relationship between consumption and citizenship
- 1 to explain the shifting local, metropolitan and transnational boundaries of cultures of consumption
- 1 to explore consumption in the domestic sphere
- 1 to investigate alternative and sustainable consumption
- 1 to develop an interface between cutting edge academic research and public debate.

For further details take a look at our website [www.consume.bbk.ac.uk](http://www.consume.bbk.ac.uk)

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