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BRIDGE OR CHASM?

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ABSTRACT

Media and cultural research has an important contribution to make to recent debates about declines in democratic engagement: is for example celebrity culture a route into democratic engagement for those otherwise disengaged? This article contributes to this debate by reviewing qualitative and quantitative findings from a UK project on 'public connection'. Using self-produced diaries (with in-depth multiple interviews) as well as a nationwide survey, the authors argue that while celebrity culture is an important point of social connection sustained by media use, it is not linked in citizens' own accounts to issues of public concern. Survey data suggest that those who particularly follow celebrity culture are the least engaged in politics and least likely to use their social networks to involve themselves in action or discussion about public-type issues. This does not mean 'celebrity culture' is 'bad', but it challenges suggestions of how popular culture might contribute to effective democracy.

Introduction

This is an age of declining participation in the electoral process in many countries, notably the USA, UK and Japan (Sussman 2005: 162) and declining institutional legitimacy[1] across most established democracies. It is characterized also by the increasing pluralization and segregation of lifeworlds, and transformations in our sense of what 'politics' and 'public' life should be, and where and by whom they should be conducted. It is marked finally by transformations in media: the forms through which media reach us and the habits by which we absorb media in our daily lives, leading to an intensified fragmentation of audiences. Slower long-term trends therefore intersect with fast-moving developments, making it particularly difficult to see what exactly is changing. As a result, there has been much debate in political science about whether falling voter turnout and political trust signifies a turning of populations *away* from politics or in fact a *reorientation* of politics and a *relocation* of political action (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000; Tarrow, 2000). Similarly, within media and cultural studies, there has been intense debate between those who fear an absolute decline in politics as a transformative force (Gitlin, 1998; Giroux, 2001) and those who argue that politics is being renewed and further democratized by popular culture (Corner & Pels, 2003b; Zoonen, 2005)

In this ongoing debate, celebrity culture is of particular interest. Celebrity itself has attracted a growing literature which is split on its benefits and costs. Celebrities, we are often told, are role-models for millions, especially younger citizens; the detailed narratives of celebrity lives – their struggles over identity, sexuality, giving birth,

performing in public – certainly fascinate many of us. And celebrities are increasingly involved in, and used by politicians to further, political narratives, as part of a general blurring of the boundary between news and entertainment (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001). From here, some have made a stronger case, that celebrity culture is an essential component of public debate about the issues which require public resolution, whether as part of an increasing personalization of politics (Corner & Pels, 2003b), or as part of a broader narrativisation of democracy that includes a wider section of the public (Hartley, 1999; Lumby, 1997). This contradicts a longer negative tradition which sees celebrities and the mediated events constructed around them, as pseudo-personalities and pseudo-events (Boorstin, 1961). But such is the proliferation of celebrity culture (Rojek, 2001; Turner, 2004) that it can no longer simply be dismissed as external to the world of public issues.

When thinking about the wider relationship of celebrity culture to political engagement and political culture, there are two possible approaches: one is to look more specifically at how the figure of celebrity is specifically mobilized in contemporary mediated politics. The other, which we will take, is to consider how celebrity culture in a broader sense (as it intersects with the growth of 'reality TV', fashion culture and other areas of today's media cultures) offers connections to a world of public and political issues, even if one very different from traditional party politics. From this latter perspective, it is interesting that some political sociologists have seen in the growth of reality TV (so successful in mobilizing significant proportions of at least the younger population in many countries) a

possible alternative route to engaging those otherwise irreversibly switched off from politics (Coleman, 2003; Power, 2006: 247-48).

In this article we aim to contribute to these debates by drawing on the findings of a recent research project (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham 2007), both its qualitative and quantitative data.[2] This, we argue, supports a skeptical approach to claims that celebrity culture, in the broader sense just mentioned, contributes positively to the possibilities of democratic renewal, at least in the UK. This has considerable implications, we will suggest, for our understanding of the relationship between popular culture and politics.

The Public Connection project: some background

Our research question in the 'Public Connection' project[3] is best explained in terms of two connected and widely made assumptions about democratic politics that we have been trying to 'test': first, in an established democracy such as Britain, that 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'), and second, that this public connection is focussed 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).

The word 'public' is, of course, notoriously difficult, since it has a range of conflicting meanings (Weintraub and Kumar, 1997), with two related types of boundary in particular

overlapping: the boundary between public and private space (a boundary which turns on the question of what is publicly accessible) and the boundary between public and private issues (which turns on what types of issue need, or do not need, to be resolved collectively). In our research, we have been primarily interested in the second type of boundary. Our working assumption has been that the public/private boundary in this sense remains meaningful in spite of many other levels of disagreement over the content and definition of politics. There is no space to defend this working assumption,[4] but we would suggest that even political theory that emphasises the fluidity and multivalence of the public/private boundary still ends up by reaffirming its significance (for example Geuss, 2001).To summarise, when in this project we talk of '*public*' connection, we mean by 'public' things or issues regarded as of shared concern, not purely private concern, matters that in principle citizens need to discuss in a world of limited resources (cf Taylor 2004). Our understanding of the public/private boundary has not however been 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)?

These are the questions we aimed to explore: first by asking a small group of 37 people to produce a diary for 3 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 (conducted in June 2005 on our behalf by ICM Research, with a sample of 1017 respondents). 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 37 diarists were evenly split across gender and three age categories (between 18 and 69). We aimed indirectly for a wide socioeconomic range through two strategies: first, by recruiting in 6 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 30 and 50 were difficult to recruit as were both genders in Class D (unskilled manual labour), but we achieved a good range of home media access (broadly tracking then current UK national averages). There were nine non-white 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. 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 semi-structured 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 based on 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, or not, as the case may be.[5] Nonetheless, as we shall see, our nationwide survey produced very useful findings also about the salience of celebrity culture to political engagement across the wider population.

An Expanded Public World

The whole point of our research was to avoid imposing a narrow view of the public world (particularly one focused on a usually gendered perspective on traditional politics) and allow for a wide range of approaches to what count as public issues. As a result, our diary research registered some people's interest in traditional politics, but registered many other perspectives as well on public issues and on the world presented by media. There was considerable commentary on celebrity culture, reality TV and (to a lesser extent) music and fashion. We took an open view on the relationship of celebrity culture to public connection: we asked our diarists to talk, as they thought relevant, about celebrity and other aspects of popular media culture, and then looked for any connections *they* made with issues of public contention.

Overall attitudes to celebrity culture

There was a clear group of diarists, generally younger and female, for whom celebrity culture in a broad sense was central to the media they followed and to which they felt connected. In what follows, we quote a number of examples to illustrate the importance of engagement with celebrity culture amongst our diarists:

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

> 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 operations manager, suburb of northern English city)

Beccy's engagement was tinged however with defensiveness:

> The public . . . are always gonna want to know more and the public are going to buy Heat magazine no matter what trash is in it because you know you just get fed the stuff and you just take it in . . . It is the whole car crash thing. It's compelling and . . . I don't know why. (Beccy, 27, marketing executive, suburb of northern English city)

Later Beccy explained her love of celebrity, soaps and reality TV through a pragmatic individualism:

I'm looking at Posh and Becks and really not looking at politics . . . I'm as guilty as the next person for doing it. There's the sort of right way of going about things and there's the actual way you sort of do things. You know in a real life situation when you're busy at work and you know you've got pressures or you know you get stresses and you come home and you know just end up watching like trash telly which is what I was doing when you came in, just to chill out. (Beccy)

In spite of such occasional defensiveness, for many diarists celebrities were part of a collective world to which media connected them. This is potentially distinct from a 'public' world in the sense we mean by the term 'public connection' (that is, a world of public issues for collective resolution).

It is important however also to register diarists by whom celebrity culture in the broad sense (in which we will include for convenience the quasi-celebrity culture of reality TV)[6] was seen as negative: 'to me it's pure voyeurism . . . there's nothing happening' (Stuart, 61, retired bank manager, suburb of northern English city); 'I mean, these last two weeks, Jordan has been front page. Who is interested in that?' (Pavarti, 51, shop owner, suburban west London). As a result, for some people celebrity stories were something they needed to escape from, rather than felt attracted to:

Have avoided newspapers, because as I predicted they are full of the Beckhams and real news is taking a back seat! (Abby, 45, administrative officer, inner south London)

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, 46, events coordinator, suburb of northern English city)

While women were particularly vociferous on this topic (perhaps they sensed that aspects of celebrity culture were particularly addressed at them), there were men who also felt a distance from celebrity culture. Men were more likely to develop this into a negative judgment about *others*:

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. I don't care what David Beckman's hair looks like. (Josh, 23, architecture student, suburb of northern English city)

Some diarists were ambivalent on the wider relevance of celebrity stories, acknowledging the pleasure they offered, but uneasy about their predominance. Crystal for example was 22, an unemployed single mother from inner city South London. She acknowledged that celebrities might sometimes be positive points of references: 'I love the Beckhams, I really do love them'. 'Sometimes' she said 'it makes you want to better yourself'.

However she felt two types of tension. The first was to do with the excessive demands of consumerism: 'I wanna read the magazines and stuff like that - but I can't have that at the moment, so . . . [I'm going to] get on with reality, what I've got to do, budgeting'. The second tension was over the excessive amount of celebrity coverage: 'sometimes it is an overload'. This linked to her sense that sometimes there were more important priorities in the news:

> 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.

Finally, there were a number of diarists for whom celebrity narratives simply did not feature at all, unless it was to dismiss them from a distance:

> I mean these celebrity programmes where you're exposing people, is it really a good thing to watch somebody eat maggots? I mean I don't particularly consider that entertainment you know. (Edward)

For a diarist such as Enid (63, part-time assistant at school, suburban west London), celebrity themes were not even raised for the purpose of critique. Enid was a heavy news

consumer whose diaries covered a variety of local, national and international topics, drawing on a range of media from TV and radio to the tabloid press. She simply filtered out what she thought was irrelevant to her, including celebrity issues.

Our diarist sample therefore exhibited a wide range of attitudes to celebrity culture, with considerable ambivalence and sometimes hostility being found alongside attraction and engagement. The pilot research linked to our project (Couldry and Langer 2005) had found even greater ambivalence and hostility to celebrity culture among its respondents from the Mass-Observation panel – not surprisingly given their older average age.

The picture that emerges is therefore considerably more complex than suggested by broad populist narratives about the implicit politics of celebrity culture. We want now to develop that insight in more detail by considering to what extent diarists themselves connected the discussion of celebrity narratives to public issues.

Celebrity and public issues

Celebrity culture can, of course, be discussed entirely in its own terms, with individual stories recycling themselves in myriad forms, or being linked to the stories of other celebrities in the narrative flow of magazine, press TV and internet coverage. However, a number of writers, as already noted, see celebrity culture had a wider significance than this, that is, a role in engaging the otherwise disengaged into a wider field of public

debate and concern. It was this we were interested in exploring amongst our diarists' own accounts.

The starting-point is everyday talk: talk about celebrity is a ready-made 'social' topic in certain settings as in the office lunch break:

I mean we'll have conversations and it is always based on the newspaper. . . . 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)

For Beccy, as her diary made clear, surfing celebrity websites was the regular way of spending the lunch hour:

At lunchtime, [female name] (the other half of the marketing team) and I did some web surfing to catch up on the news. 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. Apparently Roseanne has had her stomach stapled. Ananova is just a comic, it's great. I don't look at it because I don't need to [name of female colleague] tells me anything interesting that's on there. That's mostly what we discuss in here, celebrity gossip, who was wearing what, who has said what, who's done what. We haven't talked about the budget or anything serious (diary).

The *boundary* drawn here between celebrity culture (as a lightener of the social atmosphere) and 'serious' public issues is here very clear but not, in itself, evidence that celebrity culture disconnects people in any way from those other issues. Of course celebrity is something it can be entertaining to talk about in itself – part of Paddy Scannell called the 'merely talkable about' (Scannell, 1989).

But was there evidence in what diarists wrote or said of them *making links* from celebrity narratives to public issues (as *they* understood them)? A few celebrity stories raised moral comment:

> Stories read and TV interviews seen with George Michael, and how thoughtful of
> him to donate all future money he makes to charity. More famous people should
> follow him – after all the money that they make surely there is only so much that
> the need to live their very comfortable lives after years in the business. (Andrea,
> diary)

The comment here remains closed, not linked to any wider discussion; it was in any case only picked up by two diarists. There was much more discussion about the alleged sexual liaisons of David Beckham. These were very prominent in the British press (and also in other countries) during March and April 2004, around the same time of very disturbing revelations from the Iraq War (the Abu-Ghraib jail torture stories) and major concerns on the global security front (the Madrid bombing of March 2004). This coincidence - and the choices about relative news priorities it forced newspaper editors to make - elicited a lot

of comment (alongside other comments on the boundaries between private and public life in the case of celebrities). Commentary on the Beckham case (for example) regularly developed, <u>not</u> into discussions of any broader issues for public resolution raised by that case, but to the opposite, to criticisms of media news values and their implication that the Beckhams were of wider public importance. For example:

Why do we (the public) need to know what the Beckhams do with their private lives? (Lesley, 39, secretary in education, rural English midlands)

I don't understand why the private life of the England Coach should have anything to do with anyone but him. Private business is just that – between him and his partner – and so what if it's his secretary? (Josh, diary)

Note here that it was diarists' *separation* between celebrity culture and topics of public interest – not the connections between them – that is primary. Nor did discussion of celebrity, although frequent among our diarists, emerge elsewhere as a reference-point for broader debates that diarists *themselves* regarded as of wider public concern.[7] The same, perhaps surprisingly, was more broadly true of reality TV, in spite of many diarists' obvious pleasure in it.

Surprising here is that celebrity culture even in diarists' *own accounts* does not seem to connect with public issues in the broad sense which we were employing, that is, contentious issues that require to public resolution. We acknowledge one important cultural studies argument (Lumby 1997, van Zoonen 2005) that celebrity culture has

redefined what counts as public issues (in our broad sense). But, if that were the case, we would expect followers of celebrity culture (of whom we had many in our study) to talk about it and relate it to such an expanded notion of what counts as issues for public resolution. Yet, in our research at least, it was precisely such links that were missing. Is then the 'politics' of celebrity culture in this sense an academic illusion? We want now to develop our argument by looking at what our survey told us about who tends to follow celebrity culture.

Following celebrity culture and political disengagement

The Public Connection survey was administered by telephone to a nationally representative, quota sample of the population of Great Britain (18+). Conducted during June 2005, this was a few months after we completed the diary research and, it turned out, a few weeks after national elections in which Tony Blair's Labour Government narrowly won a third term in office. The survey questionnaire combined questions on public and political interest, knowledge and action with questions on media access, use and evaluation, so as to examine their interrelations. We will select drastically here from our survey results to focus on those aspects that provide insights into the status of celebrity culture.

Respondents were asked, 'which of the following things, if any, do you generally follow or keep up to date with?', accompanied by a list of 18 possible 'things' (we deliberately did not label them 'issues' or 'concerns'). This included 'traditional' political issues (e.g.

events in Westminster, crime and policing, etc) *and* life political or single issue politics (e.g. protecting the environment, religious questions, etc) *and* some broader themes in the public eye (including *Big Brother*, celebrity gossip, music, fashion).

The answers were interesting. Most commonly, people keep up with the environment (70%), crime (67%), health (66%) and events in Iraq (63%). One in five (21%) named *Big Brother* or other reality television programmes, more than named trade union politics (17%). Men tend to follow Iraq, the UK economy, sports, Europe, international politics, Westminster politics and trade union politics more than women, who are more likely to follow issues relating to health, fashion, celebrity and reality television. Older people are more likely to follow the environment, crime, Iraq, third world poverty, the UK economy, funding for local services, local council politics, and Westminster politics. Younger people, on the other hand, are more likely to follow issues relating to fashion, celebrity, reality television and popular music. Issues also vary by class: 50% of middle class respondents follow international politics compared to 28% of working class respondents; middle class respondents are also more likely to follow issues relating to health, the UK economy, Europe and Westminster politics.

A cluster analysis was carried out on respondents according to the issues they said they tended to follow. The analysis identified four clusters into which each survey respondent could be classified, summarized in figure 1. Table 1 shows the top things each cluster said they they keep up with.

<Figure 1 about here>

18

<Table 1 about here>

The cluster analysis shows that, with the exception of those who do not tend to follow *anything* in particular, most people keep up with a common core of headline themes, such as health, crime, the environment and events in Iraq. The different groups are then defined by what they tend to follow beyond this core. The 'traditional' cluster is so labelled because their interests match those traditionally identified as 'political'**: t**his is the largest cluster, suggesting that many attempt to keep up with the mainstream political agenda, including the economy, the environment, crime, Iraq and Europe. A sizeable minority fall into the 'issues' cluster, for they keep up with a subset of the news agenda focused on specific, single issues: the economy and Europe drop out of their top five themes, and health and poverty take their place. A smaller minority (the 'low interest' cluster) professed little interest in any topic: when asked what they follow, 4 in 10 named only one thing, in strong contrast with the other clusters. The one in seven respondents who belong to the 'celebrity' cluster are distinctive in that, as well as the headline news of the day, they keep up with the latest celebrity gossip, fashion, the music charts and reality television. Let us now examine this last group in more detail.

First, demographically, the celebrity cluster is by far the youngest of the four groups, with an average age of 32, compared with 43 for those who follow traditional political issues. Women outnumber men in the celebrity group by almost three to one. Interestingly, celebrity followers come from all socioeconomic levels: the proportion of

ABs in this group is in fact higher than it is for the single issue cluster, and only six percent lower than for the traditional group. There is also a higher than average proportion of unskilled manual workers, while skilled workers are slightly under-represented.

Celebrity followers are also a distinct group in terms of the uses to which they put their social capital. They are three times less likely (than the traditional cluster) to be involved in local organisations, and twice less likely to be involved in volunteer work. This is also reflected in their attitudes to local community: compared to the traditional group, they are 10 percent less likely to believe that being involved locally is important, and 12 percent less likely to agree that they can influence decisions in their area. This is despite the fact that they are considerably more likely to have their friends living nearby, which suggests it may be explicable by attitudes to social discourse. That is, while the celebrity followers in general have a social network in which they are active, nearly half say they do not like to discuss politics, and only 49 percent say their friends would expect them to know what's going on in the world (compared with 78 percent of traditional news followers). Celebrity followers, in other words, do not lack social capital (along the lines of Putnam's *Bowling Alone* argument) but experience a diminished sense of social efficacy in comparison to the traditional group.

<Tables 2, 3 and 4 about here>

What about politics? The survey reveals (Table 4) that the celebrity cluster is the least

likely to vote and, perhaps unsurprisingly, only 40 percent say they are generally

interested in what's going on in politics (compared with 88 percent of the traditional

cluster). When respondents were asked if they tended to avoid political protests, those

who follow celebrity themes did not differ significantly from the overall average (60

percent do not get involved), but when asked about their actions in relation to a specific

theme they had mentioned in the survey as important to them (see Table 3), less than half

had engaged in a public action, significantly lower than the two-thirds of traditional news

followers who said they had acted in relation to the issue they named.

This lack of active engagement is mirrored in attitudes towards politics amongst the

celebrity cluster. More than two-thirds agree that 'people like use have no say in what the

government does' (less than half of the traditional cluster agreed with the same question),

while over half say that politics has little connection with their lives. Sixty percent say

that it makes no difference which political party is in power, while a third say they do not

have a good understanding of the main issues facing the country. Significantly, more than

four fifths of the celebrity cluster agree that politics is sometimes too complicated to

understand. Not only is this figure much higher than for the traditional cluster, it is also

considerably greater than for the cluster who have little interest in following any issues

(perhaps a sign of an earlier effort to follow politics that has failed).

How can we relate these striking figures to the celebrity cluster's broader engagement

with media? It is certainly not the case that the celebrity cluster is 'hyper-mediated',

engaging intensely with entertainment-based media rather than other mediated or non-mediated public worlds. Indeed, overall media consumption for the celebrity cluster is about average. However, disaggregating the various media variables included in the survey highlights some clear distinctions. First, the celebrity cluster watches significantly more television on a daily basis than any other cluster, and also spends more time on the internet for non-work-related purposes (related possibly to their younger age profile). They spend a little less time reading a newspaper than the overall, and are by a considerable margin the least likely to read books.

Interestingly, however the celebrity cluster's overall time spent following the news does not suggest a lack of overall engagement with media, with average levels watching television news (92 percent watch at least three times a week), listening to radio news (70 percent) and reading a national newspaper (58 percent). However, if we look at quality of news engagement rather than quantity, some clear trends begin to emerge. Some 25 percent fewer respondents in the celebrity cluster, compared with the traditional cluster, feel a sense of duty to keep up with what's going on in the world – the same gap between the groups when asked if they compare different news sources (Table 5). It is thus the lack of engagement with news, in parallel with the lack of local and political engagement, rather than lack of exposure to news (because of reasons such as time-lack), which marks the celebrity cluster as distinct.

<Table 5 about here>

It bears emphasising that celebrity culture is a minority cluster: they do not therefore tell us about the consequences of consuming celebrity culture across the wider population. They do however tell us something important about what features are likely to be associated with a primary interest in celebrity culture. Respondents in this cluster are the least likely to vote, their political interest is low, as is their social efficacy. They spend an average amount of time with the media in general and the news in particular, although their disposable leisure time is the lowest (again, perhaps because of the predominance of women). What makes them distinctive is their low news engagement, a lack of engagement which is mirrored in the local and political arenas: seen positively, they prioritise 'keeping up to date with' celebrity and popular culture over both traditional or alternative public issues.

It is indeed important to see these trends as a positive choice: the 'celebrity' cluster is quite distinct from the low interest cluster in this respect. While as many as 49% of the low interest cluster say 'the things media cover have little to do with my life', the celebrity cluster is similar to other clusters on this measure, and are also the least likely to say there is too much media (Table 5). The question is what are the implications of this positive choice.

We were aware of the need to handle carefully the distinction between traditional and non-traditional news categories in our survey methodology, because of the risk that building in such a distinction might pre-determine the finding of such a separation in the data. We addressed this by labelling categories in the survey by specific interests rather than by normative groupings, and instructing data collectors to shuffle the topic order so as to give no overall priority to any theme. Instead of asking respondents, for example, if

they followed 'traditional' news themes, 18 topics were prompted without pre-determined emphasis or ordering. A factor analysis was subsequently applied to group interests most often named together, and *only then* did we (tentatively) apply the labels of 'traditional', 'issues' and 'celebrity' to these groups. This is in line with a key aim of the diary phase of the project not to pre-empt respondents' views on what (if anything) constitutes a public issue *to them*.

Conclusion

We have tried in this article to take a more nuanced look at how celebrity culture (in a broad sense) features in how people make sense of the world, and in particular the public world, as presented to them through their media consumption. Drawing on both qualitative and quantitative data, we have argued that, instead of relying on presumptions about the resonance of celebrity narratives for whole populations, it is essential to develop more specific arguments based on detailed evidence. No general claims are possible about celebrity culture's positive relevance to people's public connection: some people feel very negative about it, whereas for others it is a site of connection with a wider audience. Even in the latter case, there were few, if any, cases where people themselves linked celebrity narratives to what *they defined* as public issues of any sort. Indeed where media's presentation of celebrity lives did lead to discussion, it was most likely to be a commentary on how irrelevant they were to genuine public issues, so *reaffirming*, not redrawing, the public/private boundary.
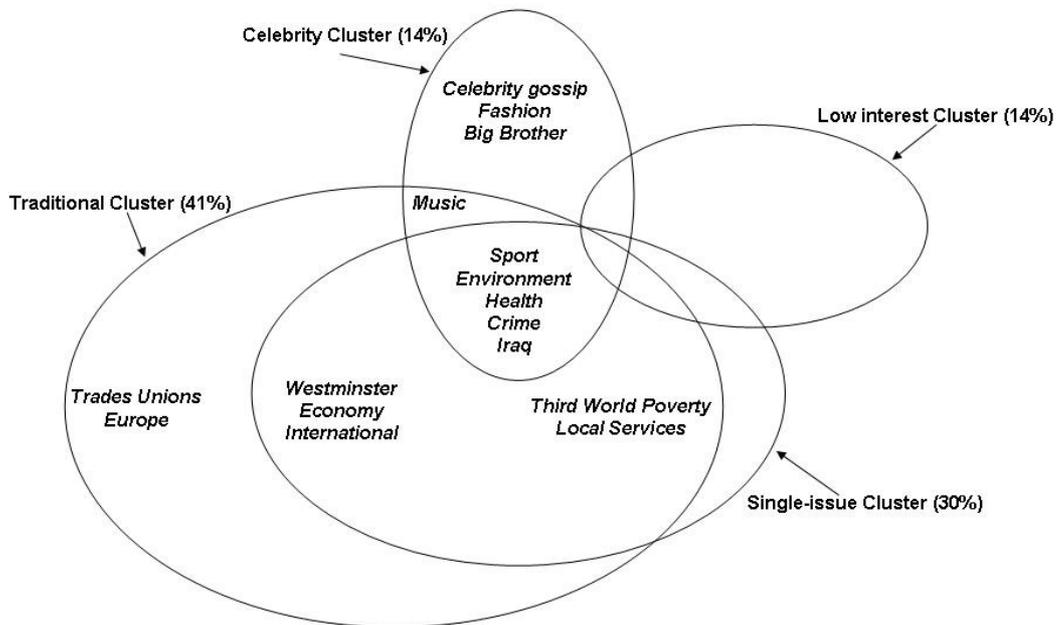
It is also important, as our survey data brought out, to be demographically precise about who we mean, when we talk about those with an affinity for celebrity culture. The conclusions are not necessarily encouraging. Those who followed celebrity culture were those least likely to be politically engaged. This is of course not surprising, and certainly linked to the gendering of political culture itself of course an important and socially regressive factor. Indeed, all the evidence suggests that following celebrity culture represents a positive choice by this group, distinguishing them from the low interest cluster. Our argument is not, however, that there is anything 'wrong' with this choice, since such a choice can only be evaluated in the context of the wider gendering and polarisation of the UK public sphere.[8] Our point rather is that there is little evidence for some optimistic claims that this aspect of popular culture provides any potential routes into political culture, even in an expanded sense. If people's engagement with celebrity culture is part of a turning *away* from concern with issues that require public resolution (away from, in our definition, 'public connection'), then no amount of well-crafted messages will make a difference.

The result is to understand better how the 'culture' of citizenship (if there is one: Couldry 2006) works. It is here that we connect with an interesting recent argument (Turner 2006) about the problematic relation between celebrity culture's 'demotic turn' and actual prospects for democratic renewal and political and social change. While our concern has *not* been to comment on the actual content of celebrity culture (what Turner calls an 'ideological system without an ideological project') but rather how it is *put to work* in people's own picture of the public world, our diary evidence points suggests considerable reservations about celebrity culture among audiences themselves, and so points in a

similar direction to Turner, if via a different route. Rather than neglect this conclusion as inconvenient, it is important, if (as Dahlgren (2006) suggests) cultural studies is to contribute to current debates about democracy, to recognise that popular culture is not always the bridge to effective and expanded democracy that we would like it to be.

Figure and Tables

Figure 1: Survey Respondents grouped according to the things they keep up with

Table 1: The top five themes people keep up with, by cluster (Percentage of respondents who named issue, N=1006)

Rank order (freq)	'Traditional'	'Issues'	'Celebrity'	'Low Interest'
1	Economy 89%	Environment 78%	*Big Brother* 80%	Health 45%
2	Environment 86%	Health 64%	Celebrity 79%	Sports 38%
3	Crime 85%	Crime 63%	Health 61%	Crime 35%
4	Iraq 85%	Poverty 59%	Fashion 61%	Environment 33%

5	Europe 82%	Iraq 57%	Iraq 58%	Iraq 16%
% who named <2 issues	0%	4.9%	4.8%	38.6%

Table 2: Social capital (Percentage who agree or strongly agree, N=1006)

	Celebrity	Traditional	Single-Issue	Low Interest
You play an active role in local, political or voluntary organizations	8	34	16	12
Most of your friends live nearby	70	56	63	65
Being involved in your neighbourhood is important to you	57	69	57	60
You are involved in voluntary work	16	33	25	26
You feel that you can influence decisions in your area	32	48	36	26
You can affect things by getting involved in issues you care about	67	78	64	51

Differences between clusters significant (ANOVA) at p<0.01 unless indicated as not significant (n.s.)

Table 3: Proportions of respondents by cluster who named an issue when asked,

and, of those who did, the proportion who took any sort of related action.

	'Traditional'	'Issues'	'Celebrity'	'Low interest'
% who name an issue	83	72	57	53
% *of these* who name a related action	68	63	47	35

Differences between clusters significant (ANOVA) at p<0.01 unless indicated as not significant (n.s.)

Table 4: Political engagement (Percentage who agree or strongly agree, N=1006)

	Celebrity	Traditional	Single-Issue	Low Interest
You generally vote in national elections	65	92	78	75
You are generally interested in what's going on in politics	40	88	60	30
You don't get involved in political protests	59 (n.s.)	63 (n.s.)	62 (n.s.)	51 (n.s.)
You don't like to discuss politics with other people	43 (n.s.)	39 (n.s.)	42 (n.s.)	45 (n.s.)
People like us have no say in what the government does	60	50	56	69
Politics has little connection to your life	63	36	50	53
You have a good understanding of the main issues facing our country	62	94	78	65
It doesn't really matter which party is in power, in the end things pretty much go on the same	60	43	61	73
Sometimes politics seems so complicated that you can't really understand what's going on	82	49	64	69

Differences between clusters significant (ANOVA) at p<0.01 unless indicated as not significant (n.s.)

Table 5: News engagement (Percentage who agree or strongly agree, N=1006)

	Celebrity	Traditional	Single-Issue	Low Interest
Your friends would expect you to know what's going on in the world	49	78	66	48
It's your duty to keep up with what's going on in the world	56	81	71	43
The things the media cover have little to do with your life	40	36	42	49
Different sources of news tend to give different accounts of what's going on	82 (n.s.)	86 (n.s.)	76 (n.s.)	72 (n.s.)
You generally compare the news on different channels, newspapers or websites	50	74	54	36
You often feel that there's too much media, so you have to turn off	66*	67*	75*	75*
It's a regular part of your day to catch up with the news	73	81	77	59
You follow the news to know what other people are talking about	71	84	73	64

Differences between clusters significant (ANOVA) at p<0.01 unless indicated as significant at p<0.05(*) or

indicated as not significant (n.s.)

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[1] Recent debates on the general decline in trust in UK institutions (Toynbee 2005, discussing private MORI research) only echo longer-term research on 'the erosion of institutional legitimacy' in many countries (Inglehart, 1997)

[2] Thanks to our colleague Sonia Livingstone for many discussions on the themes of this article.

[3] We gratefully acknowledge support [details omitted for anonymity]: for fuller discussion of the project see Couldry, Livingstone and Markham (2007) and www.publicconnection.org .

[4] See Couldry, Livingstone and Markham (2007, chapter 1) for details.

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

[6] See Holmes (2005).

[7] Only one quote (from Janet, already given in part) hints otherwise, and it is still generalised: 'perhaps I'll bring in my *Heat* magazine [to the office] 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" . . . and then the whole office gets into a discussion about it, we have some quite good discussions at work really about the press and media' (Janet).

[8] For a parallel argument on women's justified disengagement from traditional politics in Japan, Leblanc (1999).