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Troubled closeness or satisfied distance? Researching media consumption and public orientation

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There is a key ambiguity in media phenomenology which Raymond Williams expressed better than anyone when he wrote about media as:

> … a form of unevenly shared consciousness of persistently external events. [Media] is what appears to happen, in these powerfully transmitted and mediated ways, in a world within which we have no other perceptible connections but we feel is *at once central and marginal to our lives*. (Williams, 1973: 295–6, added emphasis)

We cannot grasp this paradox unless we accept that media, particularly broadcast media, are important in the phenomenology of everyday experience, something Paddy Scannell's work has done so much to establish as a dimension of media research. We need, however, a more differentiated view of the varieties and tensions at work within this phenomenology, which we will try to develop by drawing on our recent empirical research[1] which asked what everyday media consumption contributes to people's orientation towards, or away from, a world of public issues beyond the purely private.

Through written or spoken diaries produced over an extended period of three months, and interviews/focus groups with participating diarists during a fieldwork relationship lasting up to one year, we tried to understand from multiple perspectives how individual citizens fit media use into their wider practice and how this contributes, or not, to their sense of orientation to a public world. Our research complicates Scannell's account of how media expand

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the horizons of everyday life, at least in relation to the public and potentially political dimensions of media consumption.

We acknowledge that Scannell's aim was to move beyond excessively political readings of media contents (1996: 4, 1989: 157ff.), but it is not an ideological reading of media contents in which we have been engaged. Like Scannell, we have been concerned with media phenomenology, and with what media phenomenology contributes to the phenomenology of civic and political life, to the very *possibility* of a modern democratic polity. Alongside Scannell's broadly positive account, other more pessimistic accounts are possible, such as Alain Touraine's:

> … 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. (Touraine, 2000: 5)

Touraine, to be sure, mixes here issues of political process (not Scannell's concern) with media consumption, but his sense that the crisis of contemporary politics revolves in part around whether media succeed in binding us into larger polities or instead fracture our allegiances irreversibly cannot lightly be dismissed. Our research does not go so far as to support Touraine's extreme pessimism, but neither does it support Scannell's optimism.

Before developing these arguments, we must look at Scannell's own argument in more detail and its philosophical underpinnings.

Scannell and Heidegger

At the heart of Scannell's critique of ideological analyses of media is his recognition, both passionate and historically nuanced, of broadcasting's ability to 'invit[e] ordinary people into the public domain for shared laughter and enjoyment' (1989: 143). Broadcasting, he argues, offers a world to us, a 'universe of discourse'. It expands the 'merely talkable about' (1989: 147), thereby changing for all of us what *is* ordinary and taken for granted:

> The world in broadcasting, appears as ordinary, mundane, accessible, knowable, familiar, recognizable, intelligible, shareable, and intelligible for whole populations. (1989: 152)

Few would dispute that Scannell here expresses one of the most important *claims* that media institutions make, and have consistently made, from the early 20th century onwards (Reith, 1924). There is, however, an implicit functionalism in Scannell's argument which becomes explicit when he writes that 'broadcasting, *because* its service was addressed to the whole society, gradually *came to* represent the whole of society in its programmes' (1989: 142, added

emphasis). Why not leave open for empirical exploration whether broadcast media actually fulfil the role they claim for themselves, let alone the question of what causes underlie that process (cf. Schlesinger, 2000)?

Of course Scannell does much more than stress the new forms of nearness created by media. He also notes the complexity of our resulting relationship to distant events: 'by virtue of not being present, absent viewers and listeners are not in thrall to the aura of events' (1989: 154). As a result, perhaps, we have more critical distance on ritual events than the congregation crowded into Westminster Abbey or Wembley stadium: here a 'good' distance from central events comes with the 'good', if distinctive, closeness to those events that broadcasting enables for whole populations. But are these the only possibilities? Are there other less positive possibilities?

The issues become clearer when we examine Scannell's (1996) linking of his ideas on broadcasting to Heidegger's account in *Being and Time* (1962 [1926]) of Being or *Dasein* (literally, in German, 'there-being'). As Scannell puts it eloquently:

> It is not just that radio and television *compress* time and space. They create new possibilities of being: of being in two places at one, or two times at once. This magic shows most clearly for us when we experience mediated occasions in the fullness of what they presence for us. This will vary from one person to another. For me it was watching the Masters from Augusta a few years ago.… I can see it, feel it, I am *there*, now as I write.… and so it is, for everyone [in relation to their special moment], by virtue of broadcasting's power, of re-presencing. The liveness of events is their *dasein*: their magical, edged, unfolding, self-disclosing, unpredictable, mood-creating being. (1996: 91–2)

Scannell's use of Heidegger raises some general issues – about the usefulness of philosophical arguments (given their high generality) for detailed sociological and historical analysis – that we cannot address here. Instead we want to concentrate on the particular account of Heidegger that Scannell offers.

Crucial are the comments in *Being and Time* on radio which Scannell glosses as follows: 'Heidegger interprets the possibility of radio as transforming spatiality, as bringing things close and hence within the reach of concern' (1996: 167). But Heidegger's references to modern media are more ambiguous than this comment suggests. To be fair, Scannell acknowledges some related tensions in Heidegger's account of the public world (1996: 165 n18), and seeks to resolve them in one direction. But we shall argue for an alternative reading of Heidegger's account of media which is both more plausible as a reading and more open in its empirical implications.

Certainly, one passage in *Being and Time* seems to support Scannell. This is the passage where, discussing the difference between our sense of what is 'near'/'far' to us and mere physical proximity/distance, Heidegger writes:

> All the ways in which we speed things up, as we are more or less compelled to do today, push us onwards towards the conquest of remoteness. With the 'radio' [sic],

> for example, Dasein has so expanded its everyday environment that it has accomplished a de-severance of the 'world'. (1962: 140)

There is, however, already in this passage an ambiguity: the passage refers to overall processes, but Heidegger is already more circumspect about the wider consequences for our sense of Being. The sentence continues: ' – a de-severance which, in its meaning for Dasein, *cannot yet* be visualized' (added emphasis). A passage slightly later in *Being and Time* is more open to multiple outcomes:

> Circumspective concern *decides* as to the closeness and farness of what is proximally ready-to-hand environmentally. Whatever this concern dwells alongside beforehand is what is closest, and *this is what regulates* our de-severances. (1962: 142, added emphasis)

Heidegger is arguing that radio, as a technology, changes the *possibilities* for experience, but the long-term outcome depends on how that technological transformation is integrated into experience. Distant events may, in Scannell's phrase, be 'within the reach of concern' (1996: 167), but that does not mean they are integrated within that concern, yet this is what is at stake when, as Heidegger puts it, our 'de-severances' (our sense of what is *im*mediate to us) are 'regulated'.

Heidegger's original formulations therefore leave open an empirical question which Scannell's reformulations of Heidegger appear to close off. How do we know in advance that radio/TV/other media are actually treated by particular people as part of what is 'closest' to them? Similarly, for the events and processes represented through media, is it not possible that people might instead feel important sensations of *distance* from mediated events? This is the possibility that debates about 'compassion fatigue' raise in a special form.

Heidegger was more aware of these uncertainties than Scannell indicates. First, as Scannell acknowledges in passing (1996: 165 n18), Heidegger's notorious discussion of 'publicness' is highly negative about the existential significance of everyday public discourse:

> The 'they' has its own ways in which to be.… Overnight, everything that is primordial gets glossed over as something that has long been well known … distantiality, averageness and leveling down, as ways of 'Being' for the 'they', constitute what we know as 'publicness' [*die Offentlichkeit*]. (1962: 164–5)

As Heidegger puts it, in what is hardly a democratic impulse: 'by publicness everything gets obscured and what has been covered up gets passed off as something familiar and accessible to everyone' (1962: 165). Heidegger's argument in *Being and Time* (originally published in 1926) owes much more to early 20th-century 'mass culture' critique than can readily be absorbed into Scannell's late 20th-century reformulation.

In his post-war essay 'The Thing' (1971), first published in German in 1952, Heidegger refines his analysis of modern media further (cf. Couldry, 1998: 48 n19; Robins, 1997), starting from the premise of *Being and Time*'s account of radio but extending it to television:

> All distances in time and space are shrinking.… Man now receives instant information, by radio, of events, which he formerly learned about only years later.… Distant sites of the most ancient cultures are shown on film as if they stood this very moment amidst today's street traffic.… The peak of this abolition of every possibility of remoteness is reached by television. (1971: 165)

But Heidegger pushes this towards a different conclusion from Scannell's:

> Yet the frantic abolition of all distances *brings no nearness*; for nearness does not consist in shortness of distance. What is least remote from us in point of distance, by virtue of its picture on film or its sound on the radio, can remain far from us … everything gets lumped together into uniform distancelessness. (1971: 165–6, added emphasis)

If Heidegger was here contradicting himself, then Scannell's reformulation could be defended as simply taking one path down which Heidegger had travelled. But our argument is that there is *no contradiction* in Heidegger. For the premise in each discussion is the same (that media technologies change the possibilities of Being, but with long-term consequences that are uncertain); the only difference is that in the later essay Heidegger applies the dialectic of *Being and Time* to radio and television's increasing *ordinariness* to reach the opposite conclusion from that which Scannell believes (incorrectly, we have suggested) Heidegger reached in *Being and Time*.

Where from here? The differences (at the very least, tensions) between Heidegger's philosophical texts and Scannell's readings of them should provoke us to listen to the complex way in which questions of closeness and distance surface in citizens' own reflections on their media use.

Background on the project

Our project's research question addressed two connected and widely made assumptions about democratic politics: first, that 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, that 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 media consumption). Our concern was with the empirical question: can we find evidence for those

assumptions in how people think about their own practice as UK citizens and media consumers?

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 which from time to time results in actual attention. 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 and if possible resolve in a world of limited shared resources.[2]

We have been careful not to assume that the definition of 'public concerns' is exhausted by politics. People's understanding of what constitutes both politics and the public world may be changing (Bennett, 1998). In addition, the media landscape that may sustain public connection is 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 skilful 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 no longer interconnect sufficiently to form a shared public world.

Our working assumption, however, has been that the public/private boundary remains meaningful in spite of many other levels of disagreement over the content and definition of politics and the 'public'. But our understanding of the public/private boundary was 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)? Translated into the terms of Heidegger and Scannell, we wanted to investigate whether people's everyday media use sustains a 'closeness' to a world of public issues beyond the purely private, or a 'distance' from such a world, or perhaps an oscillation (more or less stable) between closeness and distance.

We felt it important to research those large questions of media phenomenology by listening to citizens' own voices, in interviews and in data produced with researchers absent (Bird, 2003): we asked a small group of 37 people across England to produce a diary for three months during 2004 that reflected on those questions; we interviewed those diarists, both before and after their diary production, individually and where possible also in focus-groups. We also developed the emerging themes of this fieldwork into a nationwide survey (1017 respondents, conducted by ICM Research, June, 2005).

Closeness/distance to/from the media world

The ambiguity from which we began this article (Williams' insight that the media world is 'at once central *and* marginal to our lives') may either be

absorbed as a minor complication into audiences' overall relationship with broadcast media, or it may generate important contradictions and tensions in that relationship. Scannell implies the first, whereas our research points towards the second.

Scannell's eloquent account of radio and television's role in our lives has two linked components: first, that we feel close to media themselves as reference-points in our lives; and, second, that we feel close to the specific public worlds we access through broadcasting. The first is Scannell's fundamental claim, but his argument for the wider sociological and broadly political relevance of that claim inevitably involves the second component too. In comparing our two accounts, it is important to note that, if Scannell is concerned to avoid over-politicizing media consumption, we too were concerned to avoid asking people directly about their relationship to 'politics' in order to tap into their relationship through media to a broader public world (cf. Barnhurst, 1998; Bhavnani, 1991). To the extent that our diarists did talk specifically about the UK political process (and they often did), then issues arise which take us beyond media's role in the phenomenology of everyday life: we will therefore leave those points to one side and concentrate on what we found out about people's orientation through media to a broader public, not necessarily political, world beyond the private.

The reality of mediated public connection

Our overall finding was that the majority of our diarists had what we call 'mediated public connection' (of varying strengths and consistency of course), and this was supported by our survey data (Couldry et al., 2007b: ch. 8), with the exception of an important group disengaged from both media and politics to whom we return later. Sometimes this mediated public connection involved a purely social connection through media, of which the clearest example was Sherryl,[3] a diarist from South London who told us that she often had talk radio on at a low level through the night as she slept:

> I've got [a radio] in my bedroom. So, I sleep with that on.… I sleep with music … so sometimes, I've had to change the channels though, 'cause there's a couple of times where … the problem was, like sometimes they'd have a conversation, like big chat thing at night. They'd pick a topic and it might be something that's been going on in the news or something like that. And it'd be like, middle of the night, 'Ping!' And I can hear them talking about it and I can't go back to sleep, 'cause everyone's talking about it. Then I start getting vexed. (Sherryl, 37, part-time playgroup worker, South London)

This is of course a particularly intense form of social and public connection through media, but there were other diarists who found radio in particular a form of talk that connected them to a wider world in a pleasurable way, whether for lively debate on talk radio or for the sound of a human voice through the day.

More common, however, was mediated connection tied to a specific value: the value of keeping up with *the news* through media (cf. Hagen, 1994). This habit and value was, perhaps, the most important element which sustained mediated public connection overall. Take for example Jonathan, a 23-year-old university administrator from West London, who clearly looked for a world beyond the purely private:

> I'll always watch the news.…I'll always watch it. I think the day that I stop watching it, will be the day when I don't know, will be a sad day anyway. (Jonathan, 23)

Jonathan himself was a very active media user, but he had withdrawn from involvement in politics (party membership, canvassing). Here therefore we have *mediated* public connection in a pure form.

Jonathan contradicted any crude stereotype of a younger generation that is disconnected; so too did many other of our diarists. We might alternatively suggest that Jonathan's connection is distinctive of a younger generation – he had a sense of media as always there ('I'm watching the news pretty much constantly') and relied on the internet as a constant news source alongside television ('I tend to spend at least an hour [at lunch] each day solidly on the internet'), for example to surf BBC and Sky News websites – but this too would mislead. We found examples of the need to keep up to date with the news across generations:

> I need the radio 24 hours. Like regular 24 hours because all the time in car, I listen radio news … the news all the time, every hour I have to listen to news just to find it out what's happening. (Gundeep, 48, garage manager, West London suburb)

> I'm compulsive, I have to pick up any paper that I see and have a look through it. (Enid, 63, part-time school assistant, West London suburb)

However, if we look for evidence of stable *habits* of news attention rather than simply orientation, Jonathan *is* rather exceptional amongst the under 30s, since his habits involved regular use of both traditional and new media. Another diarist, in her 20s and working in marketing, surfed the web during her lunch hour but for purely social reasons:

> We like anything light-hearted and diverting to entertain us, especially when we're so busy. I was checking out Courtney Love's latest adventures on nme.com, and she was checking out Ananova for celebrity gossip.… We haven't talked about the budget or anything serious. (Beccy, 27, Northern suburb)

The contrast between Beccy and Jonathan can also be interpreted in terms of gender. As in our nationwide survey, we found that gender affects the nature and degree of people's mediated public connection. It would be a mistake, however, to see public connection as tied only to politics, or as shaped exclusively by

gender (or indeed class). One working-class diarist, Kylie, a single mother, living in a council flat and unemployed, had scant media resources (no computer), but her sense of mediated public connection was no less strong for that:

> I think it is important they make us aware of what's going on otherwise no one's gonna change.… Even if it's hurting and it's horrible you need to know. (Kylie, 24, South London)

Kylie's social networks were strongly local – she lost interest in using the internet when she did have work access, because 'you're talking to people that are so far away from you' – but traditional media (newspapers, TV news and especially documentaries) provided a vital connection to a world beyond. She recalled to us how a few years previously a press report in the *Daily Mirror* of an orphaned Chinese child had moved her: 'when I read it, it made me cry, I sobbed for days. And carried this piece of paper around with [me], and everywhere I go, I showed it to people.'

There are therefore many forms of mediated public connection across generations, genders, classes and levels of technological access. For some people it is purely habitual, for others it is information-driven and mainly cognitive; sometimes, as with Kylie, it is linked to a deeply felt duty of care towards distant others; and sometimes it is hard to separate the sheer pleasure a diarist felt in media and the practical and civic value they placed in media's role of keeping them in touch with the public world. When asked if the broad range of media sources cited in his diaries was representative of his usual consumption, Henry (52, insurance underwriter, Northern suburb) remarked:

> Yeah, generally – even though I don't read as much as I used to I do enjoy that, and just taking in information full-stop, really.

There are, however, exceptions to this overall picture which generate important qualifications to Scannell's account.

Attraction/withdrawal

News was often the trigger in disrupting people's sense of closeness to the media world. The repetitiveness of news – whether distressing news from Iraq or the slow unravelling of the 'scandal' of a celebrity affair – caused some diarists to withdraw temporarily from the news, even if their mediated public connection was generally steady enough. There were many examples of varying intensity:

> Not listened to Radio 4 today, but had [name] our local radio station on instead, mainly because the world news is too depressing. So I had daft and light entertainment today. (Christine, 48, event organizer, Northern suburb, diary)

> I am afraid that I am in danger of becoming bad news weary and developing an ostrich attitude. (Alfred, 67, retired printer, Northern suburb, diary)

Sometimes it was celebrity culture, not depressing international news, from which people wanted to escape:

> A very quiet Easter, have not really read the paper, mind you there was only the Beckhams, and the Beckhams' hangers on in the world this weekend, I am so sick of them I want to throw up, I have deliberately not read anything about them, but I'm sure you will understand!! (Christine, diary)

In some diarists, a link between 'switching off' and a deeper lack of agency emerged. Sherryl's (tape-recorded) diary revealed strong views on many issues (Iraq, Guantanamo Bay and US foreign policy) but she also found the insistence of these news themes difficult to cope with: 'I have to say there's nothing really I want to talk about. It's all really depressing.… I was gonna write about Iraq and that the Red Cross and I think the government knowing of the abuse of prisoners around a year ago, but I can't be bothered.'

Some diarists reflected further on these tensions, for example Sheila, a senior health protection nurse from our Midlands rural region. Her diary offered a prolonged reflection over this tension. Sheila found the news from Iraq during March–May 2004 (the Abu Ghraib prison abuse revelations and some particularly gruesome murders of UK and US personnel in Iraq) both compelling and very upsetting. She wanted to withdraw from it, but felt guilty at doing so. In fact her ambivalence to the media's coverage of the war in Iraq became so intense that she could not complete her diary and was only able to reflect back on what happened when we interviewed her again later in the year: 'I think in retrospect, I was getting too involved and … I didn't like what it was doing to me … I got too involved with it.'

If in a less emotionally intense way, Abby, a 47-year-old local government worker from South London, also felt a similar ambivalence towards the Iraq war coverage and linked this to a wider reflection about her relation to media, by contrast with her intense engagement at events like the London Marathon:

> Attended with the family the start of the marathon [in London]. As we stood there cheering on the charity runners – I started to think that this was the true meaning of 'public life'. Strangers from all over the country, even world, coming together for the sake of their charities, and ordinary people cheering them on, regardless of background, race, religion, etc. The diary has made me appreciate – and at times view very cynically – the news and how it affects me and my family in everyday life. (Abby, diary)

Explaining this in the follow-up interview, she said she felt 'unconnected' to what she saw on TV: 'you're outside looking in.… You're just thinking: I'm glad I'm not there. I'm glad my family's not there.' So Abby, even though she had what we call strong mediated public connection, was critical of the implications

of how media connect us to distant events in our daily lives (on this theme cf. Silverstone, 1999: ch. 15).

Media connection without public connection?

Another group of diarists were linked through media to a collective world but that world was not a world of public issues, however broadly defined. For some (generally women), media provided collective access to a world of celebrity, reality TV, fashion or music:

> Yeah, that's it you know, everyone, I enjoy reading gossipy stories. Everyone enjoys reading gossipy stories. (Andrea, 25, nurse, Midlands rural)

> I would say that I do keep up to date with what's going on. Maybe mainly the gossipy side of the media, you know like *Heat* and *OK* magazine, yes I get those every week. So I tend to keep up with who's doing what with who and where and what have you. What girl isn't into that really? (Janet, 29, airport administrator, Northern suburb)

> Very unlike me this week. I don't know what is number 1 in the music charts. Hopefully next week I will have more to write. (Samantha, 33, hairdresser, Urban South, diary)

The male 'version' of this relationship to media appeared[4] different: pleasure in a wide range of light entertainment media (comedy, music, sport), but including also a wide range of factual material with politics watched as a form of entertainment. In both 'versions' diarists prioritized the pleasure that media afforded them, rather than its public relevance, but that did not rule out an overall public connection, sustained by other means.

In a few cases, however, the collective sense of connection through media came close to being in direct opposition to 'public connection' in our sense, with very little sense that media's role is to link us with a world of public issues. We call this 'pure media connection'. Beccy, already quoted, was a subtle case who tended in this direction, but oscillated between ignoring and sampling the public world. Her defence of why it was necessary sometimes to 'tune out' was interesting:

> You need to be able to turn the TV off, as awful as it is … you do, in life you do have to do what you've got to do and if you've had a bad day at work you've got to do whatever … it takes … to make you go back there the next day.… you can't feel obliged to sit down and watch the news if it's gonna depress you if you're already a bit stressed.

For Beccy, the diary context made her appreciate that her 'default setting' was to switch off from public issues in the media, even if her reflections could occasionally push her towards following news.

The weakly connected

In some diarists we found a more generalized sense of distance from both media and any world of public issues. For nine diarists media seemed an area of experience from which they could switch off without major consequences. For these diarists media were not a central part of their world: some – Christine, Eric and Tyrrone – had a strong public connection through routes *other than* media (such as the church), while the remaining six – those we call 'weakly connected' – did not.

Both these possibilities – public connection by routes that override media, and media's dispensability – are important, yet easily overlooked in media research. The clearest case was perhaps Kathleen who ended her three-month diary with the following reflection:

> The media is here to stay, love it or leave it, but I can't help wondering whether it was better to live in an age when you only knew what was happening in the next street or maybe village. We seem to live in an age now when we thrive on listening to other's misfortunes. (Kathleen, 34, trainee teachers' assistant, Urban South)

It is easy to dismiss such misgivings as inconsequential, yet they can be linked to practice (second interviews with diarists were sometimes revealing here). Mary, aged 18, told us that becoming a student away from home changed her from a regular TV and newspaper consumer to someone who rarely consumed either; while Marie, a 34-year-old accounts clerk told us the opening of a fitness club near home meant that spare time, once spent with television, was now, more purposefully (in her view), spent on exercise. These comments are a challenge to the implicit mediacentrism of Scannell's account.

Satisfied distance or troubled closeness?

We recruited our diarists from six contrasting regions, which were chosen, in part, for their varying distance from the metropolitan centre of London. Although the size of our sample does not allow us to say anything definitive here, we were struck by the difference between our diarists in South London (a poor inner-city area) and our diarists in a Midlands rural region (of mixed income levels). Our South London diarists generally showed an intense engagement with (if also sometimes the need to withdraw from) national and global issues. This was linked in part to socioeconomic status – the lack of local transport, the closeness to crime and drugs on the street outside the public housing where they lived – but there was also a sense that their inner-city setting meant these diarists felt (in Heidegger's term) 'thrown' into global issues, that is, unavoidably involved in those issues (cf. Scannell, 1996: 157 n12). Other diarists from this region showed a strong engagement with social problems that was translated not so much into media consumption as into their

intense involvement in the public worlds of religion (the church, being a professional singer in a gospel choir).

By contrast, a number of the Midlands rural diarists had a strong sense of politics as a distant world ('it just seems like it's a little bit of another world.… they're supposed to be making decisions on behalf of all of us but it doesn't generally seem that way.… it seems like we're a long way away from it you know': Andrea) but without the South Londoners' sense of living directly *in the midst of* the issues that media represented. Yet, crucially, this was not experienced as a lack of any sort.

Such regional contrasts are of course overdetermined by socioeconomic differences but there is also a broader contrast across our diarist sample in terms of how people made sense of their relationship to media and the public world. For some, such as Andrea (Midlands rural), the relationship was one of what we might call *satisfied distance* – they lacked or only had intermittent public connection, but did not experience this as a problem – whereas others (Kylie, South London) had public connection, sustained through an intense relationship to media, but this was experienced as problematic: we could call this *troubled closeness*.

In the light of the theoretical discussion at the beginning of this article, it is also interesting to note the themes of possibility and conditionality which accompany expressions of distance and closeness in the diaries and interviews. For the diarists who are unproblematically engaged, the media do appear to offer an invitation to a broader public or discursive space, or an expansion of the possible or 'talkable about'. Those who have a relationship of satisfied distance from media and the public world might also be said to experience the media as a potential route to another realm of possibility – but one which they simply do not feel compelled to follow. For those with a relation of troubled closeness, however, it is the impossibility of escaping mediated public connection which creates tension – here, media demand rather than invite participation in the discourse of public issues. Finally, there is the group for whom engagement is not merely practically precluded but effectively impossible, that is, not present in the ordinary and taken for granted. It is to this group that we now turn.

The disengaged

Questions of value – people's variable sense of whether it's worth being more or less closely engaged in the public world – here cut across questions of phenomenology (people's sense of media automatically involving them in a world beyond their private routines), and values are of course partly based in material circumstances. At this point we need to acknowledge a very different group of people – difficult to reach through our intense qualitative fieldwork but strongly registered in our survey data – who have already, as it were,

made the decision to turn away from the possibilities media offer for connection and face in another direction: the disengaged.

Levels of disengagement were measured in the survey by responses to a series of prompts about politics, issues and media.[5] While it will be seen below that answers to specific questions are perhaps the most revealing, the strong relationship between the various disengagement variables suggests that we can begin by looking at disengagement in general terms. Put another way, there was a clearly identifiable subset of the survey population who were *broadly disengaged* (rather than distant only from media or only from politics). A subsequent cluster analysis, grouping respondents together by the sorts of issues they generally followed, confirmed that, while most people follow a common core of issues and can be categorized by whether they *also* follow traditional-political, single-issue or celebrity-themed issues, there is a distinct minority who don't tend to follow *any* issues in particular – and who score highly across all forms of disengagement measured in the survey. Our analysis focused on establishing which factors predicted membership of this group.

We began by looking solely at demographic factors, and established that low socioeconomic status was the strongest predictor of disengagement. Variables measuring social capital and political efficacy and interest were then added, and together explained the difference between the engaged and disengaged to a much greater (and statistically significant) extent. In short, disengagement is predicted not only by class but by age (older), lower political interest and a weaker sense that getting involved in issues can make a difference.

We then investigated whether people's media consumption and attitudes towards media make an *additional* contribution to explaining disengagement – that is, controlling for the possibility that significant relationships between media variables and disengagement can be better explained by demographic and sociopolitical factors rather than media consumption and attitudes per se. This established that the media do make a significant difference, but in subtle and often complex ways. For instance, those who are disengaged spend less time reading books, but are more likely to seek news from their local paper. Those who report feeling more engaged, on the other hand, are more likely to seek news from the internet, the radio and the national press.

The phenomenologically ambiguous position of the media in people's sense of orientation towards or away from any sort of public world is perhaps best illustrated by responses to the prompt: 'The things the media cover have little to do with your life'. Respondents who disagree with this statement are more likely to vote, to be interested in politics and to feel a sense of efficacy, suggesting that the media do contribute to individuals' sense of orientation towards public issues.

However, the survey also demonstrated that the people who spend the most time watching television are also more likely to find media irrelevant to their lives. This is a compelling demonstration that while, for many, a certain minimum media consumption is necessary to sustain engagement, for others,

regular media habits do not lead to a sense of closeness or orientation to a public world. For this group there is an already-having-turned-away which precludes the possibility of engagement, an already-entrenched distance which media cannot bridge.

This recalls Ron Lembo's (1999) argument that, for some, particularly working-class, audiences – high television consumers whose consumption routines are linked to exhausting jobs of low status – television may work as a form of '*disengaged* sociality' that connects them to the social world, but in a way that cannot be articulated to any actual social practice, whether work- or leisure-based. This surely is an important and phenomenologically significant dimension to broadcasting's embedding in everyday life that Scannell's more optimistic narrative ignores.

Conclusion

This article started from strong agreement with Scannell on the importance of the phenomenological dimensions of media, but has looked closely at the details of, and tensions within, people's own accounts of their everyday media use and, in particular, how they do, or do not, understand their media use to connect them to a world of public issues beyond the private. The result has been to challenge Scannell's account of how media bind us daily into a national space of attention, and in so doing reflect better the tensions within Heidegger's brief writings on media on which Scannell had drawn.

The point is not to say that Scannell's account is wrong – on the contrary, the overall finding of our research project (cf. Couldry et al., 2007b for detailed argument) was that most people, broadly speaking, had some degree of 'mediated public connection' – but rather to question the universality of Scannell's account and its tendency to ignore tensions in our relationships to media that are just as salient phenomenologically as the general pattern, and sometimes more so. On the other hand, our account provides no support for the generalized pessimism of Alain Touraine; in so far as our research project is pessimistic about the effectiveness of 'mediated public connection' in sustaining British democracy, that is because of wider disjunctures between individual civic practice and the recognition that this receives from the system of Britain's 'elitist democracy' (Conover et al., 1991; and for further discussion see and Couldry et al., 2007a, 2007b: ch. 9; Mayhew, 1997).

There are, in other words, ambiguities at the heart of media phenomenology that are important to the role media can play in the ethics of everyday life. The late Roger Silverstone was one of the first to notice these ambiguities when he wrote of the amorality, not immorality, of media: 'the distance they create and mesh as closeness, the connections that they make while keeping us apart' (1999: 138). This returns us, but now in a media world whose daily global horizon cannot be ignored, to the ambiguity between connection and marginality

to which Williams had alluded. In this article we have, we hope, shown how this theoretical debate can be enriched by listening closely to the sometimes troubled reflections of the individuals who comprise Britain's media consumers and citizens.

Notes

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2. The word 'public' is, of course, notoriously difficult, since it has a range of conflicting meanings (Weintraub and Kumar, 1997), but we cannot debate this, or defend our particular usage, here (see Couldry et al., forthcoming, a; cf. Elshtain, 1997; Geuss, 2001).

3. All diarists' names have been changed for reasons of confidentiality.

4. Our examples here are men over 50 (whereas all the diarists linked with a celebrity-related connection to media were women under 40), so age and gender probably intersect as causal factors.

5. The disengagement scale was constructed from nine variables (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree): 'You don't like to discuss politics with other people', 'You don't get involved in political protests', 'There's no point in watching the news, because it deals with things you can do nothing about', 'Politics has little connection with your life', 'It doesn't really matter which party is in power, in the end things go on pretty much the same', 'Sometimes politics seems so complicated that you can't really understand what's going on', 'You often feel that there's too much media, so you need to switch off', 'People like us have no say in what the government does', 'Sometimes you feel strongly about an issue, but you don't know what to do about it'.

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