Public Connection through Media Consumption: Between Oversocialization and De-Socialization?

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This article reviews the ongoing contribution of *Personal Influence* to our understanding of media's social consequences from the perspective of recent research (the London School of Economics "Public Connection" project, 2003-2006, conducted by the authors and Sonia Livingstone) into the extent to which shared habits of media consumption help sustain, or not, U.K. citizens' orientation to a public world. As well as reviewing specific findings of the Public Connection project that intersect with themes of *Personal Influence* (particularly on citizens' networks of social interaction and the available discursive contexts in which they can put their mediated knowledge of the public world to use), the article reviews the methodological similarities and differences between this recent project and that of Katz and Lazarsfeld. The result, the authors conclude, is to confirm the continued salience of the questions about the social embeddedness of media influences that Katz and Lazarsfeld posed.

Keywords: media consumption; public connection; talk; diary methodology

We are suggesting . . . that the response of an individual . . . cannot be accounted for without reference to his social environment and to the character of his interpersonal relations.
——Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955, 25)

Part of us is immersed in world culture, but, because there is no longer a public space where social norms could be formed and applied, another part of us retreats into hedonism or looks for a sense of belonging that is more immediate . . . both individuals and groups are therefore less and less defined by the social relations which until now defined the field of sociology, whose goal was to explain behaviour in terms of the social relations in which actors were involved.
——Touraine (2000, 5-6)

Katz and Lazarsfeld's *Personal Influence* (1955) was a major step forward in our understanding of "media" as complex processes of

mediation. By asking about the contribution of "person-to-person communica-tion" to the circulation of media-sourced information and opinion (p. 1), Katz and Lazarsfeld marked a shift away from a research paradigm dominated by a concern with media's rhetorical power over "masses"[1] toward a more fine-grained account of how media messages filter through the intricate networks of social life. From this perspective, the fact that the influences they chose to track specifically were largely banal and short-term (choice of a fashion or a movie, an opinion about a current news story) rather than major and long term (the adoption of values, or political allegiances) was potentially an advantage, since it prioritized the question of how media have social consequences in the ordinary run of things. This empha-sis remains important. It is reflected in recent theorizations of mediation's social consequences over the longer term (Silverstone 2005).[2] More than that, Katz and Lazarsfeld's famous two-step flow thesis, by ruling out of court the old paradigm of "a radio listener shut up in his room with a self-sufficient supply of the world outside" (p. 40) (what we might call the "plugged-in monad" model; Couldry 2004) remains a useful ally as and when that model gets revived in new circum-stances.[3] If, more broadly, the battle continues against mediacentric accounts[4] that frame media's social consequences upon terms set principally by an examination of media's own outputs (considered to the exclusion of the vast range of other inputs into contemporary life), then we must remember that battle was begun with *Personal Influence*.

The wider significance of the book, however, extends beyond communications research. Nicholas Garnham (2000) recently has argued that communications' contribution to the feasibility of large-scale democracies is a question at the heart of Enlightenment debates, and Katz and Lazarsfeld claimed almost as long a lin-eage when they started their book with an epigraph from John Stuart Mill:

> And what is a still greater novelty, the mass do not now take their opinions from digni-taries in church or State, from ostensible leaders, or from books. Their thinking is done for them by men much like themselves, addressing them or speaking in their name, on the spur of the moment. (Mill, *On Liberty*, quoted in Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955, x)

In so doing, Katz and Lazarsfeld framed their account of how the mechanism of mass media influences daily life within a longer history of liberal inquiry into how democratic citizens come to feel part of a wider polity.[5] In the context of democ-ratic theory (not only liberal but also republican), everyday talk and discussion is

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a central, not an incidental, focus for those concerned with the possibility of effective democracy. And that interest in the political and civic significance of talk is a thread through the later work of Elihu Katz and those who have worked with him (Eliasoph 1998; Wyatt, Katz, and Kim 2000).

While Katz and Lazarsfeld's contribution to the history of mediation research is assured and unproblematic, things are less straightforward when we consider *Personal Influence*'s place in the history of democratic theory and political science. For, as the opening quote illustrates, Katz and Lazarsfeld's rightful emphasis (in the context of communications research) on the social contexts in which media messages are received can appear within that second perspective to rest on an assumption—in 1955 probably fully justified, but now open to question— about the *fit* between the worlds we learn of through media (once, perhaps, they have been further mediated by local opinion formers) and the spaces in which we regularly act. Yet it is exactly this fit, or certainly its naturalness, that the French sociologist Alain Touraine (2000) challenges in his account of what might be wrong in the contemporary polity. In Touraine's account (so different from that of Gabriel Tarde who had inspired Katz), any local mediation of media messages is absent, and the resulting dislocation threatens any sense of belonging to a democratic society.

While by no means every commentator would agree with Touraine's (2000) pessimism (Schudson 1998), there is certainly a theoretical head of steam behind it, especially given the background of wider fears about declining voter turnout and declining trust in political institutions in "advanced" democracies. For Zygmunt Bauman (1999), it is the "bridges" between private and public worlds that are missing, undermining the very possibility of democratic politics in an excessively "individualized" society (Bauman 2001). While Putnam's (2000) detailed concerns are with the decline of interpersonal trust and network resources rather than with how people interpret the world directly or indirectly through media, the *Bowling Alone* thesis certainly laments the absence of the taken-for-granted informal exchanges that Katz and Lazarsfeld themselves saw expanding, not diminishing.[6] More broadly, the idea that the worlds of knowledge and experience made available through mass media might be *in conflict with*, not harmonized with, the everyday lifeworld was foreshadowed by Robert Merton's (1938) classic study of *anomie* before World War II,[7] but has found many echoes since in accounts both of media and of the scale of social life in general (Meyrowitz 1985; Beck 2000; Urry 2000).[8]

All this gives a continued, if controversial, relevance to Katz and Lazarsfeld's wide-angled view of how mass media messages are themselves mediated by the structures and flows of local opinion.

Introducing the Public Connection Project

Against this background, we want to discuss some material generated by what, on the face of it, is a very different empirical project from Katz and Lazarfeld's, in

spite of certain similarities. Like *Personal Influence*, the U.K. Public Connection project[9] (in which we have been involved with our colleague Sonia Livingstone since October 2003) was started against a background of doubts about media's contribution to the very basis of democratic engagement. We also shared with Katz and Lazarsfeld the sense that the only way forward was to study what people do and think on a daily basis in specific contexts that are *only partly* shaped by media themselves. But our project differed in focus, method, and context.

The comparison with Personal Influence

Our focus was on the broad question of whether, and under what conditions, people across both genders, all classes, and all ages are orientated, if at all, toward a public world beyond the private, and, if so, to what extent their media consumption helps sustain that orientation.

As to method, our primary data-gathering device was the self-produced diary produced in the context of an ongoing many-month relationship between the project and diarist, whereas Katz and Lazarsfeld's was a highly structured survey questionnaire (see below for a more detailed reflection on our methodological choices). Since we researched right across England, and since the diary process was extremely labor intensive on the part of our research team, only a relatively small number of diarists (thirty-seven) was feasible, although we balanced this at the end of our project with a nationwide survey (one thousand respondents). By contrast, Katz and Lazarsfeld's initial survey was administered to a large (eight hundred) but spatially very concentrated population. Our project, however, shared with Katz and Lazarsfeld's the issue of "confirmation": just as Katz and Lazarsfeld did not rely on people's statements (in their initial survey) of who influenced them, but sought to corroborate these with a follow-up survey of those alleged to influence, so we never intended to rely on the diaries as primary data in isolation. Our plan was always to follow up the diary with a reflexive semi-structured interview with the diarist (which was also able to pick up the threads of our initial interview before the diary had started).

As to context, the world of Decatur, Illinois, in 1945 described by Katz and Lazarsfeld, where people seemed happy to leave the flow of national media to be mediated by local opinion "leaders" before it reached them (p. 314), seems a world away from early-twenty-first-century Britain with its universally available campaigning national press, still prominent national terrestrial television and radio channels, and general sense of "media saturation." How far the different outcomes of the two projects are attributable to intercountry difference or common historical shifts in media density is something we will have a chance to assess when results are available from the parallel U.S. study, based at the Institute of Communication Research, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and directed by Bruce Williams and Andrea Press.[10] At fifty years' distance, we cannot expect the framing of our results to do more than partially overlap with Katz and Lazarsfeld's inquiry. To the extent that they do so, however, we hope to demonstrate the continued salience of their path-breaking questions.

Our research question

Our research question in the Public Connection project is best explained in terms of two connected and widely made assumptions about democratic politics that we have been trying to "test." First, in a "mature" democracy such as Britain, most people share an orientation to a public world where matters of common concern are, or at least should be, addressed (we call this orientation "public connection"). Second, this public connection is focused principally on mediated versions of that public world (so that "public connection" is principally sustained by a convergence in what media people consume, in other words, by shared or overlapping shared media consumption).

These assumptions are detachable from each other. Some believe the first without the second because they argue public connection is unlikely to be served by people's use of media. (Robert Putnam's [2000] well-known *Bowling Alone* thesis takes that position in relation to television.) Generally, however, it seems to us that many writers assume both, even if only tacitly—or at least that is our contention. Consequently, our concern is with the empirical question: can we find evidence for those assumptions in U.K. citizens' practice?

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The first assumption is important because it underlies most models of democracy. Informed consent to political authority requires that people's attention to the public world can be assumed, or at least one can assume an *orientation* to the public world that from time to time results in actual attention. To be clear, no one believes that more than a small elite is continuously attentive to the world of politics, or indeed should be. But there is an underlying assumption—as we see it, political science's "bottom line"—that most people are broadly oriented in the direction of public matters so that, at certain times, they are in a position to pay specific attention either to traditional electoral politics or to broader public issues

that have become contentious.[11] Put crudely, if this is not the case and people are facing *the other way*, then no amount of skilled political communication will reach them!

More specifically, when in this project we talk of *"public"* connection, we mean "things or issues which are regarded as being of shared concern, rather than of purely private concern," matters that in principle citizens need to discuss in a world of limited shared resources.[12]

We have been careful not to assume that a decline in attention to "politics" in the traditional sense means lack of attention to "politics" in general, let alone apathy. People's understanding of what constitutes politics may be changing (Bennett 1998; Axford 2001). The *media* landscape that may enable public connection is also changing. The multiplication and intense interlinking of media and media formats through digital convergence may lead to an intensification of public connection, as people become more skillful at adapting their media consumption to suit their everyday habits and pressures. Or it may lead to the fragmentation of the public sphere into a mass of specialist "sphericules" (Gitlin 1998) that can no longer connect sufficiently to form a shared public world. In this context, the question of where and how, and for what purpose, talk oriented to a public world occurs (including talk that might fit within the theoretical model of a public sphere) becomes crucial.

Our working assumption, then, is that the public/private boundary remains meaningful in spite of many other levels of disagreement over the content and definition of politics. But our understanding of the public/private boundary is not prescriptive. The point of our research has been to ask people: What makes up *their* public world? How are they connected to that world? And how are media involved, or not, in sustaining that connection to a public world (as they understand it)?

Methodological reflection

These are the questions we aimed to explore: first, by asking a small group of thirty-seven people to produce a diary for three months during 2004 that reflected on those questions; second, by interviewing those diarists, both before and after their diary production, individually and in some cases also in focus groups; and finally, by broadening out the themes from this necessarily small group to a nationwide survey (targeted at a sample of one thousand respondents) conducted in June 2005. The survey provided data on media consumption, attitudes to media and politics, and public actions, and also the contexts in which all of these occur.

Our thirty-seven diarists were evenly split across gender and three age categories (between eighteen and sixty-nine). We aimed indirectly for a wide socioeconomic range through two strategies: first, by recruiting in six contrasting regions (poor inner-city London, mid-income suburban London, poor inner-city South of England, prosperous suburbs of two Northern England cities, and a mixed-income rural area in the Midlands); and second, through recruiting people with varying levels of media access in each region. As a result, we achieved

a broad span from single mothers living on limited incomes in London public housing to retired financial services executives. Men aged between thirty and fifty were difficult to recruit as were both genders in class D (unskilled manual labor), but we achieved a good range of home media access (broadly tracking then current U.K. national averages). There were nine nonwhite diarists, an over-representation demographically but important to ensure a range of views in relation to Britain's overwhelmingly white political culture.

The diaries were produced weekly for up to three months. We encouraged open reflection and avoided specific signals as to what people were to comment on. The diary data are particularly complex, our intention always being that the diary material would be "triangulated" by interview data. For ease of exposition, we will draw mainly from the interview data in this chapter. Crucial to our method was combining self-produced data—tracing respondents' own reflections as they developed under the pressures of everyday life and alongside changing public events—and semistructured interviews, conducted not just in advance of the diaries but after their completion, when the diarists could be invited to reflect on the accuracy and meaning of their reflections. Our idea, against the grain of so much political science that is exclusively dominated by survey methodology, was that we needed to listen to respondents' own voices produced and recorded in their own time, if we were to get a sense of what it "feels like" to be a citizen in contemporary Britain.[13]

It is however, worth reflecting here a little more on our method, as Katz and Lazarsfeld did with their own methodological reflections in *Personal Influence.* Our choice of the diary method as a key component in our multimethod study inevitably has a context and brings with it certain constraints. As a choice, it was informed most generally by an awareness of the concern with individual reflexivity in some strands of cultural studies research (compare Couldry 2000, chaps. 3 and 7) and also by the broad precedent of the U.K.'s Mass Observation study, started in the 1930s and still continuing to this date. Indeed, in our pilot research, we used alongside semistructured interviews the setting of questions to the current panel of Mass Observation diarists (Couldry and Langer 2005).[14] We were well aware, however, of the potential for self-delusion in this attempt to "get close" to respondents' own voices, and our approach was from the outset informed by Pierre Bourdieu's (1998) critique of scholastic authority, and its tendency to forget the institutional privileges built into the very possibility of academics' view of the social world as an object of research.[15] We knew that our data would be shaped by the power relationships between respondents and us (as representatives of a well-known academic institution) that had shaped its very production. For that reason, we looked for traces of those power relations in the diary and interview data. But we realized that, in the end, such influences cannot be avoided; indeed, Bourdieu argued it is one of the key delusions of academic research to think that they can! Instead, our aim was to look at diarists' accounts of their lives from more than one angle (including the retrospective interview) in the hope that certain distortions could be noted and, as far as possible, factored out. To this extent, there was some similarity between our methodological

concerns and those of *Personal Influence* even if our specific methods were rather different.

Politics and public affairs as a special case

In pursuing any comparison between our project and *Personal Influence*, one further important limiting factor must be borne in mind. This is the distinctiveness, within the wider field of personal influence, of politics and public affairs. This for us was part of our primary focus, but it was only one of four areas in Katz and Lazarsfeld's study, which covered (p. 4) "daily household marketing," "fashion," "attendance at movies," and as well as "formation of opinion on *local* public affairs" (note the restriction).

More interestingly, Katz and Lazarsfeld make very clear that the area of "local public affairs" was the "outlier" in their argument. "Public affairs," they report, is the only area where social status (as opposed to life cycle) dominates your chances of being an opinion leader (pp. 273, 323-24). In addition, although public affairs are in principle an area whose context affects both genders in their capacity as voting citizens, influence over opinions was, they found, heavily gendered: indeed this was the only area where, it seemed, men's opinions heavily influenced (or at least were reported by women to influence) women's opinions (p. 276). While the relevance of Katz and Lazarsfeld's study is limited by the fact it was only women whom they researched, their conclusion is an important one: "better educated, wealthier women—that is, women of higher status, no matter what their life-cycle position—seem to move in a climate which promotes greater participation in public affairs [than women of lower status]" (p. 295).

The Public Connection Survey

There is no space here to discuss in detail the results of our nationwide survey administered on our behalf across the United Kingdom during the weekend of June 3 to 5, 2005, by ICM Research. Here, we will concentrate on two essential points: stratification and the discursive context for following the world of news.

Although in our survey and throughout our project, we deliberately used the term "public" in a broad way (covering not just traditional politics or "public affairs" but the much wider space of "issue" politics), we found broadly the same stratification of political and news engagement as Katz and Lazarsfeld, with the additional factor of age stratification suggesting that the levels of engagement found in 1945 Decatur are also historically quite distinct from those of the contemporary period.[16]

Our respondents overwhelmingly report that watching the news is important and a regular practice for them, while also agreeing that there is often too much media and that politics is too complicated. However, age makes a difference: a feeling of duty to follow the news increases with age, as do practices of regular

news consumption and understanding of issues. As to class, those from what in the United Kingdom are called C2DE households[17] exhibit a distinctly higher tendency to agree that there is no point in following the news, that politics is too complicated, and that they have no influence over political decisions. Men are more likely to say they have a good understanding of issues and actively compared news sources, while more women than men agree that politics is too complicated to understand. People from ABC1 households (see note 15) tend overall to find media relevant and agree that different sources of news give different accounts of events, while those from C2DE households are more likely to agree that media are irrelevant to their lives. Respondents older than fifty-five and from ABC1 households are far more likely to agree that they know where they could find the information they needed about issues important to them. Gender and class therefore intersect to stratify the practice of following public matters, with signs that a specific, and disadvantaged, group has switched off more decisively. Looking from the other side of the equation, those who are disengaged from politics, as measured by their response to the prompt "Politics has little connection with your life" are more likely to be of lower socioeconomic status and to have left full-time education at an earlier age than those who disagree with the same prompt. Significantly, those who are disengaged from politics are very likely also to agree that the media cover issues that have little to do with their lives and exhibit lower media literacy, measured by their likelihood to compare different sources of information.

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What about talk in our survey? We asked respondents to indicate whom they spoke to both about issues in general and about a particular issue that they named as currently the most important to them. Levels of discussion are high: 85 percent of respondents say they regularly talk to friends and 72 percent to family about issues. If we exclude those unemployed or past retirement age, gender is a predictor with men considerably more likely than women to report talking to colleagues about issues. Taking this same group and looking at their talk with family and friends, we found that an interest in traditional politics or issues is associated with reporting discussion about issues with friends.

This broad evidence of a discursive context for thinking about public issues is supported by other data. Respondents were asked if they thought their friends or colleagues would *expect* them to keep up with the main issues of the day. With a correlation of $r = .157$, age is the strongest demographic predictor of social expectation, but newspaper readership and using the Internet as a news source are also significantly correlated. Perhaps more important, people who cite social expectation are more likely to follow traditional politics ($r = .479$) and social issues ($r = .388$) rather than celebrity ($r = -.052$); they are also likely to have higher levels of media literacy, and, interestingly, are significantly more likely to vote ($r = .210$). This demonstrates clearly that the availability of *some form of discursive context* in which issues are discussed (and in which a level of proficiency is expected) is an important determining factor, if not for public action as such (beyond the minimal action of voting), then certainly for engagement with the public world. Most people report having at least one context in which they discuss issues: overall, 85 percent talk to friends, 73 percent to family, and 55 percent to colleagues at work[18] about the issues that interest them. Women are more likely ($r = .088$) to talk to family members, and men are more likely ($r = .117$) to talk to people at work about these issues.

The Public Connection Diary Data

Although the main questions of our project were with media consumption and people's overall orientation to a public world, we were interested also from the outset in the context for such orientation provided (or not) by everyday talk.[19]

Scale of social interactions

First, however, we want to introduce one further, demographically inflected factor that, given the local focus of Katz and Lazarsfeld's study, is not prioritized there, although it is implied in their very distinction between opinion leaders (who have wider links to the world) and others. This is the variation between people in scale of social interactions in which they are regularly involved.

Although inevitably the distinctions that can be made here are to some degree intuitive, we considered how our diarists differed in the scale of social interactions regularly described in their diaries and interviews: ranging from *local neighborhood* (local streets/village, small area of London), to *local area* (nearby villages, town, broad area of London), to *national* (including the metropolis of London as a whole), to *international*. The results were interesting. Seven diarists' social interactions seemed from their own account to be largely limited to their local neighborhood and nineteen to their local area, nine had regular social interactions on a national scale, and only two could be said to have regular social interactions on an international scale.

Clearly, there is potentially a link between one's scale of social interactions and the way one's opinions are influenced, and perhaps if *Personal Influence* were being repeated today—in an age of considerable, although still highly uneven levels of travel in everyday life—this would be investigated. Since we did not ask directly about opinion formation, we cannot resolve that point, but one implication of people's scale of social interactions is striking.

In our wider analysis (for detailed background, see Couldry, Livingstone, and Markham forthcoming, chap. 4), we found an important distinction between diarists we call "public world connectors" and those we call "media world connectors." For the former, the public world emerges principally out of their media consumption, whereas the latter's orientation to a public world is something which they *bring to* media and which further orients their use of media (that is, they have an involvement with a public world independent of their media consumption). We make no value judgment of course about which is the "better" type of "mediated public connection" (in our term), and many people fall somewhere between these two possibilities (we call them "multiple connectors"). In addition, other people whom we call "weak connectors" had no strong orientation either to a media world or a public world. But the distribution of public world connectors, media world connectors, multiple connectors, and weak connectors bears an interesting relationship to variations in people's scale of social interactions.

Those diarists whose social interactions are largely at a neighborhood level are unlikely to be public world connectors and likely instead to be either weakly connected or bidirectional. By contrast, those two diarists whose social interactions were regularly on an international scale were both public world connectors, and those whose social interactions were on a national scale were more likely to be public world connectors than anything else. (Those linked to their broader locality showed no particular pattern.) In a tentative way, therefore, this supports the link Katz and Lazarsfeld imply between "gregariousness" (defined in part by the scale of your social interactions beyond immediate neighbors; p. 227) and the way in which you orient yourself to the world through media ("opinion leadership" in public affairs being linked both to gregariousness and to a great breadth of media consumption).[20]

Talk about public issues

Most of our diarists reported to us in various ways on how they discussed with others public issues (in the broadest sense, that is, the type of issues they mentioned in their own diary): only four diarists appeared to have no discursive context sustaining their media consumption and possibly public orientation. To this extent, our data suggest some continuity with Katz and Lazarsfeld's emphasis on talk within social networks, rather than support for Touraine's (2000) more drastic "desocialisation" thesis.

We found, disappointingly often, evidence of a gendered authority structure in how people formed their opinions on public matters, similar to that Katz and Lazarsfeld found. Most often, this was in couples (with the male partner bringing

home the daily paper for the female partner), but sometimes (among our younger respondents), it was produced across generations by the traditional "paterfamilias" figure:

> He sort of explains it all to me and still it makes no sense, waste of time. (Kylie, twenty-four, unemployed, urban London Southeast)

> No, I mean as soon as I sit down to read the paper, like I say, my partner reads it at work and he'll come in flipping pages and say, look at that story and drive you mad cause I just sat down to try and read it myself and he'll say look at that. (Andrea, twenty-five, nurse, Midlands rural)

> Well, dad's very willing to explain the stuff, it's just, I don't know, he, he's very very willing to explain but then he kind of puts stuff in when you know he just goes off on one. (Mary, eighteen, medical student, Northern suburb)

In one case, a diarist tells of talking to her son in a manner that reproduces the gendering but reverses the direction of generational influence:

> My son studied Media at school and college so I spent some time discussing advertising with him today. He made me realise that I don't think enough about information. (Jane, fifty-two, supermarket assistant, urban South)

As to where people talked, most people talked across the same range of contexts as was evidenced in the survey: twenty-four mention talking to their friends specifically about issues, twenty to their families, and fifteen to people at work. Work contexts are particularly subtle in their variety, ranging from (1) casual chat to colleagues in a work break (often with some form of media stimulus, whether Web surfing or newspapers) to (2) broader discussion about "issues" (what one diarist called "putting the world to rights") in a break from the workplace or on the journey home to (3) cases where talk was inherent to the work process itself (as with three of our diarists who respectively ran a beauty salon, managed a busy gasoline station, or ran a newsagents).

The last type of case takes us closest to the sort of informal social setting that Katz and Lazarsfeld envisaged (p. 10):

> [My newsagents' shop is] like a small village shop, plus . . . it's in the city, you know? So, I've got no competition; mine is only shop on the road. So they all come and talk to me. They all what happened in their house and where they went and what they did and which cinema they been to or what theatre or what show they been, they always ask me—and how you are and how was your day. So it was like a—in a small community, small town shop. (Pavarti, fifty-one, newsagent, suburban West London)

It is worth noting, however, that, by her own account, this diarist tended not to offer her own opinion, so cannot qualify in Katz and Lazarsfeld's terms as an opinion former.

Do such settings imply an element of regular group influence mediating the inputs from media themselves, as in Katz and Lazarsfeld's study? That is ambiguous

perhaps, particularly in work settings where part of the point of media-stimulated talk is simply to fill the time between work phases in a socially neutral way:

> I mean we'll have conversations and it is always based on the newspaper. [The guys in the rostering department] . . . will come in and the main conversation is about the sport and you just talk about headline news and it'll be like "What do you think?" or "What did I think?" Or perhaps I'll bring in my *Heat* magazine and one of the lads will pick it up and be like "Whoah that's Kylie Minogue" and it will branch off into "Oh look she's getting married." (Janet, twenty-nine, airport administrator, Northern suburb)

Beyond the workplace, there were a range of accounts of the influence of social context on diarists' opinions. Some took it as natural that their friends or family would be in agreement with them:

> That kept us going. . . . I was discussing it with my friend as well, she was discussing with her friends, and you know everybody had the same opinion. (Pavarti)

> I was kind of meeting people that would agree with me and I suppose that cements your, once you know that other people feel the same way that you, I suppose it cements your opinion. (noncompleting diarist, male, twenty-nine, administrator)

Others, more rarely, made a point of demonstrating the independence of their views.

An important factor in our study, raised vividly in Nina Eliasoph's (1998) study of U.S. everyday talk about politics, was constraints on raising public issues. Sometimes, this takes the form of a general exclusion of any "serious" talk, for example when friends are on a night out:

> I think all my friends, we've all got children now, so when we, we don't see each other as much as we used to, still see each other quite a bit. So when we do go out, it's more for the laugh and the social rather, whereas when we used to see each other a lot more, you'd probably get all spectrums of a conversation coming in. Whereas now, it's all a bit more light hearted because we think, well I don't see you that often, you don't particularly want to be sitting there talking about doom and gloom that's going on in the world. (Marie, thirty-four, part-time accounts clerk, Midlands rural)

More important to any potential process of opinion formation are cases where even in a discussion about "issues," people avoid certain issues, particularly "politics." A number of our diarists mentioned this as normal, and some had naturalized it: "I don't really want to be the sort of arrogant sort of having heated debates on it" (Kylie). Or, looked at from the point of view of someone wanting *others* not to give her their opinions,

> My cynical friend would say that you know everybody should be obligated to know about politics and everybody should use their vote responsibly because he's really into that. . . . Whereas me, . . . I don't know where my line would be because I know I look at a lot of celebrity news but that's not important and I wouldn't say people were obliged to know about that at all. (Beccy, twenty-seven, marketing executive, Northern suburb)

But if it is "arrogant" to express a sharply differing opinion, or seen as "cynical" by others to insist on being engaged and critical on public matters, then it is

clear that the space of everyday discourse about pubic matters is significantly reduced. And this was exactly how some diarists who *were* consistently engaged in a world of public issues felt:

> They just don't care. This is what I find quite astonishing really that most people I know really just don't care about what's going on. They're focused on their own thing and as long as they know that David Beckham's had a new hair cut and that they can go and get it done at the salon just like this, and they just carry on with stuff. (Josh, twenty-three, architecture student, Northern suburb)

> I talk about Iraq with my partner, with my mum, sometimes, you know—but—you know, a lot of people around me are very materialistic and that's just not on their minds. . . . [I] like to concentrate on reality—things—but a lot of people around me are more into their own lives than others that they never knew and are now getting killed 500,000 miles away. A lot of that, they don't care about the war, but they just don't make it a part of their lives. (Crystal, twenty-two unemployed, urban London Southeast)

The space of everyday talk about public issues, while significant, is clearly fractured in various ways that significantly qualify Katz and Lazarsfeld's original thesis.

Everyday debate

Such evidence of constraints on opinion formation—that is, constraints on the opportunities for people to influence each other on matters of public importance—must be set alongside plenty of evidence from our diarists that they had debates, and sometimes disagreements, and enjoyed them as part of every-day social interaction.

[T]here are hints that while family debates
are open to everyone, opportunities for
debates in more public settings (such as work
or discussions with friends) are more open
to those of higher social status.

While the volume of our data on this is too small to claim any broader signifi-cance for such a conclusion, there are hints that while family debates are open to everyone, opportunities for debates in more public settings (such as work or dis-cussions with friends) are more open to those of higher social status:

Yeah, um, I'm lucky in as much as that my wife, my wife's sister and her husband very much politically minded. So we have a lot of good debates [laughs] on various, yeah, you know, various topics . . . it's not just what my opinion, it's just you know, you're sort of sharing with people, like-minded people. (Patrick, fifty-two, warehouseman, urban South)

I enjoy conversation and vigorous debate [with friends], um, being aware of the topical issues and having people to discuss them with, having sounding boards if you like. (Bill, sixty-one, retired managing director, Midlands rural)

I've discussed a lot at the magistrates . . . everyone has a cup of coffee and you have a chat and . . . inevitably you lunch and generally talk to the people you've been sitting with. But you get a good cross section of views there 'cause there's all sorts of people magistrates. And it's very interesting to hear people's views. (Edwards, sixty-four, retired financial services chief executive, Northern suburb)

In addition, we found, as expected, evidence of media stimulating debate that otherwise would not feature in local experience at all (for example, talk about a rare disease shown on television or the debate opportunity afforded by an online discussion group):

Lots of people watched it [a human-interest television programme titled *The Boy Whose Skin Fell Off*], my friend, mum and me rang each other during the break. Some of us talked about it for the next few days. (Sherryl, thirty, deputy play-leader, urban London southeast)

I take part in a number of Internet discussion forums [on religion], where people from any part of the world can meet in what some call "cyberspace" to discuss matters of mutual interest. This has the benefit of meeting people from all kinds of countries and backgrounds very easily. . . . A great way to learn from other people (Eric, forty-seven, computer analyst and lay preacher, urban London Southeast)

In this last example, we get a glimpse of opinion formation occurring well outside the parameters of any social group, from unknown and unseen discussants. This is an obvious area where the model of *Personal Influence* needs to be extended. We must emphasize, however, that it was the *only* example of its sort in all our data, where online discussion was surprisingly absent overall—indeed, this seems likely to prove a significant difference between our project and the parallel U.S. project run by Bruce Williams and Andrea Press.

Summary

We have found some evidence therefore of the older forms of authority structure (particularly between male and female partners) persisting in what, as Katz and Lazarsfeld pointed out, is the highly gendered area of public issues. However, any assessment of opinion formation overall in this area is constrained by evidence of the *gaps* in, and constraints upon, discussion and exchange of opinions on public matters, and particularly traditional politics. Unlike perhaps in

the areas of fashion and cultural taste, the field of public discussion is limited as to who can regularly participate within it, and when and where. It is not an open space of discussion, still less of open opinion formation and deliberation.

This last point is reinforced by another finding that moves us beyond Katz and Lazarsfeld's concern with opinion formation on specific issues. This is the question of action. Although we regularly asked diarists not only how they talked about the issues they mentioned but also what public actions, if any, they took or had taken, *we found only one report in all our data of a discussion leading to public action.* The case in point was perhaps our most locally engaged diarist who told us she got to talking about trash recycling at a party and then decided with her friends to lobby the local council to revise how they collected domestic trash. Our point, however, is that this link between talk and action was rare. This raises the wider question of how *consequential* opinion formation on public issues is for wider democratic participation, even if it is greatly mediated by the opinions of those around us. Without a link between talk *and action*, surely, Katz and Lazarsfeld's implicit link back to the liberalism of John Stuart Mill is potentially broken.

Conclusion

In concluding, we want to build on this last point, while noting the continuities with Katz and Lazarsfeld's model that our research still registers. In this article, we have used the findings of the London School of Economics Public Connection project to explore the extent to which Katz and Lazarsfeld's account of opinion formation through "personal influence" in mid-twentieth-century America remains pertinent, particularly in the area of public affairs.

Certainly, looking back, their emphasis on the priority of local social groups, from this distance, might suggest they had what Dennis Wrong (1961) called an oversocialized conception of the citizen's everyday life, that is, an account of the social world[21] that exaggerates the degree to which individuals operate within a coherent and complete framework of social norms and values. Media are of course now a source of opinion and reference that is pervasive to a degree that could not have been fully anticipated in the 1940s and 1950s, and in that radically changed environment some argue (Bennett and Manheim 2006 [this volume]) that the individualizing tendency of particularly narrowcast media fosters precisely the de-socialized context for information transmission that Touraine (2000) diagnosed. Our findings are, in some respects, rather different. Both talk and social expectations remain, according to our survey, importantly linked with engagement in a public world through media, and Katz and Lazarsfeld's finding that there is a relation between the scale of people's social interactions and their degree of attention to public affairs has also been backed tentatively by the evidence of our diarist sample.

All this points to the continued salience of Katz and Lazarsfeld's questions to warn us off the more drastic prognoses of the de-socialization of contemporary

life. Instead our concerns about the contemporary salience of *Personal Influence*'s argument—the argument that, by identifying the social networks through which mass transmissions are interpersonally mediated, we have identified a mechanism that effectively embeds media in the processes that sustain liberal democracy—lie elsewhere. For, as our diary data suggest, the problem may be not the absence of a discursive context for our tracking of a public world through media; for that discursive context probably exists for most people. The problem, in Britain at least, is rather the lack of any link between that discursive context and any opportunities for *doing anything* effective about the issues we learn about through media. In that sense, the problem with contemporary democracy is larger than any study about the social mediation of media consumption can address. Does that mean that Katz and Lazarsfeld's whole study is condemned to irrelevance? Quite the contrary—for it sustains our attention to one key term (talk) of a wider disarticulation that neither policy makers nor academics who care about the future of democracy can afford to ignore.

Notes

1. Contrast, for example, Cantril (1940).

2. As explained by Roger Silverstone (2005, 189), "Mediation . . . requires us to understand how processes of communication change the social and cultural environments that support them as well as the relationships that participants, both individual and institutional, have to that environment and to each other."

3. Sunstein's (2001) well-known critique of the Internet's consequences for democracy can be interpreted in these terms.

4. See Martin-Barbero (1993), Couldry (2006, chap. 2).

5. For a useful review of the broader background associated with this position, see Simonson (1986).

6. See their comment (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955, 10) on the rise of the "beauty parlor."

7. Compare the more directly media-related argument of Lazarsfeld and Merton (1969).

8. Compare Castells's (1996, 477) comment that "the network society increasingly appears to most people as a meta-social disorder."

9. We gratefully acknowledge support under the ESRC/AHRB Cultures of Consumption Programme (project number RES-143-25-0011): for fuller discussion of the project, see Couldry, Livingstone, and Markham (forthcoming) and www.publicconnection.org.

10. Funded by the National Science Foundation. We appreciate the support and stimulation that Bruce Williams and Andrea Press have provided us during the course of our project.

11. In this sense, from the perspective of the United Kingdom at least, we are skeptical of the claim of Lance Bennett and Jarol Manheim (2006 [this volume]) that in a TV age "inattentive participation [is] presumed," unless we are discussing thoroughgoing elite models of democracy masquerading as participative. However, as noted in the main text, neither have we investigated assumptions of continuous attention, but rather the assumption of something in between continuous attention and inattention.

12. The word "public" is, of course, notoriously difficult, since it has a range of conflicting meanings (Weintraub and Kumar 1997), but there is no space to debate this, or defend our particular usage here: for more details, see Couldry, Livingstone, and Markham (forthcoming); and compare Geuss (2001) and Elshtain (1997).

13. For a call for political research to be opened out in this way, see LeBlanc (1999); and for a defense of the contribution of self-produced data in media research, see Bird (2003).

14. There is also a precedent for diaries in Herbert Blumer's early study of film audiences (cf. more broadly Blumer 1969, 41). Thanks to Pete Simonson for reminding us of this precedent.

15. For much more detailed discussion see Couldry, Livingstone, and Markham (forthcoming).

16. For interesting material on the Internet's contribution to debates about whether the disengagement of "youth" is principally a life stage or a more profound generational shift, see Pew Foundation (2000).

17. Although there are unresolved debates about how precisely class can be measured, public debate in the United Kingdom has for a long time drawn, and still does draw, on the distinction between ABC1 social categories (broadly, managerial, professional, and administrative classes) and C2DE social categories (skilled manual workers, unskilled manual workers, and unemployed).

18. After excluding those past retirement or without employment.

19. For an implicit link between our thinking on the project and a consideration of Katz and Lazarsfeld's questions, see Couldry (2004, 22).

20. See, respectively, Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955, 324 and 314).

21. Wrong's (1961) particular target was Parsonian structural functionalism.

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