

**THE FORGOTTEN DIGITAL DIVIDE  
RESEARCHING SOCIAL EXCLUSION/ INCLUSION IN THE AGE OF  
PERSONALISED MEDIA**

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**Paper to be presented to the Media in Transition: Globalisation and  
Convergence conference, MIT, May 10-12 2002**

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‘[now] we can set out on the enormous task of redefining “the right to the word” that is called for in the information age’.

Melucci (1996: 228)

***(A) Introduction***

Policy concern with the ‘digital divide’ is now, perhaps, past its height, although it has been to some degree translated into other forms. But underlying the flurry of initiatives and documents on the ‘digital divide’ in the 1990s was a wider question, which is not historically contingent and which will not go away. This is the changing relationship between media and democratic participation, or (to put it more loosely, but perhaps more helpfully) between our media consumption and our sense (or not) of connection with a public domain. It is the assumed link between media and democracy that underlies the very idea of a digital divide. The fluency of much debate on the Digital Divide came at the expense of ignoring quite crucial issues about social exclusion, raised by patterns of media use. We need therefore to clear some space for a different set of research priorities. This exploratory paper offers at least one starting-point towards that larger aim.

Thinking about media and citizenship has often divided into two opposed camps. Whereas Baudrillard (1983) and more recently Bourdieu (1998) have argued that media (or at least the media systems we currently have in Europe and North America) contribute to the atrophy of the public sphere,<sup>1</sup> the British media scholars Paddy Scannell (1989) and John Corner (1995) have argued that twentieth century electronic media have broadened, not narrowed, public debate or at least public knowledge about politics in the broadest sense. Electronic broadcast media, as Scannell put it sharply, changed the range of what is ‘talkable about’ (1989: 144), deepening our ‘communicative entitlement’ (1989: 160), that is, our sense of what it means to be addressed as equals in a democratic society.

This is an important debate, but one whose key terms are now in flux. The ‘new media environment’, as the call for this MIT conference suggested, is very much ‘still nascent’. What we mean by ‘media’ is shifting from a largely centralised system of broadcasting and print distribution, to a pattern that, at least, potentially, is more diffuse. It hardly needs emphasising also that the terms ‘citizenship’ and ‘politics’ have been extensively rethought in recent years, as sociologists, political theorists and other commentators have questioned what type of ‘connection’ is possible and desirable for individuals and groups today; in the course of this, the relationship between ‘citizenship’ and ‘politics’ itself has been rethought, with a new emphasis on cultural citizenship as well as citizenship tied to formal politics (McGuigan, 1996; Murdock, 1999; Stevenson, 2000).

If the media/citizenship relation did not dominate 1990s research in the way Graham Murdock called for (1997 [1989]: 83), it is all the more urgent as a focus for our research now. Rather than review past debates, I want to look again at what should be our starting-points. One must be reciprocity. Developing and refining Habermas' concept of the public sphere for contemporary complex, pluralistic societies, deliberative democracy theorists have argued for the centrality of mutuality and recognition: our recognition of each other as agents capable of debating, and reaching shared decisions about, an emergent common good (Benhabib, 1992 and 1995; Cohen, 1995; Guttman and Thompson, 1996; and see for a different approach to similar underlying concerns, Young, 1995). As Nancy Fraser (2000) has argued powerfully, recognition is not opposed to, but closely interwoven with, questions of inequality and therefore the redistribution of society's resources. Although Fraser doesn't push the argument in this particular direction, the link between recognition and redistribution is most compelling in relation to symbolic resources, especially in societies that are characterised by highly unequal distribution of symbolic power. To be recognised as a full participant in a democracy, I need some fair share of society's symbolic resources, so that I have the option (whether or not I always choose to exercise it) to speak and be listened to in my own name. Or at least, this is where questions of reciprocity and mutuality bite (what 'mutuality' do contemporary democracies, channeled through highly concentrated systems of media production, as well as centralised systems of political representation, really allow?).<sup>2</sup>

If you accept that broad starting-point, then it matters than media institutions, whatever other contribution they may make to democratic, are themselves the beneficiaries of such a highly uneven distribution of symbolic power. Once we take this seriously, then we have an alternative entry-point for grasping the inequalities at the heart of the relationship between media and citizenship. Our starting-point, I suggest, must be that contemporary media systems, and the immense concentration of symbolic power they constitute, generate a dimension of social inequality in their own right (Couldry, 2000a: 7-8, cf Melucci, 1996: 179),<sup>3</sup> which is negotiated and lived with in various ways. This is the other side of thinking about the Digital Divide, the forgotten dimension of that loosely used term. This will be explained more fully in the later sections of this paper.

### ***The Gap in Research***

First however we must be quite clear in rejecting some influential existing approaches to the relationship between media and democratic participation, which would seem to reduce the problem of the Digital Divide, at the same time as, in fact, they obscure it.

#### Digital Divide or Digital Fudge?

My first example is the huge area of public debate and policy-making around the 'digital divide' itself. In the second half of the 1990s, many national and international organisations became exercised by the possibility that new media technologies (above all, the explosive growth of the Internet and World Wide Web) would widen, not narrow, global inequalities. While the main arena for this concern was international, in some cases (the US under Clinton, the UK under Blair) this concern was given a national focus as well; if inequalities in access to the Internet, or other media, are

most extreme at the international level, they can hardly be ignored within nations either.

The motivation for such concern was always at least partly economic: projected exponential growth in markets from the new online connections between consumers and businesses became an exponential loss of opportunity, if viewed from the point of view of the shortfall in market growth represented by those who could not afford a computer, modem, or even the cost of the local phone call that linked them to a server. The gap between early cyberhype and brutal economic reality was so obvious in development contexts that different approaches had to be found, and the increasing emphasis on establishing social or public access to new media technologies, through telecentres and the like, was designed to address this. The West's vision of a virtual consumer revolution needed major adjustment when, as one helpful recent report put it,<sup>4</sup> 'a minimum of 676 million households worldwide – almost all of them in developing countries – would be unable to afford private rather than public access to telecommunications', let alone computers and operating software. Yet public access to media is not a straightforward answer to the digital divide, once one takes account of the constraints which public access sites often involve for users (Clark, 2001).

In spite, or perhaps because, of the obvious problems in addressing the digital divide seriously – problems which remain unresolved on the agenda of various international task forces – the rhetoric has recently shifted in some quarters from 'Digital Divide' to 'Digital Opportunity'. This blows the cover on the underlying market imperatives fairly conclusively.<sup>5</sup> Leading the way here were the proposals submitted by the World Economic Forum to the G-8 Kyushu-Okinawa 2000 summit, under the title 'From The Global Digital Divide to the Global Digital Opportunity'. This argued that:

'instead of fixating on the existence of a divide, it would be far better to focus our attention on the "global digital opportunity", because that is what really confronts us today – an unprecedented opportunity to move swiftly up the path towards global digital development.' (World Economic Forum, 2000: 10)

In case you imagined that the word 'opportunity' carried with it here some sense of reversing the social inequalities which 'digital divide' still implies, page 3 of the report removes any doubt when in introducing the new term it talks about 'extraordinary opportunities to substantially increase [ICT's] diffusion and use for the purpose of promoting rapid development in the years ahead'. In other words, the opportunity not so much to avoid social exclusion and division, as to expand markets.

Even where digital divide talk remains current, it involves a fairly shallow notion of the divides to which media technologies can give rise. It is inequalities in ownership of media technologies that are discussed, with much less (if any) emphasis on use, let alone effective use for the purposes of citizenship. Here is a passage from one of the more reflective and considered reports in the field, a summary report of the Joint OECD/ UN/ UNDP/ World Bank Global Forum that met in March 2001 under the title 'Exploiting the Digital Opportunities for Poverty Reduction':

'There are imaginative ways to appeal to children and youths - through brand names, sport or entertainment stars, kids clubs where they can play or make e-mail friends around the world. Once they are engaged the media can then be used to

pass important information, for example on sexual health, HIV/AIDS.’ (OECD, 2001, para 10)

Entertainment or public health information is the most ambitious target for broadening access. The most recent in an important series of US Department of Commerce reports under the title ‘Falling Through the Net’ dealt with the US digital divide in terms purely of access, rather than capacities or quality of use,<sup>6</sup> yet carried a glowing summary by then Secretary of Commerce, Norman Mineta: ‘I am pleased that the data in this report show that, over all, our Nation is moving toward full digital inclusion’ (US Department of Commerce, 2000: 2). To speak of ‘full digital inclusion’ surely assumes a knowledge of the shape of future mediated societies that we still lack, as well as going beyond the scope of the statistics available in the report. But the problem arises not just at the level of government rhetoric. As Lynn Clark (in an illuminating study of what public computer access for the ‘underserved’ actually meant in one Denver centre) argues, ‘the [simple] emphasis on technological solutions leaves to the margins any other considerations, including those that would influence how the technology might actually be used to meet social goals’ (Clark, 2001). The connections between media access and citizenship issues are in such practice thin indeed.

Sometimes in these debates, more serious concerns have been raised about the questions underlying digital divide rhetoric. For example, a recent British Government report on ‘E-Government’ acknowledged that ‘skills and access’ are not the same as sustained, voluntary use, and therefore nominal access headcounts barely grasp the social exclusion issues raised by virtual government initiatives: as the report says, ‘it has to be accepted that some citizens will not want or will not be able to be direct users of new technologies’ (UK Cabinet Office, 2001a: 8). Another report for the UK government acknowledged that ‘policies that promote home [ICT] access without a range of public support options could seriously delay the development of the UK as a connected society’ (Harris and Dudley, 2000). The UK Cabinet Office Report ‘Closing the Digital Divide’ acknowledged the ‘urgent need for comprehensive data’ on the relative unwillingness of the most disadvantaged groups to take up new media ‘opportunities’ (UK Cabinet Office, 2001b: section 3.3). This last report references, in passing, an innovative US study by the Children’s Partnership that researched extensively whether ‘low-income and underserved Americans’ were satisfied with the online content that they accessed. The US report found that ‘a new dimension of the digital divide is beginning to take shape, one with a profound impact on young people and those who guide and teach them: content’ (Children’s Partnership, 2000: 12). That is, the lack of accessible, comprehensible content that would help the disadvantaged to improve their position (through training courses, job searches and so on), or simply feel a sense of community. The same report (page 21) suggested that ‘appropriate content’ was not enough: people ‘want to be in a place where others in their community are doing the same thing and where they can count on coaching and support their confidence, answer the questions and guide them in new directions’. In other words, a serious attempt to address the digital divide requires attention to the social context of media use and the dimensions of social and symbolic exclusion against which it has to take effect. This realisation sometimes appears ‘in code’ in official reports, which speak, for example, of the need for ‘[ICT] knowledge acquired and adapted to local needs’,<sup>7</sup> but talking in code is not enough, if these difficulties are to be properly addressed.

Against this background, a wider concern takes shape: given that most new media use (like most media use generally) is purely 'instrumental' (Castells, 2001: 116), will the original grand hopes of the Internet re-connecting individual citizens to public spaces be succeeded by the sort of 'intensified privatism' that was the long-term destiny of the telephone (Fischer, 1992)?

### Whose Virtuous Circle?

Supposing my concerns about the superficiality of digital divide debates were answered in the medium term, at least pragmatically, because some degree of Internet access became the norm in developed countries. Suppose, indeed, that the numbers expressing no interest in connection to the Internet in developed countries continued falling to a small group, as perhaps the first two UCLA Internet surveys suggest might happen (UCLA, 2000 and 2001). Would that mean that my wider concerns about citizenship and symbolic inequality were answered too, so we could move onto other questions? I will argue no: even universal media access does not mean equality of symbolic resources (no more in the case of new media, than with 'old' media). To get clear on this, however, we must deal with the implications of a powerful position recently argued by the Harvard political scientist, Pippa Norris.

Pippa Norris in her book *A Virtuous Circle* (2000) tries to demolish once and for all the long tradition of arguments that media, or at least our media systems in the US and Europe, hinder, rather than support, democracy. Norris' is an important argument, not least because of the rhetorical sweep of its claims, and it scores some effective points against any simple notion either that today's media give us less information about politics than before, or that media consumption itself breeds mistrust in politics. Because my paper is not concerned with the media/politics relation in detail, I will dwell on only one aspect (or rather blind-spot) of her book.

The boldest part of Norris' book, which she admits is partly speculative, is the argument that justifies its title: the claim that the overall, cumulative impacts of media on political engagement are systematically positive, creating a 'virtuous circle'. On the one hand, those who are already engaged in politics (who will generally be of higher education and economic status) use news media more and the more they use such media, the higher their levels of underlying trust in politics, in a positive feedback loop; on the other hand, those who are already disengaged from politics (who will generally be of lower education and economic status) use news media less, but in any case are 'inoculated' against any negative impacts of media coverage of politics by that pre-existing disengagement (2000: 18-19, 305, 317).

Taking the first part of her argument, Norris freely admits that without longitudinal data (of which we would surely need a great deal!) there is no possibility of proving the direction of causality: at most she can show that high media use is correlated with high political trust (2000: 19, 316). Even so, she suggests, with only minimal empirical evidence (2000: 249-50), that we should think of the direction of causality going in both directions (i.e. media usage and media trust in the case of high scorers reinforce each other positively). Turning to the second part of her argument, her evidence only shows, once more, that low media use is correlated with low political trust. But in this case, without any empirical evidence to support her move, she rules

out the possibility that the influence is two-way. If that were the case, of course, there would be a vicious circle for low media users, not a virtuous one. It is easier for Norris to ignore that possibility because (2000: 5, 252-53) she refuses to consider any suggestion that media impacts work in more subtle ways than can be shown from vast opinion surveys. What if media affect how people frame social and political space and their place in it? If she had not blocked off this line of argument in advance, she might have addressed the possibility that her evidence is consistent with a less upbeat conclusion: that media (at some level, that we need to do more to understand) reinforce pre-existing divisions between the engaged and the disengaged, the already included and the already excluded. 'Reinforce' those divisions indeed, rather than create them *de novo* (to that extent Norris' argument is probably convincing), but this does not mean such reinforcement is so insignificant that it can be ignored in signing our mediated democracies' bill of health.

It is this possibility – that the whole pattern of media production, based as it is in a highly unequal distribution of symbolic power, reinforces broader patterns of social inclusion or exclusion – which a tradition of political science literature (ignored by Norris) addresses: Edelman (1988), Gamson (1992), Eliasoph (1998). How precisely, and to what extent, media can be seen to reinforce some people's sense of exclusion from the political sphere (in the narrow sense) is very difficult to research. Eliasoph makes a subtle argument that the workings of US local news undermine the possibility of seeing local issues as part of the wider political field (2000: chapter 8). Gamson's focus-group research on the relationship between US media coverage of key political issues and the frames through which people understand those issues as relevant to their actions (what Gamson calls 'collective action frames') does not yield simple conclusions (cf Gamson, 2001). I can hardly therefore take these questions further here. What is clear, however, is that this area must be researched, whether or not it is amenable to methodologies reliant on large data-sets and impersonal surveys.<sup>8</sup> We must at least ask whether particular media forms and systems encourage a sense of political, or social, agency, or whether they work to undermine it (see for a useful study of children's news media which reflects on how they affect children's sense of agency, Buckingham, 2000, especially 204-5).

In other words, if we want to think seriously about the Digital Divide in the broadest sense, we should think about the structure of participation (and non-participation) in symbolic production which the media themselves comprise. Narrow research agendas, such as Norris', fail to grasp the possibility of a wider pattern: that the concentration of media production is linked in researchable ways to people's sense of self-worth and their place (or lack of it) in the wider public sphere. Such questions can be approached from at least two angles. One approach would attempt to trace people's sense of their place in the traditional media system, where, whatever the popularity of many of its products, there is almost always a sharp divide between a small group which makes media and vast numbers who 'merely' consume media; I have analysed the implications of this division elsewhere (Couldry, 2000a and 2001).

Another approach, which I will discuss further here, remains orientated to that same question – of how the distribution of symbolic resources in particular systems of media production resonates with, or perhaps reinforces, other social divisions – but with the emphasis on the future. What social form will the new media environment take in the longer term? Will it remain a form of 'social division' (as Baudrillard once

put it: 1981, 169) or will some different, less concentrated distribution of symbolic power emerge, no longer so focussed around particular centres of media production and channels of media distribution? This question underlies recent debates on the decline of civic participation (Putnam, 2000) and its connection with levels of public knowledge (Milner, 2002; cf Lewis, 2001). This is also the larger sociological question within which research on the Digital Divide needs to be framed.

### *Keeping the Debate Open*

Before I try to make that research question more concrete, let me run through more briefly some reasons why such a research agenda needs to be explicitly defended.

There are now multiple pressures to close off the space from which arguments for a more inclusive social, political and media sphere can be mounted. One pressure is the intense professionalisation of politics and political marketing, whose consequence is to redefine politics as the provision of differently crafted messages to separate groups without any consistent wider vision (Gandy, 2001), the chillingly named ‘universe reduction’ in the political realm. Another force, which emerged clearly for the first time in Nina Eliasoph’s remarkable empirical work, is the pressure (whose precise causes are difficult to disentangle) that discourages US citizens from talking in a ‘public-spirited’ way (that, is ‘politically’ in the broadest sense) outside of the most private arenas (Eliasoph, 1998). The media’s role in this ‘evaporation of politics’ is not finally resolved by Eliasoph, but if her diagnosis is even half-right for the US case, then we must think more widely about the risk that politics will atrophy completely, and with it any sense that exclusion from the mediated political sphere even matters. Deep-seated inequalities of representation (whether in relation to the political or the media system) will then be fully naturalised.<sup>9</sup>

There are broader pressures too, perhaps, that make political atrophy seem natural, rather than a scandal. The opaqueness of the wider public world (global economic forces, downsizing, and so on) surely does not encourage people to find new ways of getting connected with the public sphere and using media as a resource for such connections. As Richard Sennett has argued in his powerful dissection of the new flexible work ethic, the undermining of the ‘sense of mutual dependence’ in and beyond work bodes ill for an interest in civic affairs (1999: 139, 130). There is the question too, of whether today’s market-based entertainment universe provides any real scope for children (or indeed adults) to discover ‘non-market based democratic identities’ (Giroux, 2000: 11): space, that is, where politics in the broadest sense (open debate towards common values and decisions) has not already been crowded out by corporate rhetoric. We are facing perhaps a ‘vacuum in recognition’ (Honneth, 1995: 229): a lack of spaces in which we might recognise each other as potential participants in anything that approximates to politics. If true, then this is both a problem for politics itself and another aspect of symbolic inequality in a world where a few are intensely recognised as agents in public space and the rest live in their shadow.

In addition, it is always and necessarily difficult to see the symbolic dimension to social inequalities: the sense of not belonging, or not being represented, that may lie unnoticed and unarticulated within a supposedly popular media culture (Couldry, 2000b, chapter 3), precisely because it is this gap that popularising rhetoric claims to



fill. It is to counteract the top-down diagnoses of both cultural commentators and sociologists that Pierre Bourdieu (1999) has argued for the importance of grasping the complex ‘space of points of view’ in which individuals may feel excluded, yet have mutually incompatible perceptions of the social world and their position in it. There is, then, potentially a gap – not the result of poor research, or wilful neglect, but a gap that is genuinely difficult to see ‘from above’ – between the rhetoric that connects us to the wider polity and the everyday realities of disconnection and exclusion. One form of this is the gap between media and their supposed ‘object’ – the ‘ordinary person’ who (by definition) is a receiver, not a producer, of messages – a gap, which is hidden within the media’s glare, even if it is also its precondition.

### ***The Media and Social Exclusion/ Inclusion: Towards a New Research Agenda***

In the rest of this paper, I want, not to convince you that this gap exists, but to explore what an agenda for researching the Digital Divide and, more broadly, mediated citizenship would look like if it were based on respecting, not suppressing, the possibility that it might.

#### An Outline of a New Approach

In earlier work (Couldry, 2000a), I looked at how the unequal distribution of society’s symbolic resources is legitimated. Society’s symbolic power – ‘the power of constructing reality’ (Bourdieu, 1991: 166) – is heavily, although of course not exclusively, concentrated in media institutions. This is not to deny that many other social forces compete for attention and power through the media frame, but to insist that this fact in itself is a fundamental dimension of power that sociology has often neglected. The media’s concentration of symbolic power, I argued, is legitimated indirectly through a vast society-wide process of naturalisation; media institutions’ historical struggle to focus more and more of our networks of signification have merged into our ‘nature’, the ‘habitus’ (in Bourdieu’s most general sense of the term) of mediated societies.

If so, then the uneven distribution of the resources to speak and be heard effectively through the media (and the gulf in symbolic resources that separates the ‘media person’ from the non-media, or ‘ordinary’, person) is easily forgotten, simply because it is so embedded in everyday reality. And yet it matters, if we take seriously the principle (mentioned in the introduction) that a deliberative democracy should be based on mutuality. The symbolic dimensions to contemporary inequality cannot safely be ignored (cf Murdock, 2000).

At the same time, the whole landscape within which it makes sense to talk about people as having a large or small share of society’s symbolic resources is changing, as already suggested. On the one hand, the structure of the media field is changing with a massive increase and diversification of media production (society’s symbolic production has increased in absolute terms: Melucci, 1996: 177). It is uncertain therefore how important today’s concentrations of media production will seem in future assessments of the distribution of symbolic power (Couldry, 2000a: chapter 9); it is unlikely, for example, that the Web will increasingly be used by non-media people to distribute their own video productions, but it cannot be ruled out. On the other hand, the set of spaces to which we might think of ourselves as connected as

citizens (and therefore potentially disadvantaged by the uneven distribution of the resources to speak up there) is itself in flux. The question of where exactly we might belong is a potent one. Without accepting that we can simply abandon the term ‘society’ (contra Urry, 2000), and certainly without accepting that we might treat with equanimity the atrophy of national political spaces, we must acknowledge that there are few clear signposts from which to discern the future relationship between media and citizenship, or therefore the long-term consequences of a continued ‘digital divide’.

How can we develop a research agenda in this flux? Certainly, there are problems in reading off social consequences from the development of this or that media form. New forms of talk show or reality television, for example, have at various times been seen as positive signs of greater inclusiveness of the public sphere and perhaps therefore in the long-term of a concrete shift in the distribution of symbolic power. But there are problems in judging such programmes in isolation from long-term research into the self-images that they do (or do not) encourage in those who watch or appear in them (cf Eliasoph, 1998: 260). In any case, it is exceptionally difficult, if not impossible, to trace clear effects from particular media productions to changes in social life.<sup>10</sup>

It is here that the limitations of all but the most imaginative<sup>11</sup> survey-based research becomes obvious. Large-scale current Internet surveys (Annenberg, 2001; Pew, 2002; UCLA, 2000 and 2001), while they contain interesting basic material on patterns of use, tell us very little about how Internet access might make a difference to people’s sense of connection to wider civic spaces; indeed, while they do show that information is a key, and perhaps the dominant, reason for accessing the Internet, the information accessed seems to have very little connection with spaces of citizenship. This does not necessarily mean there are no such links (Center for Media Education, 2001), but it may mean that those links are too subtle to emerge from a large-scale telephone survey.

An alternative approach, which I have recently been developing, is to start out, apparently more loosely, from people’s own reflections on the relationship between the resources (informational, imaginative) with which media provide them and their own conceptions of their needs as participants in a democratic public space. I am putting these questions into practice in pilot research at present and will move from there into larger-scale research. Clearly, this is a broad research framework rather than a narrow research question. It represents a decision about how research on media and citizenship should be orientated, but encompasses many different research applications, for example the particular impacts of new or old media technologies (such as interactive digital television with all its uncertainties). With that qualification made, let me bring out some detailed choices that lie behind this research orientation.

First, it prioritises people’s own reflections about how their media consumption is connected with their participation in the public realm. We need, as the political sociologist William Gamson emphasised, to take very seriously people’s practice as ‘thinking individuals’ (1992: xii). If connection is perplexing to us as researchers, then why rule out the possibility that many of those we interview are perplexed by it too? Indeed, if our connectedness, or lack of connectedness, to wider spaces and forces is a source of perplexity to researchers and researched alike, then as George

Marcus (1999) has recently argued, this ‘complicity’ of concern is one way of rethinking the ethics of ethnographic or qualitative research.

Second, if we take our interviewees’ reflexivity seriously, we must frame our research questions in a way that leaves enough space for uncertainty about the status of such fundamental terms as ‘politics’ and ‘citizenship’, hence my preference for looser terms such as ‘participation’ and ‘connection’. The underlying question remains: what is our connection with wider spaces where debate about shared goals and values is possible? That is, spaces of ‘politics’ in the broad sense that Nina Eliasoph (1998: 18) insists upon: talk about ‘what is worthy of public debate, what is important, what is good and right’. Where exactly we might imagine that space to exist must be left open in the research question, precisely for interviewees to reflect upon. Equally, we must allow space for interviewees to describe their own terms where they look for media resources to meet their needs as participants in that wider space. As Della Carpini and Williams (2001) have argued, old divisions between ‘news’ and ‘not news’ no longer hold up in today’s media flows, which is not to say that this blurring of the old boundaries around the political sphere is necessarily positive (Meyrowitz, 1992; Morley, 1999). ‘Needs’ here is the important term, however, not market-based ‘demand’, since to reflect on one’s needs involves some bracketing of the constraints that particular market conditions impose on what can be ‘demanded’. It is ‘needs’, not temporary market ‘demand’, that must be satisfied, if the real challenge of the ‘digital divide’ is to be addressed (cf Ernberg, 1998: 6). And, as important new work by the Glasgow Media Group (2001) suggests and as many have long suspected, the fact that people tolerate their current sources of public information does not mean that, if an alternative were presented to them, they would still be satisfied with what they have.

Third, reflexivity, while a vital starting-point, cannot be the end of the research, because we always need to look at the relationship between thought and action. Reflexivity, especially when recorded in the artificiality of the research setting, may involve retrospective adjustments or rationalisations, as well as unrealistic projections into the future. The very act of reflecting out of the flow of everyday life on such abstract questions carries its own distortions; it does not yield simple research ‘truths’ (Bourdieu, 1999: 63). Interviews must therefore be supplemented by evidence about actions: practices of media use and also practices of social and political connection. The licence of the interview situation may differ markedly from the constraints on such speech and reflection that operate in other contexts, including those where choices about media consumption or political connection usually arise: we must take account of the impacts of people’s ‘beliefs about what it is right to say’ in this place, and wrong to say in that place (Eliasoph, 1998: 244). The regulation of talk produces gaps and silences in our speech, to which talk-based research must be sensitive, even as it tries to challenge those silences.

#### Detailed methodological issues

As explained, it is difficult to refine empirical questions on media consumption and citizenship in such a way that does justice to the complexity and uncertainty of the issues. There are some further methodological difficulties in this area which are also worth discussing.

We have to face the real and inevitable variations in how agents imagine they are and should be connected to a wider world. Different people will give different priority to different types of connection. This emerges from Leslie Haddon's research on how people vary in the connections with family, groups, and the local public sphere that they prioritise in the context of their media use (Haddon, 1998, discussed in Mansell and Steinmueller: 2000 49-50). It also emerges very clearly in Nina Eliasoph's fieldwork on different US suburban groups: some were involved in campaigning organisation and took for granted their responsibilities to a wider public sphere; others saw the social world solely in terms of individual action, and literally could make no sense of such public-oriented action. There are radical disagreements between people about how and to what end one's immediate domestic and social world should be more widely connected: precisely what we would expect in a society where vast numbers are 'represented' by relatively small political and symbolic centres. 'Tuning out' cannot be dismissed in advance as an irrational response to the current state of politics (cf Buckingham, 2000: 68-70 in relation to children's alienation from the mainstream political sphere).

Methodologically, it is vital that in framing questions for interviewees we avoid building in the researcher's assumptions about what forms of wider connection are rational or desirable. We should expect that people take up some quite complex positions simultaneously 'inside' and 'outside' dominant systems of representation (cf Melucci, 1996: 309). We also need to be sensitive – as part of the complexity of the media/citizenship question – to the possibility that agents are ambiguous about whether they are connected or not, withdrawn or not. This emerges quite powerfully from Ron Lembo's subtle account of people's routine television viewing choices. Using television each night to 'switch off' from work, while it on the face of it disconnects the agent from, for example, the political aspects of media coverage, is not necessarily an intentional act of disengagement. It is a choice through television to frame a space for individual thought that may not exist in the working day; how that, quite private, space is used, may not exclude politics. Even so, the unintended effect of such practices may be to cut those agents off from sources of political information or wider social connection, and locate them within what Lembo calls a 'disengaged sociality' 'that is situated outside the logic of social action depicted in images, but not outside the logic of images themselves' (Lembo, 2000: 239). Here, we return to the wider ethical implications of our embedding in a media-saturated world. But it is important that analytical questions are kept separate from moral judgements: who is the researcher (someone with a relatively privileged share of society's symbolic resources) to say that political disengagement is not an intelligent response to an individual's sense of powerlessness in the face of corporate dominance of culture (Lembo, 2000: 241)? The place where moral judgements come in – and they must, as Henry Giroux's important work on media consumption insists – is in framing research priorities and, after completion of research, thinking more widely about its implications. We need both utopian thinking (in Bloch's sense of thinking about the 'not yet': Giroux, 2001, chapter 5) and clear-sighted engagement with what it means to live with inequalities of symbolic power without remission.

### Current Pilot Research

I am under no illusion about the difficulty of researching these questions; it is a long-term task. I want however to make some preliminary comments on the related pilot

project currently under way at the LSE. Since the pilot is still proceeding, these comments are necessarily tentative.

This pilot has two elements: analysis of responses to a series of questions asked on media and citizenship by the panel of diary-writers maintained by the Mass-Observation Archive at Sussex University, and interviews with people in the London area. I can only comment on the first, as the second part of the project is still proceeding. The main point of the pilot was not to reach definitive conclusions, but to test out possible questions for tapping into people's reflections on the difficult question of media and citizenship. The more people do, in fact, feel disconnected from public arenas, the more difficult it is likely to be to ask them effective questions about the connections between media and citizenship: they may be reluctant to answer such questions or they may simply not see their point.

This underlying methodological problem came out in a number of panel responses. One woman (a 54-year-old administrative worker) admitted she had difficulty in answering the questions we had asked. Her self-deprecating comment suggested however a deeper level of disconnection: 'I'm sure it must be me: perhaps I'm fed up with "issues" of any sort'. Another woman said she was too depressed to answer questions of this sort. Others were more articulate about the difficulty, but in a way that revealed why general survey data is unlikely to get us very far in this area. As one man (a 76-year-old retired typesetter) put it:

I find it difficult to answer the question on whether I have enough information to be a full and active member of a democratic society as I do not feel I am living in one. (added emphasis)

Our panel responses revealed a significant level of dissatisfaction with media outputs in terms of whether they provide the resources people need to be active citizens: more than 50% expressed overall dissatisfaction on this point, although the result must be qualified by reference to the unusual nature of this sample (which was skewed to the over-50s and the retired, as is the Mass-Observation panel overall). Even so, the links between dissatisfaction with media and wider forms of disconnection were often striking and moving:

I don't feel confident that the representation I am given is that truthful and there is no simple way round that . . . I don't feel connected at all. (24-year-old woman)

We live in a media world. There are eyes everywhere, but we still know nothing. We still see nothing. (22-year-old female postgraduate student)

Being a full and active member of a democratic society is I fear something that few of us will ever be. (70-year-old retired sub-postmistress)

I feel permanently out of step with the rest of society. (58-year-old woman, ex-bookkeeper)

In a word, big business and the profit motive have left me utterly powerless. I am not a fool, nor illiterate, but have no absolutely no power or influence in Britain today . (Man, 57-year-old retired teacher)

The last respondent, however, reflecting many respondents' hopes for the Internet, even those of non-users, commented more positively: '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'.

Until debates on the digital divide, and on media and citizenship generally, are sensitive enough to take account of such levels of ingrained dissatisfaction, they will do nothing but scratch the surface.

### ***Conclusion***

Where does this leave us? It leaves us, as suggested by my opening quotation from Alberto Melucci – a still relatively neglected source of insight, incidentally, in studying symbolic politics and symbolic inequality – at the start of an 'enormous task' of redefining 'the right to the word' in the so-called 'information age'. Whose information exactly, about what and whom, is usually left unclear, or worse unasked, when that phrase is invoked. That this isn't a simple question was confirmed graphically by one 76-year-old woman from the Mass-Observation Panel who responded to my pilot questions:

I don't want to be a full and active member of this stinking society. So I have no idea if the Information Age delivers adequate information. Doubt it.

The normative question of redefining what rights people have to be included as producers as well as consumers in new flows of information and images is, perhaps, some way in the future – and in any case a question not only for sociologists. But as a precondition it requires us to research how people – across the social spectrum, but all potentially beneficiaries of today's expanded media resources - are imagining and enacting their position in the public spaces that the 'information age' in principle makes possible.

I have argued that, if we are serious about the 'mutuality' underlying deliberative democracy and about the digital divide that policy-makers have raised and largely fudged, then we must look seriously at whether the conditions of mutuality in large complex societies are genuinely helped, or hindered, by media flows, and if hindered, how people live with the consequences. Beneath the easy rhetorics of 'connection' there may be a great deal of disconnection, a sense of not belonging, that, necessarily, lacks easy words with which to define itself. To quote Eliasoph once more: 'not only are dominated people powerless, they lack the power to name their own powerlessness; the lack is itself a kind of powerlessness' (1998: 235). My aim has not been to show this is true, but to flesh out what research into mediated citizenship, and its changing dynamics, might look like if it were orientated towards that sad possibility.

At the end of his eloquent book on the social disconnections that are being endorsed by the new 'flexible' work ethic, Richard Sennett writes that 'a regime that provides human beings no deep reasons to care about one other cannot long preserve its legitimacy' (1999: 148). Sennett is talking about the conditions of work, but as his book brings out so well, work is (or at least was) one of the main ways that people

acquire the ability to tell stories about themselves that connect them to wider public spaces. If such domains of narrative are threatened, there are wider consequences. Another Mass-Observation panel respondent in my pilot study (a 66 year-old retired female nurse) made this link very effectively:

If my views counted as nothing after 50 years doing the job which I knew about, why should they count about other things I know less about?

The broader question, then, is: to study how and under what constraints, and with what assistance (or otherwise) from new media resources, are people now constructing a sense of connection to wider public spaces, spaces of potential politics and citizenship – or not? Do new media, any more than old, improve our chances of constructing a public space in which we can address each other as effective equals? Whether we face that research question as optimists or pessimists, we can agree at least, perhaps, on the need, through our research, to listen to what others have to say on that question.

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### *Acknowledgements*

Many thanks to STICERD (The Suntory and Toyota Centers for Economics and Related Disciplines) for their financial support of the pilot study ‘The Dispersed Citizen: Personal Media and the Future of the Public Sphere’ discussed in this paper and to the staff of the Mass-Observation Archive, Sussex University, particularly Dorothy Sheridan and Joy Eldridge, for their help and support to this project. Thanks also to Ana Langer for being an excellent research assistant on it. Thanks finally to Professor Peter Golding and the Media Research Network of the European Sociological Association for comments provided in their sessions in Helsinki in August 2001 on an earlier version of my argument.

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<sup>1</sup> Although he was the original reference-point of such debates, I leave out Habermas for the purposes of my comparison, since his position has recently shifted (compare Habermas (1996) with (1989)).

<sup>2</sup> See for an interesting recent discussion of the importance of the principle of reciprocity Young (1999).

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<sup>3</sup> Although this question has been relatively neglected in media studies, there have been some key signposts, such as Stuart Hall's early work. See Couldry (2000a: chapter 1) for discussion, and see also Foucault, (1979).

<sup>4</sup> Commonwealth Telecommunications Organisation (2001: 23).

<sup>5</sup> For discussion, see Gill and Pratt (2001).

<sup>6</sup> See the admission in the Report (Part II, see first paragraph under heading 'Location of Internet Use'): 'although this survey did not collect data on the intensity or the quality of Internet use, where an individual uses the Internet – at home, away from home, or both - probably reflects some degree of the quality of his or her Internet access' (my emphasis).

<sup>7</sup> Dotforce (2001: 8); cf IBRD/ World Bank (2000: 1).

<sup>8</sup> On the limitations of opinion-poll based research in relation to such larger issues, see also Bennett and Entman (2001: 9).

<sup>9</sup> To be fair, Norris (2000: 15) does acknowledge this worrying possibility at one point, but it does not shape the rest of her argument.

<sup>10</sup> For development of a sceptical argument about the significance of talk shows and 'reality television', see Couldry (forthcoming, chapters 6 and 7).

<sup>11</sup> I make this qualification to allow for the excellent work on public knowledge (or lack of it) by Justin Lewis (2001).