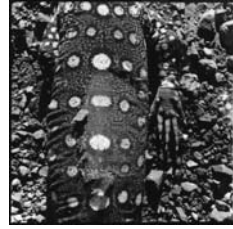


INTERNATIONAL  
journal of  
CULTURAL studies

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London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi  
www.sagepublications.com  
Volume 7(1): 21–32  
DOI: 10.1177/1367877904040602



## The productive 'consumer' and the dispersed 'citizen'

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**ABSTRACT** ● This article argues for a more nuanced approach to the relationships between the figures of 'consumer' and 'citizen', normally assumed to exist in separate spaces. Against the idea that each acquires information and feelings of connection in isolation (the 'plugged-in monad model'), the article argues for an open research agenda into how the spaces of public connection that frame both practices are sustained and the common issues of trust that affect them. This is linked to the author's forthcoming research into media consumption and public connection. The conclusion reflects briefly on the policy implications of this research direction. ●

**KEYWORDS** ● citizenship ● consumption ● production ● public connection ● trust

Manuel Castells offers a broadly optimistic account of the social impact of recent technological change, but, at the end of *The Information Society*, he writes that, 'the network society increasingly appears to most people as a meta-social disorder' (1996: 477). While I hold no particular brief for the notion of a 'network society', Castells is surely right to foreground as problematic questions of scale and perspective; that is, our beliefs – or rather disbelief – about wider social structures. With this in mind, I want to look sceptically at two terms whose interconnections have not always been sufficiently emphasized: the 'consumer' and the 'citizen'. I will argue that you cannot get far in framing research into one without addressing the

other; at a time when the *lack* of dialogue between major discourses on consumption and citizenship, the economy and public life is obvious, we need research agendas (and also policy agendas) that look in unconventional places for connections across those divides and keep as many variables open as possible. To give substance to this rather abstract vision, I will explain the rationale of my own current research in this area.

### Some (almost) ancient history

First, I will draw on some rather distant history to introduce these issues. From the 1950s, it is worth recalling Katz and Lazarsfeld's classic 'two-step-flow' model of media consumption in their book *Personal Influence* (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955). Their research seems old-fashioned now in many ways, particularly its prestructured research field of local opinion leaders (mainly men) and interviewees (all women) whose consumption patterns and knowledge of the 'wider' world the opinion leaders were found to have shaped, mediating, as it were, the media's original messages. But the general question Katz and Lazarsfeld raised remains relevant: how should we understand the actual information flows through which consumer goods and media messages get inserted into everyday life? In prioritizing this question, they rejected the idea of 'a radio listener shut up in his room with a self-sufficient supply of the world outside' (1955: 40). That idea is only apparently archaic; a similarly flawed vision of the internet surfer, trapped within her/his own virtual bubble, has stimulated anxieties for the future of democracy (Sunstein, 2000) – what I call the 'plugged-in monad model'.

That model ignores a large region of everyday life: the flows of information and opinion that *surround* the acts of consumption and opinion formation and the feedback loops that compete for influence or authority over our buying and thinking. A bold attempt in media and cultural studies to open up that region came in the form of Janice Radway's call for work on what individual media consumers do 'as active subjects . . . as producers of culture . . . the point of view of the active producing cultural worker who fashions narratives, stories, objects, and practices from myriad bits of prior cultural production' (Radway, 1988: 361–2). The problem with Radway's call to research was its generality: a study of nothing less than the 'dispersed constitution of everyday life' (1988: 368), but at least she rejected any closed-off notion of the consumer isolated from production. In a similar spirit, I want to start from what we can call the 'productive consumer'.

Why might this hybrid figure be interesting? Let me recall here another piece of history, this time from the 1960s. Much talk about consumption now assumes an a priori boundary between consumption and 'citizenship'

(note that 'citizenship' throughout this article is in scare quotes not necessarily to signify current structures of formal politics within nation states, but instead a more loosely bounded zone [or zones] of public connection). Against that artificial separation, we can counterpose Albert Hirschman's classic book *Exit, Voice and Loyalty* (1969). As a critical voice within mainstream economic and political thought, Hirschman insisted that each discipline undermined itself by ignoring the other. Specifically, economic thought studied economic actors only at the point at which they *exited* markets (stopped buying), ignoring the dimension of *voice*; that is, the consumer's desire or need to speak up about a product before the last resort of exit. Clearly, in an age of consumer boycotts intended as political signals and anti-logo activism, Hirschman's argument against mainstream economics still has relevance, but it is equally interesting the other way round. Conventional political science has always concentrated on the dynamics of opinion expression within existing formal channels such as elections (that is, *voice*), but has only recently started addressing the dimension of *exit* (people giving up on expressing voice, for example by not voting – if legally they have that option – or else just giving up caring). Political science cannot avoid considering the consequences for political authority if the monad pulls the plug out of the wall.

However, the most interesting aspect now of Hirschman's book is not his correction of economics from politics and vice versa, but his overall depiction of a broader research space beyond either economics or political science: the everyday space wherein people try to speak up for themselves or take action and their beliefs about what difference their actions will make (if any). This leads to the question of trust. Trust and the frameworks of belief on which it depends fit uneasily into the exclusive boxes of consumption or citizenship. As Jeremy Rifkin argues, trust is central both to successful economies and to successful democracies (2000: 244). Of course, you might say that this is merely a matter of trusting that the basic infrastructure will work, such as the way we trust clocks and the electricity supply. But Rifkin pushes the point beyond formal system-centred trust to 'social capital' (2000: 245); that is, the 'connections among individuals . . . and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them' (Putnam, 2000: 19). The norms of reciprocity or mutuality, of course, take very different forms in the economic and political spheres, but that does not mean we can neatly divide off the effects of the *collapse* of trust in one sphere from what goes on in the other. And what of the actions that people take to *repair* trust, to refashion belief in larger forms of connection, when older forms fail? If, from the perspective of freedom, as Amartya Sen (1999) powerfully argues, economically-based values are *secondary* to social or political values, then neither can trust in the economic system be sealed off from trust in (or, more likely, declining trust in) the political sphere. As Oscar Gandy (2002a) has recently argued, new forms of information flow

and information storage raise crucial concerns about trust both for markets and politics: which, if any, institutions or groups can now be ‘trusted agents’ for the holding of personal information? How can we build new trusted agents and where? Can trust in where our personal information is stored be divorced from new ideas (or perhaps the lack of new ideas) about where citizens feel they can belong?

The analysis of consumption cannot ignore emerging questions about the spaces of public connection and participation: who are, or should be, their key agents? What should participation consist of and on what scale(s) should it act? What form can mutuality take? These are some of the questions behind the other term in my title, the ‘dispersed citizen’.

### **Productive ‘consumer’ as dispersed ‘citizen’?**

#### **Connecting up to the present**

Where does this historical detour lead us? Towards recognizing, I would argue, the importance of a hybrid object of research which crosses the divide that Gandy (2002b) calls ‘the real digital divide’ between the languages of markets and politics. By framing things abstractly so far, my aim has been to keep in view a theme that would otherwise be hidden by that division: the production practices of consumers aimed at generating or sustaining, through participation, new spaces of public connection, new spaces of mutuality. I am not limiting these to the realm of formal politics; by using ‘citizen’ in scare quotes, I allow for debates about the scale(s) on which public connection should or can now work. Crucial here are precisely the possibilities for more dispersed symbolic production (image-making, information distribution) embedded within new models of consumption – possible new hybrid forms of production/consumption (themselves connected with aspects of the so-called ‘new economy’, although my argument won’t depend on that difficult term)<sup>1</sup> that may tell us something significant about the current crisis in political and social ‘belonging’.

Before finally getting more specific, we should note, first, the obstacle that large-scale models of the ‘network society’, or even the ‘new economy’, place in the way of getting specific. For Castells, for example, things are implicitly ‘either/or’: *either* we analyse the vast space of network flows to which all the long-term causal power is reserved; *or* we analyse ‘local’ resistances to those flows through which identities of struggle are formed, although their impacts are necessarily limited to a local setting. This way of framing the dynamics of change diverts attention from the possibilities emerging on other scales. We should look for new forms of local or at least subnational networks that institute public connection for various purposes,

for example, websites or portals that collect information for consumption *and* civic activism on a relatively local scale, but with a ready link to larger or smaller scales. With these points made, let me explain my own research interests.

### Tracking the dispersed citizen

First, I am about to embark with Sonia Livingstone on planning research about how individuals in Britain consider they are connected to wider public spaces through their media use.<sup>2</sup> This research seeks to *avoid* all the assumptions that might usually be made in researching 'citizenship':

- a) that the space of formal politics has a higher or prior status over other potential forms of public engagement;
- b) that the space of 'national' connection has a higher or prior status over other potential spaces of connection;
- c) that one form of media (say, television) is likely to matter more for sustaining this connection than others;
- d) that the media available to people have a significant causal impact on their sense of connection (they may not);
- e) that people have *any* such sense of public connection (they may not); and
- f) that people *should* have any sense of wider public connection beyond the immediate context of their everyday lives (something assumed in the research, although this is not to say I would jettison it as a normative principle).

By leaving open as many variables as possible,<sup>3</sup> we would like, more positively, to respect people's own capacity to *reflect* critically on these difficult issues. There is no value anymore, if there ever was, in research that assumes the researcher somehow has a radically different and 'better' perspective on the problems of everyday life. Listening to people's reflexivity means acknowledging that those we research may face many of the same puzzles as do we, the researchers, particularly about the nature of the spaces to which we supposedly 'belong'. This is the research standpoint that George Marcus has recently called 'complicity' (Marcus, 1999, discussed in Couldry, 2003b). As Marcus argues, a good way to express what is at stake in contemporary 'ethnographic' encounters is a 'mutual curiosity and anxiety' felt by both researcher and researched 'about their relationship to a "third" – that is, to the sites *elsewhere* that affect, or even determine, their experiences or knowledges *here*' (Marcus, 1999: 101; emphases in original). If 'citizenship' is now potentially dispersed across many practices and sites, then research must, in that spirit of complicity, be open to a range of images, languages and models of connection. The plugged-in monad, taking his or her nightly fix of publicly-sponsored national news, cannot be artificially privileged unless we exclude precisely what is at issue: the uncertain processes through which people are seeking public connections and public

agency (see Dubet, 1994; Touraine, 2000) in *new* forms, including in the consumption domain.

### New networks of trust

The research just described is a large-scale project combining local interviews with a broader survey. At a time of uncertainty about research agendas and priorities, however, this conventional approach needs to be supplemented with smaller-scale research that follows up local possibilities and innovations. Thus, I am also interested in particular settings where people are generating new contexts of public communication and trust, whether as frameworks primarily for consumption or for citizenship participation (or both). Here, the productive and distributional potential of the internet is central, without excluding the importance of other media.

In mapping out my own wider research priorities here, I have found very useful the work of sociologist Robert Wuthnow on what is truly ancient history: the long-term embedding of the printed book into social life in Western Europe and North America in the 17th and 18th centuries. The technological innovation of the printed book format is just the start of Wuthnow's analysis, which explores how, over (a long) time, new forms of 'institutional framework' developed for reading and exchanging information obtained through books (new forms of church, school, political party) and new 'action sequences' developed as individuals organized their time and behaviour around the ready availability of printed books, newspapers and pamphlets (Wuthnow, 1987: 7). Of course, we are only at the *very beginning* of the parallel institutional architectures that may emerge around the internet and mobile communications. Research has to improvise, therefore, in order to track the new 'institutional arrangements [that] restructure the contexts in which [cultural] producers and their audiences come together . . . and cultural production [will be able to] take place' (1987: 9).

Some of the most interesting developments here are the new technological possibilities for distributing almost instantly via the internet not only images and information, but whole publishing structures. Because of software innovations and the ability to circulate them to others with sufficient technical knowledge, certain new publishing formats have grown extremely fast across national borders such as the highly interactive web interface on which the Indymedia network is based. This network is already a significant contributor to the emerging international public sphere (Downing, 2003a). It challenges the long taken-for-granted hierarchy between a limited group of centrally-positioned cultural 'producers' and a dispersed mass of 'consumers'. The Sydney-based software activist Matthew Arnison has been a crucial influence here, with his ideal of 'open publishing' (Arnison, 2002; Rennie, 2002); that is, an editing process transparent to, and in principle

reversible by, readers. The point is not just to have readers 'interact' with a distant production process, but to have them become producers themselves.

This notion of 'open publishing' has relevance to all sorts of sites, including consumption portals, but its implications for social connection are provocatively summed up by Arnison himself: 'on the old one-way system, community media was the exception. On the net, community media is very much part of the mainstream' (Arnison, 2002: 6). Clearly such producer/consumer models raise many questions about: 1) the actual social inclusiveness of those involved; 2) the dependence of such innovations on hidden subsidies (for example, a university base); and 3) the stability of the new forms of trust on which they rely (by editors in contributors to keep to site guidelines and by contributors in editors to edit transparently). Australia currently seems a good place to research these themes, not only in the work of Arnison and the active.org websites he has helped design, but also on the website Australia Connects, a self-proclaimed 'open dialogue about Australia's future' (see: <http://www.conversations.com.au/c21c/auscon.htm>).

We need lots of specific studies in this area, but romanticism about their likely long-term significance is unhelpful. The stark questions remain: who uses them, how much, in what context and to what end (cf. Downing, 2003b)? Those questions can be pushed beyond the language of traditional audience research: in what 'communicative ecology' (to use a term recently suggested by Don Slater and Jo Tacchi) will such sites and networks be sustained, if they are sustained? Or (less comfortably), what new hierarchies will emerge in the wake of such sites, what old hierarchies will they silently reproduce? This is a topic that cries out for international *comparative* research.

It might be objected, however, that there is little apparent connection between my earlier quite abstract argument and this open-ended list of localized research possibilities. Where, for example, is the nation state in all this? Can it safely be ignored? I am certainly not trying to argue that. At a time when we need to *open up* research questions, there is a strong argument for suspending *assumptions* about the primacy of the state framework; what, after all, may be emerging are new forms of public connection within and beyond the state. Even so, state initiatives in encouraging web-based connection are themselves interesting, for example those tentatively developed by the Blair government in the UK (see the recent consultation document by the Office of the e-Envoy, 2002).

There remains, as yet, a great gulf between UK government rhetoric (encouraging new forms of democratic participation) and the reality. Suppose, encouraged by the warm words in that UK consultation paper, you visited the 'Citizens' Space' section of the government website at: (<http://www.ukonline.gov.uk/CitizenSpace/>). You might first want to click on 'how to contribute effectively'. However, the first instruction you get is



‘be brief’: ‘use one short sentence to explain each point you want to make’ – hardly an encouragement to open-ended deliberation! In fact, there’s no mention of how you can get a response to your comments, still less a dialogue between government and citizen. We are, clearly, at the beginning of developments in this area: we cannot predict what patterns and conditions of interaction will become normalized,<sup>4</sup> but it is unhelpful to confuse the myths of e-government with any likely reality.<sup>5</sup>

### Some wider perspectives

To sum up so far: first, I argued that we must frame research agendas beyond any arbitrary division between consumption and citizenship, the economy and politics, precisely to allow into view new practices that search for public connection across that divide. Second, in describing my own recent and planned research, I mapped out various possibilities from larger-scale research (on people’s sense of public connection through media consumption) to a more improvised microfocus that, *taken together*, will, I hope, track some of the complexity of a situation where both the technological forms and the social grounding of older frameworks of mediated public connection (the national radio and television audience, for example) are changing. New network forms are under construction,<sup>6</sup> but their effective scale is far from clear. Imposing one (say, the national) scale of analysis ignores the point that scale is always a social construction – one with political consequences (Harvey, 2000: 75–7). But how, finally, to think about the contribution to social civic and cultural space of large actors such as governments and corporations?

Let me conclude by suggesting three points about the role of such large actors. First, governments and other major players interested in influencing positively future forms of public connection should take seriously the impetus to technical and infrastructural innovation from the partial collapse of traditional frameworks of political and social connection. The French sociologist Alain Touraine has, for some time, called on sociology to redirect its priorities away from society’s grand claims about itself, instead to ‘work . . . in close proximity to the emotions, dreams, and wounds of all those who assume the lives of [social] actors but are not acknowledged as such’ (Touraine, 1988: 18). If Touraine is even half right, governments and major market players would do well to also look closely at this space of experimentation.

If so, a second question arises: what forms of subsidy will be most effective in stimulating new forms of public connection? Should governments be more active not just in creating basic information websites, but also in subsidizing portals and networks where new forms of public connection can *self-organize*, facilitated, but not directed, by the state? What architectures (both



online structure and the social embedding of online opportunities) can generate and sustain new spaces of public connection and trust and for whom? What indeed should 'subsidy' now mean in this context? Surely it cannot mean public service provision located in – and only in – the state (cf. Downing, 2002).

Third, in helping governments and commercial players to address such questions, we need to know more about the developing interrelations between the never-simply-isolated process of consumption (production/consumption) and the wider processes through which mutuality is fostered, so that community, even against the odds, can emerge. The importance of this area (for example, questions of social capital and 'community') has been clear for some time (see Wellman and Gulia, 1999; Wellman et al., 2001), as has its irreducibility to formal political science or market functioning. But its difficulty is also clear, for we stand here, directly in the gap with which I began, between local possibilities of connection and our wider sense of 'meta-social (dis)order'. This gap, of course, can be challenged. The different forms that such challenges take in countless cultural and social conditions<sup>7</sup> require the international exchange of research ideas, priorities and results. The interdisciplinary but sociologically-informed space of cultural studies is surely as good a place as any for such a dialogue to take place.

## Notes

- 1 For different criticisms, see Garnham (2000) and Barry and Slater (2002).
- 2 The project is called 'Media Consumption and the Future of Public Connection' and runs from October 2003 to March 2006. Many thanks to the UK's Economics and Social Research Council for funding this research as part of its Cultures of Consumption programme.
- 3 See also the critical position of Toby Miller (1999) on the consumer/citizen binary.
- 4 'Interactivity' is a slippery term; see McMillan (2002).
- 5 For a wider argument about the myth of 'the media' as our access point to a social centre, see Couldry (2003a).
- 6 Note that the traditional public sphere model has recently adjusted to the importance of networks (Benhabib, 1995; Habermas, 1996).
- 7 For some interesting recent work, see, for example, Lim (2003) on Indonesia, Morris and Meadows (2003) on Aboriginal communities in Australia and Rodriguez (2003) on Chile.

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