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Images of Citizenship on Television News: Constructing a Passive Public

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Introduction

There has, in recent years, been much concern about low and declining voter turnout in both Britain and the United States. This has been seen as part of a more general decline in civic participation and a decreasing interest in political life (cf. Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995; Buckingham, 2000; Capella & Jamieson, 1997). A number of scholars link the turn away from conventional politics to an absence of places and opportunities for citizens to discuss politics (cf. Eliasoph, 1998; Gamson, 1992; Wahl-Jørgensen, 2002a). As McNair (2000a, p. 197) has put it, "the weight of scholarly opinion . . . harbours . . . a 'pervasive pessimism' concerning the present and future health of the journalism – democracy relationship in societies of the advanced capitalist, liberal-democratic type".

At the same time we have seen declining budgets for domestic and international news amidst widespread accusations of a "dumbing down" in the coverage of public affairs (e.g. Hodgson, 2002; Riddell, 1999). Others, however, have suggested that political journalism continues to fulfil its democratic role (e.g. Blumler, 1999; Brants, 1998; McNair, 2000a) even if the forms it takes are both more varied and more market-oriented. Indeed, Pippa Norris (2000) has argued that political journalism generates a "virtuous circle" of citizen participation. Her research indicates that engaged individuals consume political news, and that this consumption encourages them to become even more politically active and informed as citizens. However, this research, while suggesting that the media are not to blame for all that is rotten in the state of democracy, does not dispute the evidence of a decline in participation in conventional politics.

Our work enters into the debate about the relationship between media and democracy by asking whether the routines and practices of journalism might actually contribute to producing a passive, disengaged citizenry. The news media are, after all, our main source of information about public affairs, so what do they teach us about our fellow citizens? And what do they suggest about the role we should play in a democratic

society? In a climate of declining political participation, does the way journalists report the world encourage or discourage citizens to engage with politics and public life? Our focus here is thus on the way the citizen – and public opinion – is represented in news media.

Our study assumes that media representations do not merely reflect the world but also construct our understandings of it (cf. Gieber, 1964). We suggest that representations of citizens, even if they are logical outcomes of time-honoured journalism practices, have ideological significance by shaping the meaning of citizenship. At a more basic level, our study also gets at questions of access and participation in politics through mass media. We agree with McNair (2000b, p. 105) that "the public in a democracy should have opportunities not just to read about, or to watch and listen to the development of political debates as spectators, but to participate directly in them, through channels of access". As Cottle (2000, p. 427) has suggested, whose "voices and viewpoints structure and inform news discourses goes to the heart of democratic views of, and radical concerns about, the news media".

The research presented here draws upon the largest and most comprehensive study of the news media's representation of public opinion and citizenship conducted to date. The study, funded by the British Economic and Social Research Council, looks at television news in both Britain and the United States. The research analysed thousands of news reports in both countries between September 2001 and February 2002, and included any reference to public opinion, whether through polls, "vox pops", demonstrations or simply off-the-cuff remarks made about what people think about the world.

The study provides evidence of a troubling pattern of representation, for while there are ample references to citizens and their opinions in television news, the references do not provide an encouraging picture of citizenship. The citizens of our study are passive observers of a world, constructed and defined by those more powerful than themselves. While they are allowed to express basic emotions about the world, these representations offer no room for the citizens to express political opinions and offer solutions to problems.

News Media and Citizenship

Despite the crucial role of the media in providing models of citizenship, to date there have been few studies of the subject. Contributions to the field have been made by scholars such as Lewis (2001), Page (1996) and Herbst (1998), who have looked at the news media's use of opinion polls. While these studies give insights into the relationship between media and citizens, there is no research that looks more broadly at how citizen engagement with public affairs is reported.

Media sociologists have long agreed that journalism offers little room for the voices of citizens, and is generally focused on the doings of the powerful (cf. Epstein, 1973; Gans, 1980; Sigal, 1973). Studies of news values (Galtung & Ruge, 1999; Harcup & O'Neill, 2001; Manning, 2001) suggest that the "actions of the elite are, at least usually and in short-term perspective, more consequential than the activities of others" (Galtung & Ruge, 1999, p. 25). Indeed, regular individuals are interesting for the purposes of

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news coverage primarily when they are victims of crimes or natural disaster. As Cottle (2000, p. 434) observes, "the organization of news is not geared up to the needs of the socially powerless".

The hierarchy of access embedded in dominant news values is not the result of a journalistic conspiracy, but comes out of the practices of newswork; the rationalisations that make, journalism possible (Golding & Elliott, 1999.) Golding and Elliott have suggested that broadcast journalism "is a highly regulated and routine process of manufacturing a cultural product on an electronic production line" (Golding & Elliott, 1999, p. 15). Because of what Merritt has characterised as "the tyranny of space and time" (Merritt, 1995, p. 15), journalism organisations have developed reportorial shortcuts that make it possible for newsworkers to easily gather the information they need. The downside of these shortcuts, however, is that they are heavily biased towards the statements, opinions and interpretations of those whose views are already privileged by society. Tuchman (1978, p. 21) suggests that the institutionalised and centralised beat reporting system is a "news net" that catches the "big fish" or the stories spawned by public relations experts, but lets the little tales of average people slip through the holes. Journalists are quick to point to their own dissatisfaction with these routine practices. Indeed, as Brennen (1995, p. 91) has suggested, the cultural discourse of journalists, captured in newsworkers' fiction writing, implies that although their work was "sometimes exciting and adventurous, the majority of the time it was routine, repetitive, monotonous, dull, and boring".

Our study seeks to move beyond the focus on news values to uncover the ways in which the established routines of journalism *do* allow for regular citizens to appear on television news – as citizens, rather than victims or eyewitnesses.

The Scope of the Study

We analysed a total sample of 5658 television news stories in Britain and the United States. We concentrated our sample on news bulletins with large audiences. In Britain this involved the two early evening broadcasts on BBC and ITV: the BBC News at 6 pm and ITN's Evening News programme at 6.30. In the United States, we examined the three main network news programmes: *ABC World News Tonight*, *CBS Evening News* and *NBC Nightly News*. The sample originally involved all weekday UK and US television news programmes over a three and a half-month period – chosen in advance – between 30 October 2001 and mid-February 2002. Due to the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 11 September, we decided to expand our US news sample back to 12 September (this was not possible with the British sample, for which no archive exists), so that the US sample covered a five-month period.

The fact that the aftermath of the September 11 attacks and the subsequent "war on terrorism" fell within our time frame also allowed us to pay special attention to the way citizens are represented during such a period. The time frame, however, was long enough for normal patterns of news reporting (i.e. without single or unusual events dominating the news) to resume in the second half of our data collection period. We were aware, in our analysis, of the way the post-September 11 period – especially in

the United States – might influence the data, and so paid special attention to the consistency of patterns over time and in comparisons between the US and Britain.

Our goal was to analyse *every* reference to citizenship or public opinion, whether implicit or direct. This posed a serious challenge. While overt references to citizens through mechanisms like opinion polls are easy to identify, more subtle inferences about public opinion, such as 'there's a widespread feeling that . . .' are difficult to find without a close reading of every item in a news programme. One of our first tasks was therefore to identify the various ways in which citizens are invoked. To do this, we began with the categories used by Brookes, Lewis and Wahl-Jørgensen in their study of how citizens were represented in the 2001 British General Election (Brookes et al., 2004), and developed and extended those categories to encompass our larger, more varied sample.

If we adopt a fairly inclusive definition of citizenship and public opinion, it becomes clear that references to citizens in the television news media are both a routine and frequent part of the practice of news journalism. Of the 5658 news items we looked at, we found 4398 references to citizen or public opinion (some stories involved several references). During an average week, around 30–40 per cent of stories in both countries made *some* reference to citizens or publics. All the data that follows is, unless stated otherwise, based upon the sample of 4398 references to citizen or public opinion.

In terms of breakdown by country, the US sample consisted of 2880 references (which came from a data set of five months of coverage on three channels, or 15 months of coverage overall), and the UK sample consisted of 1518 references (which came from a data set of three and a half months of coverage on two channels, or seven months of coverage overall). The US sample was larger because it involved three programmes rather than two, and included the period from 12 September to 29 October. The regularity of references to public opinion in the United States and Britain was similar: British news programmes involving 216 references per month of weekday news programmes, and the US 192 references per month of weekday news programmes (a difference that narrows when we consider that US news programmes, while taking a similar half-hour slot, are a little shorter due to the frequency of commercial breaks). We were, of course, interested in exploring any divergence between US and British TV news reporting, although it is worth noting that we discovered far more similarities than differences between the two data sets. This suggests that the *way* news represents citizens is part of a set of well-established journalistic practices that cross national boundaries.

We identified five different ways in which citizens are represented in news:

1. *References to public opinion polls or surveys.* This category identifies the use of polls or surveys about public opinion or citizen behaviour.
2. *Inferences about public opinion.* This category involves statements that *infer* something about public opinion in general, without reference to polling data or other systematic evidence.
3. *Vox pops.* This is the format that allows "ordinary citizens" to appear in news bulletins. This category therefore excludes people interviewed because of their expertise, or people who have merely witnessed an event.

4. *Demonstrators, protesters or other forms of citizen activism.* This involves reference to forms of collective citizen action.
5. *The "some people say" category.* This is a wide-ranging category that refers to a section of public opinion without reference to polling data or forms of systematic evidence, and without reference to public opinion in general.

Every category was coded according to the same list of sub-categories, some of the main ones being:

- Who is the *source* of this reference to public opinion (so, for example, is reference to a poll made by a reporter or a politician)? What is the *subject* of this reference to public opinion?
- Which members of the public does this reference to public opinion refer to (so, for example, is a poll of the general public, or of a specific group)?
- What broad political spectrum does this reference to public opinion belong to? This was a complex category, which we discuss in more detail later.
- Is this reference to public opinion "at home" or "abroad"?
- What degree of political engagement is suggested by the reference? This is, again, a complex category which is discussed in more detail later.

When a news story contained more than one reference to public opinion, these were coded individually, allowing us to be precise in our analysis.

Before we discuss our findings, we should note that designing a coherent coding frame was a significant methodological challenge for this project, as references to citizenship and public opinion are often subtle, and do not always include key words. The coding frame was piloted extensively, and repeatedly tested by the three members of the research team to ensure a high level of inter-coder reliability. Most of the material was coded by one main coder, and then tested by the other two members of the research team. On most simple measures (such as the designation or the source of references) agreement between coders was between 90 and 98 per cent. On more complex measures such as the level of citizenship engagement, reliability was initially much lower (around 80 per cent). For this reason, we isolated areas of potential ambiguity, and resolved these each week during project team meetings. While this "collective coding" approach is unorthodox, we felt it appropriate for the most complex forms of measurement. The coding sheet was amended several times during the early stages of the project, and in each case the entire sample was re-coded accordingly, with checks to ensure at least a 90 per cent level of inter-coder reliability.

How Do TV News Journalists Represent Citizens?

It is often assumed that the main form of public or citizen representation in media and public life is the opinion poll (most of the scholarly work on public opinion focuses on polls – see, e.g., Page & Shapiro, 1992; Salmon & Glasser, 1995). In both Britain and the United States the media regularly commission polls, and the polling industry

Table 60.1 Types of reference to public opinion (%)

Type of reference	US television	UK television
Inference to public opinion	42.4	44.3
Vox pops	41.3	38.7
"Some people say"	10.1	13.6
Opinion polls	3.6	1.8
Demonstrations	2.6	1.5

produces a wealth of data about what people think and feel about a wide array of issues. So, for example, a network like CBS News will regularly report on its own polls:

A CBS News poll out today reflects the growing annoyance. Last month, more than half those sampled were satisfied with government efforts to improve airport security, but that has now plunged to just 37 per cent. Apparently feeling the heat at last, congressional negotiators finally broke a partisan deadlock today and agreed on a common approach. (15 November 2001)

One of our most surprising findings, however, is that the great majority of references to citizen or public opinion *do not involve polls or surveys of any kind*. As Table 60.1 indicates, on US television less than 4 per cent of references to public opinion involve polls, while in Britain it is less than 2 per cent.

While polls have been much criticised for their limitations (e.g. Salmon & Glasser, 1995; Hauser, 1999; Lewis 2001) they remain, for all their contrivances, the *most* systematic form of commonly available evidence we have about what people think about the world. None of the other categories in our study – with the possible exception of demonstrations – requires or involves *any* systematic evidence. Yet all of them *convey an impression* about public opinion. In short, our findings suggest that while television regularly refers to public opinion, it rarely offers any systematic evidence for the claims being made.

This may be partly because journalists are constrained in their reporting of polls – the BBC, for example, has guidelines about the use of polls which do *not* apply to more vague, unsubstantiated claims about public opinion (Brookes et al., 2004). But the reluctance to use polls may also be a function of a tendency to avoid *overt, deliberative* expressions of public opinion – a point we develop later.

The most common references to public opinion are what we have called *inferences* – claims made without reference to supporting evidence. A typical example is this reporter's voiceover on ABC News the day after September 11.

"This morning, though, priorities were being pushed back into place by Americans in no mood to give terrorists the satisfaction of seeing the nation come apart.

While such claims are often plausible as expressions of public opinion (and may be informed by the journalist's reading of opinion polls) they are also impressionistic and

involve a degree of poetic licence. It is easy to see, in this context, how a conventional wisdom about public opinion *can* develop with little grounding in empirical evidence, on the basis of beliefs shared within the culture of journalism. This partly explains King and Schudson's (1995) account of how President Reagan was lauded for his popularity despite consistently poor approval ratings in the polling data, and suggests that there may be many more examples of conventional journalistic wisdom contradicting polling data.

We see an even greater degree of poetic licence in the 'some people say' category, which carries no obligations about representing the weight or character of public opinion. As the following example (about proposals to market the image of the United States) suggests, this is often little more than a linguistic device for *rooting* a body of opinion broadly in the public sphere:

Charlotte Beers is the new undersecretary of state for public diplomacy. She created advertising campaigns for Head and Shoulders Shampoo, American Express and Uncle Ben's Rice. It is a controversial appointment. Some people believe the US can use the branding principles of advertising to sell a country. Others believe it is naive and superficial. We'll look more closely as the campaign develops. (ABC News, 6 November 2001)

Similarly 'vox pops', constituting the second biggest category of references to public opinion, *appear* to provide an impression about public opinion, but they are rarely used in the context of survey data that might suggest how common the views expressed by these "people on the street" actually are. Indeed, the BBC guidelines for the use of vox pops make clear that they are *not* a device intended to indicate the direction or weight of public opinion. Whether viewers understand this is quite another matter: we found *very few* instances when the "unrepresentative" nature of "vox pops" was specified. On the contrary, the place of "vox pops" in a story often creates an *impression* that they represent majority opinion – in this example, to convey the impression of a general frustration with the weather.

The wild winter storm leaves a blanket of snow and ice unusually deep in the South. From the Gulf Coast of Alabama up to the Carolinas and Virginia, eight inches so far in Raleigh, 10 in Richmond.

Unidentified woman: "Richmond and the snow drives me bonkers." (NBC News, 3 January 2002)

Examples of *demonstrations* or other forms of citizen activism are the least common form of reference to public opinion on television news – constituting less than 3 per cent of the British sample and less than 2 per cent of the US sample (even though there were a number of public demonstrations held during the period analysed). The most common examples of this in our study were demonstrations around the "war on terrorism" and the bombing of Afghanistan, such as this brief reference on NBC News:

In Iran, hundreds of thousands filled the streets to show their anger at America on the 23rd anniversary of the Islamic revolution in that country. The crowds were reportedly

much larger than last year because people are upset at President Bush calling Iran part of an axis of evil. (11 February 2002)

In sum, the *most explicit* forms of citizen expression – polls and citizen activism – are by far the *least common* in television coverage, which is more likely to feature vague, impressionistic indicators of public mood or attitude.

Who Speaks About Whom?

It is of little surprise that public opinion at home is considered more newsworthy than public opinion abroad. Indeed, were it not for the presence of a major international story – that of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and the subsequent war in Afghanistan – during this period, the proportions detailed in Table 60.2 would probably be even more slanted towards domestic opinion.

We also see a notable – if predictable – difference between Britain and the United States, with the United States being more inward looking, and British news more likely to take note of public opinion elsewhere. This is, however, rather deceptive, since most of the references on British news to opinion elsewhere focus on the United States, reflecting the dominance of US news in Britain. It is remarkable how few references there are to public opinion in Europe – *especially* in British media (despite the easy availability of data). Indeed, the British broadcasters are a little *less* likely to refer to European opinion than the inward-looking US media. There are, by contrast, almost no empirical measures of opinion world-wide, and yet British TV reporters are more likely to refer vaguely to "world opinion" than to European opinion (even while references to British attitude to Europe are quite common – see Brookes et al., 2004). This suggests that there persists, in the culture of British journalism, an abiding lack of interest in European life.

Those people heard speaking about public opinion are overwhelmingly journalists – the source of 83 per cent of references overall (with similar proportions for the United States and Britain). While politicians may purport to speak for public opinion, they are not often seen doing so on television, the only other significant voice here being domestic 'experts' of various kinds (Table 60.3).

If domestic public opinion gets more coverage than public opinion elsewhere, in more than 98 per cent of cases, the *sources* of claims about public opinion are domestic.

Table 60.2 References to public opinion at home and abroad (%)

	At home	Other country	World opinion	Several countries	Europe	Unclear
USA	80.1	16.5	0.7	2.2	0.5	0.1
UK	73.8	24.4	1.1	0.5	0.1	0.0
Total	77.9	19.2	0.9	1.6	0.3	0.0

Table 60.3 Sources for references to public opinion (%)

Anchor/reporter	Politician at home	Expert at home	Military at home	Politician in other country	Expert in other country	Military in other country
83.1	3.9	10.0	0.3	1.4	1.1	0.1

So, even when foreign public opinion makes the news, it is generally conveyed by a domestic expert or reporter.

What emerges here is the degree to which it is common practice for journalists to make claims about public opinion, and to therefore see themselves as speaking for the public or reflecting what people think. This is consistent with journalists' self-understanding which emphasises their role as servants of the public (e.g. Gans, 2003, p. 1). What is less clear is how aware journalists actually are of what citizens think and want. Given the lack of evidence used to support claims, the process by which journalists make assumptions about public opinion is clearly a matter that merits scrutiny.

Most studies of journalists' understandings of the public and their opinions provide evidence that journalists have little direct interaction with citizens but rather rely on their own ideas about readers and viewers, constructed within the culture of the newsroom. Gans (1980) found that editors tended routinely to reject feedback in the form of market surveys, letters and phone calls out of a mistrust of statistics and of the views represented in these forms of feedback. In their search for audience opinion, editors were much more likely to rely on "known" groups, such as family members, friends or people in their local communities. Similarly, Sumpster's (2000, p. 338) ethnographic case study suggested that journalists construct "imaginary, local readers" who nevertheless "often resembled the interests and demographics of the people in the newsroom". Indeed, Wahl-Jorgensen's (2002b) work on how journalists discuss the people who write letters to the editor suggests that the culture of the newsroom may create a discourse of disdain for the public. All of this indicates that journalists' inferences about public opinion cannot be taken at face value, but should be understood as culturally constructed ideas, built on the basis of what is often feeble evidence.

The Politics of Public Opinion

In modern democracies, public support is used to confer legitimacy upon ideas. We were therefore keen to see how public opinion is represented in ideological terms. Every reference to (or representation of) public opinion was coded in one of four categories: views that could be broadly labelled as on the left, views that could be broadly labelled as on the right, views that indicate a centrist or mixed ideological view, and views that do not indicate any clear ideological preferences.

What is most striking about Tables 60.4 and 60.5 is the degree to which, in both the United States and Britain, citizens are represented as *non-ideological*. In our sample

Table 60.4 How the public is represented in terms of political ideology in US news (%)

	Left wing	Right wing	Mixed	Unclear	Total
Opinion polls	5.9	30.7	0.0	63.4	100
Inferences	0.4	8.4	0.1	91.1	100
Vox pops	1.4	6.4	0.1	92.1	100
Demonstrations	5.3	3.9	1.3	89.5	100
"Some people say"	1.5	7.3	1.1	90.2	100
Whole sample	1.3	8.1	0.2	90.4	100

Table 60.5 How the public is represented in terms of political ideology in UK news (%)

	Left wing	Right wing	Mixed	Unclear	Total
Opinion polls	14.3	14.3	0.0	71.4	100
Inferences	0.1	4.6	0.6	94.7	100
Vox pops	1.4	2.6	0.0	97.4	100
Demonstrations	4.3	8.7	0.0	87.0	100
"Some people say"	0.5	5.3	0.5	93.7	100
Whole sample	0.5	4.2	0.3	95.1	100

overall, 90 per cent of references to public opinion in the United States and 95 per cent of references in Britain expressed no clear ideological leaning. Remarkably, this is even the case with demonstrations. Although they are often associated with the political left, only around 1 in 20 references in our sample overall made this link.

In both countries, "vox pops" seem to be routinely apolitical: thus when citizens are allowed time to speak their minds on the news, 97 per cent in Britain and 92 per cent in the United States are shown saying nothing of any clear political orientation. Even opinion polls – which we often imagine are commissioned to find out what people think about political issues – only suggest support for a politically infected opinion in 36 per cent of cases in the United States and 29 per cent of cases in Britain.

The range of *apolitical* opinions represented in our sample is enormous, from polls about women's handbags to views about celebrities. And yet, as Table 60.6 indicates, the issues citizens are most often shown (or referred to) expressing themselves about – such as terrorism, crime and transport – are often clearly in the political domain. The *apolitical* nature of references to public opinion cannot therefore be explained by an excess of human interest or celebrity news – what we see here are citizens being *apolitical* about manifestly political issues.

The fact that public opinion is seen as steadfastly *apolitical* on these subjects risks conveying the impression of a citizenry *unable or unwilling to put forward a political view*.

In many cases public expression stops *short* of politics, a realm left to experts and politicians, who are given the freedom to interpret these public expressions as they wish.

Table 60.6 Main topics engaging public opinion (%)

US TV subject	Within country	UK TV subject	Within country
Mood after 11 September	15.9	Health	12.1
Terrorism	10.3	Event in world of sports	7.4
Military attacks on Afghanistan	8.3	Crime	6.3
Anthrax	5.8	Consumption/shopping	5.7
Consumption/shopping	5.3	Military attacks on Afghanistan	5.7
Fear of flying	4.5	Railways	4.9
Economy	3.9	Northern Ireland	3.9

So, for example, a routine report such as the following might be *interpreted* by politicians or parties as support for their economic policies:

An ABC News poll released today shows consumer confidence holding steady since September 11th. And anecdotal evidence from around the country suggests people are spending again. (ABC News, 2 October 2001)

And even though people themselves *might have* specific and verifiable views about economic policy, this is an issue left for politicians to debate.

There is a sense here that ordinary citizens are almost childlike: they have moods, experiences and emotions, but they are rarely seen making forays into a deliberative public sphere. During coverage of the war on terrorism, for example, we heard a great deal about people's fears, but very little about what they thought about relevant foreign or domestic policy. The following example is fairly typical:

In America's proud, tall buildings, from the Empire State on Manhattan, now New York City's biggest, to Chicago's Sears Tower, tallest in the country, a feeling that landmarks may not be the safest places to work.

Ms Tanya Kukla (Chicago): "Once we go into actual war, I don't want to be near this building at all." (NBC News, 18 September 2001)

Both pro-war and anti-war groups might interpret this woman's reaction in various ways, but what *she* actually thinks about her government going to war remains a mystery. All we know is that she feels nervous. Thus we might say that her reaction, like many others we see, is one of apolitical self-interest.

Similarly, we might hear of people *complaining* about the state of public services – especially in British news – but we will very rarely hear that people want, for example, more public money put into those services – even when polls consistently suggest this is the prevailing opinion.

When citizens *are* heard expressing a view, it tends to be on the right rather than the left – especially in the US media. So, for example, in the following extract the

Table 60.7 Types of citizenship expression and engagement (2244 valid cases)

	Frequency	%
Private individuals speaking about their experience or impressions	666	30
Concern or emotional responses to specific event	408	18
Discussing events, social issues or social groups	663	30
Ranking of concern about an issue	14	0.6
Responses to politicians, parties and party policies	251	11
General appeals to government, corporate world or fellow citizens, with no specific suggestion for action	15	0.6
Suggestions to government, corporate world or fellow citizens, about what should be done	109	5
Other references (celebrity polls, consumer confidence etc.)	120	5
Total	2244	100

impression is conveyed that there is public support in the United States for infringing on civil liberties for the sake of security:

... right now the calls for action are drowning out the second thoughts. As one veteran of World War II put it today, if you have to violate freedom to protect the masses, go ahead and do it. (ABC News, 21 September 2001)

Indeed, the opinion polls featured in US media run more than 5 to 1 in favour of conservative opinions, with no instances of mixed opinions at all. While it could be argued that public opinion in the United States *does* incline to the right rather than the left, a number of careful studies of US public opinion contradict this (e.g. Page & Shapiro, 1992). Moreover, this pattern of bias in US news coverage has been found in previous studies, which suggests that media coverage of public opinion in the United States reflects the centre-right bias of the political class, rather than the more left-leaning inclinations of the public at large (Lewis, 2001).

A number of the left-leaning opinions that were featured on US news followed the Enron scandal, when polls suggested a high degree of support for tighter business regulation:

Did Enron executives do wrong? Those paying close attention say Yes 78 per cent ... And nearly as many, 77 per cent, think the executives should not have been allowed to sell their stock while preventing workers from selling theirs. (CBS News, 1 January 2002)

The British TV news media are less inclined to show opinions of *any* political hue, and, in terms of opinion polls, appear to succeed in a remarkable display of balance (with 14.3 per cent of polls on the right and 14.3 per cent on the left). Table 60.7 indicates that. It is in the less systematic articulations of citizen opinion that a small right-wing bias appears to creep in, as in the following example about illegal immigration:

[the decision not to take the train driver to court is] . . . not going to play particularly well with many people in the South-East constituency who already feel illegal immigrants are getting in too easily . . . and not well with lorry drivers either. (BBC 6 pm News, 4 February 2002)

While this statement is highly plausible, we rarely see similar inferences suggesting a left-leaning body of opinion. Thus we often hear "middle England" invoked as a barrier to progressive policies, and yet there is no progressive equivalent (the part of Britain, for example, that wants to re-nationalise the railways and spend more on health and education, has no moniker in journalistic parlance). The left-leaning inclinations of public opinion on public services might be pertinent, for example, when discussing the privatisation of the railways, which was the sixth most popular topic for invoking public opinion in our British sample. Yet despite clear majority support in polls for bringing the railways back into public ownership (around 60–70 per cent support, according to polls by Mori and ICM), among the dozens of stories on this issue in our sample we found *no* indications that there might be public support for the re-nationalisation of the railways.

What this suggests is that many British journalists have an instinctive sense that public opinion in Britain tends to be conservative. Since the press in Britain – especially the popular titles – are more likely to lean to the right, it is easy to see where this assumption may come from. So, for example, journalists may well assume that popular, right-leaning papers like the *Sun* and the *Daily Mail* are, somehow or other, reflecting their readers' views. Thus it may be that journalists look to the press in Britain rather than to opinion polls as an indicator of the public mood – a gesture that may well reinforce the power of conservative newspaper proprietors to set the news agenda.

Surprisingly, examples of mixed opinion are extremely rare in both countries, the following being one of the few examples indicating ambiguity in public opinion:

The biggest holdout is Britain, which hasn't adopted the euro, but is watching it very closely. There's a fierce debate here about whether to join the common currency or to keep the strength and sovereignty of the pound, not to mention the picture of the queen. (ITV 6.30 pm News, 10 December 2001)

While this news item does not explicitly tell us who is involved in this debate, there is an implication here that citizens are actually debating a political issue. This is, in terms of TV news coverage, almost unheard of. Citizens may feel, desire or complain, but they do not, on the whole, discuss the merits of political ideas – not, at least, on television news.

Levels of Citizen Engagement

Thus far our findings suggest that the *image of citizens substantively engaged in politics is notable by its absence on TV news*. While public opinion is present on a variety of issues, it is rarely the focus of a news story. The form it takes favours vague, second-hand

accounts rather than more explicit expressions (like opinion polls or demonstrations), and it is routinely apolitical.

As these trends began to emerge, we decided to revisit and re-code the data to specifically examine the *degree of political engagement* suggested by each reference. This involved categorising each reference to public opinion in order to identify the *nature* of that opinion: did it involve a statement about people's experience of the world, for example, or did it constitute a more overtly political comment? What we found was that the most common type of citizen representation takes the form of a private individual who speaks (or is referred to speaking) about their *experience*, but who *does not* offer an explicit political opinion – 30 per cent of references overall are in this category. This might typically involve someone complaining about being stuck in a snow storm or being delayed by a late train. What might be *done* about such things is left, in the news story, for others to discuss.

The other main category (also 30 per cent) involves citizens discussing events, social issues or social groups – such as the state of the health service or race relations – but, similarly, without giving any indication of what action should be taken. We might, for example, see a "vox pop" saying that the health service is in a mess, without them saying what might be done about it.

The third most common form of representation (18 per cent of references) is similar, except that it involves people expressing an *emotional* response to a specific event or issue, such as fear or flying or of receiving an anthrax letter. Overall, 78 per cent of all references come in one of these three categories, all of which provide, at most, *commentary* rather than *advocacy*.

What emerges from this analysis is that while politicians are often seen telling us what should be done about the world, *citizens are largely excluded from active participation in such deliberations*. When people are shown expressing political views, it is most likely to involve simply giving – or failing to give – consent or support for the policies or actions of political leaders. We are, in other words, shown following rather than leading. Around 11 per cent of references take this form, and include things such as horserace polls, approval ratings, and support for a politician's style or handling of an issue.

Indeed, only around 5 per cent of references to public opinion involve citizens making overt suggestions about what should be done in the world, whether to government, the corporate world or to their fellow citizens. This might involve nothing more elaborate than people saying more public money should be spent to improve public services, that businesses should do more to protect the environment, or that parents should teach their children not to drop litter (*any* such suggestion was coded in this category).

Conclusion: Getting Engaged?

Most broadcasters, policy makers and scholars would agree that television news programmes play a central role in informing citizens in a democratic society. We have discussed what viewers learn about themselves, as citizens, if they take seriously the normative responsibility to keep up with the news. The picture painted by this study

provides a rather depressing answer. Citizens are, on the whole, shown as passive observers of the world. While they are seen to have fears, impressions and desires, they do not, apparently, have much to say about what should be done about healthcare, education, the environment, crime, terrorism, economic policy, taxes and public spending, war, peace or any other subject in the public sphere. The world of politics is, in this sense, left to the politicians and the experts.

This is, perhaps, not all that surprising. In terms of traditional news values, the "ordinary citizen" is, almost by definition, generally excluded from news about public affairs. As we have pointed out, most citizens have no authority, celebrity or expertise, and thus have no obvious place in a news story, which is mainly reserved for elite sources and opinions. Yet our political system rests, in theory, on what citizens think about the world (e.g. Benhabib, 1994). And the news is replete with references to public opinion, whether it is a political commentator speculating in conversation with a news anchor, or "a person on the street" responding to a journalist's questions. The problem is that while these references provide a constant backdrop, they remain remorselessly apolitical. The active citizen, engaged with politics, can be a difficult creature to deal with on a news service committed to impartiality. This is particularly true when public opinion favours clear policy preferences. If a policy is the subject of debate between political parties, showing a majority of citizens clearly taking one side or another makes it more difficult for broadcasters to appear even-handed. This may account for why such issue-based polls are so abundant but so little reported.

But perhaps the most profound obstacle to showing active citizens on television news is the traditional top-down structure of political reporting. Politics on the news is usually about what politicians do, and not necessarily what people want them to do. In the British 2001 election, the issue on which public opinion was most often cited was Europe – even though the same polls showed that most people did not regard this as a key issue (Brookes et al., 2004). In short, citizens do not set the agenda.

Is it possible to imagine television news in which citizens not only play a more active role but are seen to do so? While this might involve some radical departures from time-honoured journalistic conventions that perpetuate top-down news coverage, it might also be a pre-requisite for engaging a population increasingly disenchanted with democratic politics.

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