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Tracking Public Connection: Methodological Issues

So far we have reviewed a range of arguments (both empirical and theoretical) about the uncertain future of democratic participation (Chapter 1) and media’s role in democratic systems (Chapter 2). We use the term ‘(mediated) public connection’ heuristically to cut beneath that complexity and suggest an underlying precondition for democratic legitimacy. Our wider aim is to trace this precondition in everyday practice in contemporary Britain. In this chapter we detail our multi-method strategy, explaining in particular our diary methodology.

Overall design

Public connection is part of how people reflexively inhabit their role as citizens. In so far as ‘public connection’ involves uncertainties, these are uncertainties for all citizens, ourselves included. This overlap between the reflexivity of researcher and ‘researched’ generates a ‘complicity’ that George Marcus (1999) suggests is the condition of all contemporary qualitative research. However that may be, we knew in advance that the reflexive process of public connection could not be adequately understood ‘at a distance’: it was essential for us to generate individuals’ accounts of that process.

This is why we chose the diary form (both written and spoken) as a major tool of research. We asked a range of people across England to produce a diary for up to three months during 2004 on the following issues: what did the ‘public world’ constitute for them? How was their sense of a public world linked to the media they consumed? How was it linked to their occasions for talk with others and their wider reflections on the workings of media and democracy? Our aim was to stimulate reflection, not constrain it, leaving room for a variety of responses on
these complex, open-ended, questions. It was important also to contextualise the diaries using a range of evidence: interviews with individual diarists conducted before and after diary production, and, if possible, their talk in focus groups with other diarists.

Because of the intensity of this research process, the number of diary participants was necessarily small: 37 men and women from six regions across England (see Appendix IA for summary details of the diarists). That was why we wanted to place the diary research within a broader context of a nationwide survey (see Appendix II). The overall result we believe is a rich and complex picture of whether and how citizens orientate themselves to a world beyond the private, and what role media plays in this ‘public connection’.

Research precedents

As Chapter 1 explained, the term ‘public connection’ is deliberately much broader than electoral ‘politics’, and so we did not aim directly to explore people’s views about specific ‘political’ issues. Indeed, given the problems researchers have found with that term’s negative connotations (Barnhurst 1998; Lister et al. 2003; Livingstone 2009), it is arguably an advantage to approach people’s political engagement indirectly.

At the same time, little political science has been expressly interested in media-related activity/consumption when assessing habits of public/political participation. This is a symptom, perhaps, of a wider problem. Recall Carole Pateman’s argument nearly four decades ago (1970: 104) that political theorists were insufficiently curious about the ‘ordinary man’s everyday experience of political participation of the: many have noted a similar absence in political science, an absence that naturally covers the ‘ordinary’ experience of using media too (Street 1994). Further afield, in the study of consumption generally, too little attention has been paid to the ‘narratives mobilised by consumers’ when they give a detailed account of what they do (Longhurst et al. 2001: 125–6).

At this point two approaches are possible. One – pursued in political communication research – aims for large-scale generalisations entirely based on surveys. Our approach by contrast responds to the current uncertainties over the nature of democratic engagement through a detailed attention also to engagement’s embedding within the textures of everyday life. This requires a qualitative, broadly