



Current Contents

Past Issues

□ Couldry, Nick, Sonia Livingstone & Tim Markham:

*Media Consumption and Public Engagement: Beyond the Presumption of Attention*

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## A Review by Michael Higgins

This book may well prove to be an important one for those interested in the relationship between media and politics. It offers important insights into the place of the audience in at least two parallel discussions that have come to dominate that field. One of these debates has centred on the place of the citizen in media, both in terms of how they are addressed as a public and in how they are involved as participants. From this, some extremely worthwhile material has emerged, looking at how informal, confessional public talk has developed as media spectacle, and offering conjecture on the cultural and political implications of such practices. Another still larger body of work has examined various strategies of engaging public in issues around the democratic state. Running through this latter debate has been the assumption that the development of media outside the realm of traditional public service has generated a new configuration of political culture, where political arguments and policy outlines are ‘dumbed-down’ in the name of media friendliness. In *Media Consumption and Public Engagement*, Nick Couldry, Sonia Livingstone and Tim Markham engage in both of these debates, in a way that combines a focus on the audience with an admirable clarity of approach.

The book calls into question common assumptions regarding audiences. Too often, the authors argue, these provide the backdrop to debate on media responsibility. One of the notions challenged is that of “mediated public connection” – defined as a taken-for-granted residual capacity amongst audience members for intermittent citizen-like activity – a consequence of which has been that academic and policy discussion often alights on establishing the best mechanism to transform these inherent qualities into attention. The authors argue that this has skewed those debates on “political disconnection” that have arisen from a supposed dearth of trust in political establishments, coupled with comparatively feeble civil institutions and structures, and set alongside patterns of traditional and regularised media use. Some of these beliefs may have some basis in research, but the authors insist that those regarding media consumption certainly do not. Indeed, Couldry *et al* point out that media institutions themselves have long integrated the fragmented audience into their marketing, in ways recently assisted by the development of participatory technology: for some colleagues, offering the potential to encourage political participation in the audience’s own terms, for other colleagues, the provision of yet more cheery distraction for those audience members content with political marginalisation.

One of the most pleasing aspects of this book is its transparency of method, which is first explained in chapter three, and then applied conscientiously and with precision through to the penultimate chapter eight. The findings are based around a diary project involving a total of thirty-eight men and women across a range of English regions. The authors also interviewed the diarists early in the study, and involved some of them in later focus groups. This diary phase is backed by a survey of 1000 people, designed to establish norms of media consumption as they are articulated alongside the perceived duties and actual practices of political public connection. One emphasis at this stage is on establishing exactly what such constructions as “political” and “public” mean to those surveyed. Appropriately, the insights of the respondents are preserved by the authors’ emphasis on the “descriptive or explanatory language” used in the surveys.

What emerges is a broad characterization of the political amongst the respondents. There is a definition that extends beyond the frameworks of democratic statehood into a “public world” that includes “health, education and family morality, race and identity, religion, sexuality, music and film, and celebrity culture” (84). Consistent with its long-standing status as something of a problematic term, discussions of “public” also bleed into discussion of such “quasi-public actions” as those forms of participation available on such occasions as the eviction nights on *Big Brother* (70). Yet, in spite of the emergence of an inclusive notion of the political, the authors recommend caution over merely assuming any association between political engagement and, for example, entertainment media (85). Indeed, even where discussion of public issues is highlighted by the respondents as a commendable pursuit, the authors stress the disjuncture between activities of talk and meaningful political action.

The sheer quantity of discussion of the data offers up some fascinating insights along the way. To take just one example, in what proves to be a complex correlation between watching TV and political interest, the ideal pattern of behaviour – for those who see political action as good thing – seems to be a optimum amount of TV, where too much is coincidental with disengagement (158). Also, what is seen as a moral duty to keep up with the news among some respondents (159) is confronted by the determination of others to block-out “particularly intense” forms of news, including war coverage (102). The media literacy described is sophisticated, complex, and sceptical. There is, however, the occasional barb, such as hints of surrender to the moralistic underpinnings of media content (112). Certainly, the authors argue, what we find is a form of media literacy better contemplated along with the socio-cultural situation of the correspondents than through any predictive models of media citizenship (109).

The issues highlighted here have taxed political communications scholars for much of the last century. In a study on citizen engagement in politics now more than four decades old, Rokkan and Campbell (1960) argue that two indexes have to be taken into account in establishing political participation: namely, involvement in organised political activity and attention to politics in media. They agree with Couldry *et al* that the relationship between these two indexes is far from straightforward and that political activity can be

independent of political use of media. However, the insights of Couldry *et al* offer us a far more refined account of a multi-generic media environment: we are asked to question how we assess media consumption and to be attentive of how others define the political. We should be grateful that Couldry *et al*'s account of the relationship between media consumption and public connection moves these debates on, even though the shifting character of media, in terms both of genre and delivery platform, mean that we will have to revisit the relationship between political action and audience activity many times in the future. In addition to their impressive contribution to current scholarship, therefore, the conceptual and methodological framework provided by Couldry et al seems likely to provide an essential resource for years to come.

This book is a demanding one to read, but it is a text I will certainly be recommending to students engaged in postgraduate study of audiences, or with any interest in the relationship between media and political engagement. Perhaps the conclusion might have been lengthier and more illustrative, and might also have been more boastful of the book's contribution to such debates as that over the "dumbing-down" or otherwise of political media. Brief as it is, though, the conclusion offers some telling advice. Addressing themselves to the academy, the authors call for a more nuanced approach towards media consumption as a series of political practices – and not just the institutionally approved ones; political institutions, for their part, are urged to appreciate the variety of productive media consumption practices and to incorporate these in challenging political disengagement; and media institutions are asked to instil a culture of self-criticism and development into their public service provision that takes account of audience practice.

## Reference

Rokkan, Stein and Campbell, Angus, 'Citizen participation in political life: Norway and the United States of America', *International Social Science Journal* 12, 1960, pp. 69-99.

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## Biographical note

Michael Higgins is based at the University of Strathclyde

