

Mediated Access

Political Broadcasting, the Internet and Democratic Participation¹

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Observers of British politics identify a ‘crisis’ of democratic participation, measured in falling rates of party membership, reduced involvement in political campaigning and, most urgently, a sharp decline in voting at local and general elections. If people cannot be bothered to vote, it is argued, it may be because they have no confidence in their democratic institutions. When so many citizens lose that confidence political parties find their mandate undermined, and the entire system of governance begins to lose credibility².

For some observers the media – as the main disseminators and translators of political discourse to the citizenry – are complicit in this process. Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch write of the “crisis of public communication” (1995)³. But even amongst some of the most fervent critics there is acknowledged to be a ray of hope in the evolution of the political media. This is the growth of *public participation*, or *access* broadcasting – forms of TV and radio programming in which citizens are physically present in the public sphere, encouraged to state their views on political issues, to debate them with professional experts of various kinds, and to question representatives of the political elite face-to-face in ways which – or so the programme makers would assert – amount to significant participation in the democratic process. The facilitation of public access has been part of the remit of British public service broadcasting since the 1940s. Developments in new interactive technologies, however, and the convergence of these with traditional broadcasting forms, are providing new opportunities for access programming. This essay looks at some examples of British access programming and the increasing use of the Internet to facilitate public participation in political debate.

Public participation programming is now, of course, a major element of broadcast output in many advanced capitalist societies. The biggest audiences go to programmes like those hosted by Oprah Winfrey in the USA and Robert Kilroy-Silk in the UK, which involve audiences in discussion of a wide range of human interest and lifestyle subjects. Some of these may have political dimensions, where for example they raise questions of social policy, or law

and order. We have not included such programmes in this study, however, focusing instead on those which aim to cover the issues of government and civic administration debated in the public sphere by parties and serving politicians, elected representatives, single issue groups and lobbyists. Fencing off these debates from the debate of, for example, child abuse or homophobia that might take place on Oprah or Kilroy is not to suggest that the latter are of lesser importance in the public and political life of a society. Indeed, we have previously written at length about day-time chat shows, docu-soaps and other forms of human interest public participation programming – what has been called ‘reality TV’ – and have drawn on that work in the design of this research (Hibberd, et al, 2000). But in so far as the crisis of democratic participation is generally seen as a phenomenon relating to party politics, and the processes of governance, this chapter is centred on forms of public participation media which explicitly address formal, institutionalised politics.

While for obvious reasons only a small number of individuals can take part in these programmes directly, many millions more watch and listen to them at home. They too, through their watching and listening, are invited by the programme makers to think of themselves as participants in political debate, and as citizens with a stake in the democratic process. Some variants of the form make this explicit by encouraging audience participation and feedback through post-programme telephone calls and electronic voting, the results of which may be fed back into the content of subsequent programmes, or become the subject of political journalism and debate elsewhere in the public sphere.

As part of the broader process of technological convergence now impacting on the broadcast media, access programming on TV and radio is now being complemented by e-mail and internet channels. British broadcasters have been among the leading promoters of on-line political debate and discussion, which they see as a complement to their more traditional activities. Access programmes will often promote further debate and discussion via their on-line sites.

The democratic implications of the rise of access broadcasting (and now on-line media) have been the subject of a growing sub-field within the study of political communication. Some commentators, such as Sonia Livingstone and Peter Lunt in the UK, have welcomed the emergence of what they call ‘talk show democracy’ (1994). Kenneth Newton speculates on the positive role of public access broadcasting in the “mobilisation” of the citizenry, and their contribution to the construction of an informed, participatory public sphere (1997). In the United States, an expanding body of research examines patterns of participation in TV and talk radio shows that address overtly political topics, including those that do so under the direction of idiosyncratic, sometimes extreme ‘shock jocks’ such as Morton Downey Jr. and Rush Limbaugh (Herbst, 1995; Barker, 1998; Jones, 1998). Even as they criticise the provocative, reactionary manner in which these programmes sometimes

handle the issues under discussion, many analysts note that they comprise the only media spaces in the USA where ordinary members of the public can have their say on the issues of the day, political and otherwise, and that this in itself gives them potential value as democratic instruments.

“Forum media”, argues Douglas Rushkoff, “however sensationalised or tabloid it may get, depends upon the interpretive and evaluative skills of its audiences, even if it does not demand knowledge of facts or history” (1996: 65). Rushkoff defends US access shows precisely on the grounds that they are “participatory”. In contrast to the tradition of top-down journalistic ‘spoon-feeding’ of news to passive audiences eating their TV dinners at home (as Rushkoff characterises the producer-consumer relationship associated with the ‘straight’ news and current affairs media), access programmes on TV and radio, “call upon the intelligence of [their] viewers and participants” (p.65). Moreover, they “loosen the grip of public relations experts on the opinions of the greater population”. Rushkoff here turns the familiar criticism that contemporary political discourse is excessively managed and spun on its head, contrasting the spun-ness of traditional news media with the relatively raw and unspun character of political access programming. In the era of the soundbite and the photo-op, he suggests, and to the extent that it breaks through the PR-produced rhetoric to the political reality underneath, public participation media acquire an enhanced value.

Others are critical of the ‘videomalaise’ caused by the political media in general, and pessimistic about the capacity of public participation channels to contribute usefully to the democratic process. The fact that all forms of electronic access are, by definition, arenas for *mediated* politics conducted at various removes from what these critics would characterise as ‘reality’, undermines their democratic value for many commentators. Robert Putnam’s influential study of the decline of civic culture in America, *Bowling Alone* (2000: 41), argues that “TV-based politics [and, by extension, radio and Internet-based politics] is to political action as watching ER is to saving someone in distress. Just as one cannot restart a heart with one’s remote control, one cannot jump-start citizenship without face-to-face participation. Citizenship is not a spectator sport”.

Indeed it is not, and we do not argue here that mediated political debate, whether conducted through TV, radio or on-line channels can, or should be, a substitute for participation in voting, campaigning or involvement in political parties. We do, however, contest the assumption underlying Putnam’s position that mediated participation in politics (participation experienced at one remove through TV, radio or any other channel of electronic communication) is in some way inferior to the interpersonal, face-to-face modes of the past, when politicians would tour the country and participate in hustings meetings at which they might be robustly challenged and heckled⁴. These encounters, appreciated though they no doubt were to those who had access to them, were limited to audiences of a few hundreds or thousands at most. The great majority of the people had no involvement in them beyond

the journalistic accounts they read in their newspapers (those who could read, that is) or hear on the conversational grapevine.

Mediated political debate, by contrast, has the potential to reach millions of people in their own homes. This essay rejects any presumption that those millions are less likely to be informed, motivated or mobilised into action by public participation media than would have been the nineteenth century crowd at a hustings meeting, struggling to hear the content of a political speech delivered without the aid of electronic amplification by a man on a podium hundreds of feet away. Our working assumption, as communication scholars, is that the audio-visual clarity of the broadcast media, joined now by the interactive possibilities of the Internet, and the penetration of these media into the domestic environments of virtually the entire population, allow for the transmission of political messages which are no less intimate or affecting than the interpersonal exchanges of the past.

This chapter describes how the producers of converging forms of mediated access (TV, radio and Internet) seek to engage UK citizens in the discussion of public affairs, and to facilitate their participation in the life of a healthy, 'deliberative' democracy. It considers the extent to which mediated access can contribute to what Chambers and Costain characterise as "a healthy public sphere where citizens can exchange ideas, acquire knowledge and information, confront public problems, exercise public accountability, discuss policy options, challenge the powerful without fear of reprisals, and defend principles" (2000, ed., p.xi)⁵.

Why access?

That citizens should have a degree of access to those who govern their lives, and some means of participation in the processes by which political decisions are made, are correctly viewed as characteristics of a healthy democracy. They should, as Chambers and Costain note, be able to pass critical comment on their governors, and expect their voices to be heard. William Gamson writes that "public discourse can and should empower citizens, give them voice and agency, build community, and help citizens to act on behalf of their interests and values. The normative standard here is one of engaging citizens in the democratic process through their active participation in the public sphere" (2001, p.56).

The main vehicles for the exercise of such participation have always been, and are today more than ever, the media. From the first readers' letters published by newspapers in the Seventeenth Century, to e-mail participation in the radio and TV programmes of the Twenty-First Century, the facilitation of public access to political debate has been recognised as a democratic function of the journalistic 'fourth estate'. Where 'straight' journalism ideally provides the information (news and commentary) on which a sound democ-

ocracy is founded, access media exist to provide opportunities for public participation in political discourse, both as a means for citizens to acquire political information, and as a prelude or incentive to political action (such as voting in an election). They provide access both to the debating fora in which individual and public opinions about political issues can be formed; and to political elites, in contexts where they are obliged to engage in debate with ordinary citizens.

In Britain the forms of broadcast access vary from medium to medium and channel to channel, in what is a mixed media economy and an increasingly fragmented market of niche audiences. All involve some element of public participation, organised for the purpose of achieving three democratic goals: *representation*, of the people in the public sphere; *interrogation*, or what Habermas (1989) has called the *critical scrutiny* of political elites by the people; and the *mobilisation* of citizens to participate in politics. These are the *normative* aspirations of public access programming; the goals set for themselves by the makers of the programmes, and against which their effectiveness as mechanisms of mediated democratic participation can be evaluated. The rest of this chapter considers how those aspirations are put into practice in the UK, against the background of a changing *political culture* in which the nature of 'the public', and the expectations of that public in respect of their interaction with political elites, have significantly altered; growing *economic constraints* caused by an ever-more competitive media environment; and an emerging *technological environment* of enhanced convergence and interactivity – exemplified by the increased use of e-mail and Internet channels – which is constantly expanding the opportunities for mediated access to political debate.

Access programming and representation

The idea of representation is fundamental to democracy, and from the birth of access programming in Britain in the late 1940s has been a key structuring element in the design of British public service broadcasting. *Representation* in this context refers both to access programmes' status as an estimation of political and public opinion in the country, and to their constitution of the population in the public sphere. Access programmes function as visible symbols of 'people power'. The displays of mediated public participation they allow are signifiers of democracy itself. Access programmes on radio and television represent the people to themselves, in the process of engaging with the political elite. They give the people voice, as a support to the exercise of their democratic power.

To have resonance at this ideological level, participating members of the public must be accepted as an accurate sample of 'the people', and their views expressed on air as a valid indicator of what 'the people' are thinking

about current political issues at a given moment. One of the main *production challenges* of public participation broadcasting is thus to convey these qualities to viewing and listening audiences. This challenge has been complicated by the evolution of British political culture in the post-World War II period, driven by changing social attitudes to class, gender, and ethnicity, as well as the onset, post-1997, of devolution and other constitutional reforms set in motion by the Labour government which came to power in that year. Taken together, these processes have undermined the traditional notion of a unitary Great British public and encouraged recognition of the UK as a multi-nation state comprising many, often overlapping publics defined by social class, gender, ethnicity, nationality, geography and lifestyle.

Normative democratic theory suggests that all of these have the right to, and need for, some representation in the expanded public sphere of the Twenty First century. The broadcasters profess to understand that need, and to this extent the history of public participation programming in Britain is the history of producers' efforts to expand and refine their socio-demographic reach, and to find modes of facilitating access appropriate to the many different publics they now aspire to serve. This effort has required revision of the conception of 'the people' which underpins the broadcasters' work, and a movement from a model of public participation which can be viewed as broadsheet in content and style (designed for a relatively educated and affluent public), to forms which can be described as mid-market and tabloid.

The unfolding of this process can be seen with the first example of the public participation genre in the UK – BBC radio's *Any Questions?* (launched in 1948). *AQ?* brings a sample of the public together to question four panelists – typically comprising three professional politicians and one other, such as a journalist, a senior public servant, or a lobbyist, judged competent to comment on political issues. This panel is *representative* in so far as it contains a balance of political viewpoints from left to right of the parliamentary political spectrum, supplemented on occasion by a panelist drawn from a recognised pressure group. Editions of the programme recorded in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland will reflect the distinctive political environments to be found in those areas, with representatives from nationalist parties usually included.

The *AQ?* panel is a kind of parliamentary democracy in miniature, both in its careful maintenance of party political balance, and in its construction of democratic accountability – a visible demonstration of the accessibility of the political class to the voting public (represented both in the audience of 500 or so present at the recording, and the larger audience of approximately 2 million listening to the broadcast at home). Ensuring that panellists answer questions is a chairman drawn from the senior ranks of the fourth estate, with the authority and the journalistic licence to act as 'watchdog' over them.

Schools, universities and other public institutions apply to host the programme on a given week, and the demographic composition of participants is skewed accordingly. In this respect *AQ?*'s audience is representative less

of the people as a whole than a sub-set of what are probably its more civically engaged, politically motivated members – the middle classes, professionals, those who might already be thought more likely to participate in the political process, and can engage with the panelists as active citizens. To this extent the programme reflects the political culture of the late 1940s when it was established, amidst the prevalence of assumptions about who was best qualified to participate in political debate, what it was appropriate for ordinary people to say, and when the still-relatively uneducated working classes (as well as women and ethnic minority groups) were excluded from all but walk-on and vox pop roles in the public sphere.

Expanding access

In its reasonableness and quiet good humour *Any Questions?* is, for many, a model of how mediated political debate should be conducted. Its audience, however, is comprised mainly of those who are likely to be relatively well-equipped with social capital and engaged in a range of political processes, from school boards to single issue campaigns and party work. This is not a criticism of the programme, which to this day serves a large and loyal audience, but suggests that its value as a participatory vehicle does not extend to the millions of citizens usually implicated in the crisis of democratic participation.

To their credit, British broadcasters recognise this limitation, and subsequent models of access programming have sought to provide more genuinely representative participatory fora, and to target those who are less engaged politically than the typical *AQ?* audience; those, in short, who may be lacking in the cultural resources required for active citizenship and who might, if access broadcasting can indeed play a role in enhancing political participation, be thought most likely to benefit from it. For example, *Question Time*, which premiered on BBC television in 1979, and is today the corporation's flagship participation programme, proactively seeks out what its presenter describes as "a fairly crude but quite effective cross section [of the public] based on age and gender, race and political affiliation". ITV's *Dimbleby* has a similarly representative ethos, aspiring to what its producer calls "a broad range in social class and all the other demographic terms".

The UK's public service commercial channels, dependent as they are on advertising revenue, are under greater pressure than the BBC to make programmes which are both political *and* popular. One product of this tension was the monarchy debate broadcast on ITV over three hours in January 1997. This major experiment in public participation programming was introduced to viewers as "the biggest live debate ever in the history of television, on the most contentious issue of the decade", a reference to the future of the British monarchy, even then (before the death of Princess Diana in August

1997) the subject of intense public and constitutional debate. The production brought together 3,000 people, divided into pro- and anti-monarchy camps, arranging them for dramatic effect in a circular arena surrounding a panel of pro- and anti-monarchy experts.

We have discussed the form and content of the monarchy debate in some detail elsewhere⁶. Its assembly of such a large group of the British people, in a uniquely irreverent discussion of an institution whose earthly representatives, as Andrew Morton pointed out during the debate, were but a few decades ago believed by one third of the public to be “descended from God”, lies at one extreme of a continuum of access programming styles bounded at the other by *Any Questions?* The latter’s more passive style of public participation was here replaced by a passionate, at times rowdy crowd, encouraged by the gladiatorial style of the debate, and the blunt tone of the panelists. The result was a noisy display of public participation in a debate of considerable importance to the future of British democracy.

The ethos of what we might call *mass representation* (our term rather than theirs) also inspires the producers of *The Wright Stuff*, a day-time talk show broadcast by the UK’s newest commercial TV network, Channel 5. The audience for *The Wright Stuff*, as for most day-time talk shows, is predominantly female (around 65% of the programme’s 180,000 viewers are women), and many of the topics discussed are of the Oprah/Kilroy/Tricia human interest type, focused on the ‘feminine’ private sphere. Others are political in the sense defined above, addressing what the producer calls “typically male” issues such as taxation.

This distinction between the feminine private and the male public spheres – long identified by feminist analysts as a major and lingering limitation of political culture in patriarchy – is one which *The Wright Stuff*’s producers set out to challenge with an agenda which they proudly identify as “tabloid”: in the presenter’s words, “populist but not trashy, informed but not too worthy”. *The Wright Stuff* seeks to make politics the domain of the day-time talk show audience – predominantly women, pensioners, and the unemployed. Similarly ‘tabloid’ in their style and content are many of the radio phone-in programmes, which take pride in extending opportunities for access to as broad a range of the British public as possible, widening the range of contributors beyond what one producer describes as the “metropolitan chattering classes”.

These programmes are a result of their producers’ recognition that genuinely representative public participation in mediated political debate necessarily involves the inclusion of a variety of discursive styles and debating conventions. One senior news editor identifies a trend towards “targetted news and current affairs” in British broadcast journalism. “The consensus about how you address audiences, the techniques you use, the production methods, is breaking down”. The evolution of access programming in the UK has been consistent with that trend, so that the genre can now be seen to occupy a *differentiated* public sphere embracing (like other forms of journalism) broadsheet, mid-market and popular (or tabloid) segments. Access broadcasting

services many different publics in their engagement with the political elite, from the polite register of *Any Questions* to the more disrespectful tones of radio phone-in shows, and all the variations in style and tone in between.

Limits on representation

That said, efforts to broaden the reach of access programming are constrained by the simple fact that readiness to participate is not evenly distributed amongst the population. Participation in mediated politics, like other forms of civic engagement, appears to be linked to the possession of social capital, and it is not surprising that those who respond to invitations to participate tend to be, as programme-makers themselves characterise it, male, middle class, middle aged and white. On several of the mainstream access strands the preponderance of men over women amongst those members of the public applying to participate is pronounced. Women appear to be more reticent in these contexts; a cultural hangover of patriarchy, perhaps, and the dominant role it has traditionally allotted men in the conduct of public discourse.

Radio phone-in programmes experience a similar bias. The rise of these programmes has coincided with the growth of the mobile telephone market, a technology with the potential to expand the possibilities of public access broadcasting, by enabling the participation of people outside their homes and on the move. Most users, however, from the statistics provided by programme-makers, turn out to be men driving from one business meeting to another, or sitting in traffic jams. The ratio of male:female callers to one radio show was found to be 70:30.

To address gender and other forms of imbalance the programme makers employ computer software packages which record the demographic profile of calls as they come in, and rank them according to what kind of caller is going to be required by that particular edition of the show. Producers may enlist the help of special interest groups with contacts in under-represented sectors of the public – youth organisations for young people; community groups working with ethnic minorities, and so on. Programmes have been made especially for sections of the community identified as under-represented in the more mainstream strands. In these ways *representation has to be actively worked for, or constructed*, to the programme producers' blue print of what an 'ideal' audience should look like.

Interrogation

If the producers of public access broadcasting have aspired to become more representative over time, the form of the critical scrutiny of political elites

which they enable – the *interrogative* function of mediated access – has also evolved. As already noted, *Any Questions?* model of critical scrutiny reflects the deferential political culture of the era which gave it birth. Participants in *Any Questions?* are a polite audience, and appear in the main satisfied to put their questions and sit back while the experts pontificate.

But elsewhere in the broadcast media realising the interrogatory function of public participation programming means enabling audiences to do more than sit passively before government ministers or party leaders as they answer questions or debate with each other on the panel. In today's political culture access has to be more than merely symbolic. It must be accompanied by the visible, relatively unrestrained participation of citizens in robust debate with their governors. When this happens, argues one presenter, "it really does serve as a substitute for the best kind of hustings".

In so far as access programmes frequently involve senior politicians they represent a highly distinctive feature of British political culture. In few comparable democracies are leading politicians required to confront members of the public live on-air (as British access programmes often require them to do). On *Question Time* and *Any Questions?* Cabinet ministers are regular guests, and the Prime Minister has been a regular guest on all the main access shows.

Access and mobilisation

The information provided through access programmes has a purpose – that of mobilisation, by which we mean stirring an audience to act on, or at least think about, the issues under discussion. Achieving this means paying attention to the aesthetic quality as much as the democratic functionality of the access form: skilled presenters, engaged and enthusiastic participants, in the studio or elsewhere, lively and relevant questions – all are deemed essential by producers. One outcome of the desire to engage audiences has been the expansion of expert contributors and panelists beyond the traditional ranks of professional politics, political journalism, and senior public figures.

In 1999 the *Question Time* panel was expanded from the four-person format dominated by political experts (three party members and one non-politician) to five, to make room for a 'non-professional' – someone who, though a celebrity or senior figure in his or her chosen field, such as entertainment or business, is independent of the political class and thus more likely to be seen by the audience as 'one of us'. Comedians and musicians are among those celebrities who have appeared on *Question Time* in recent years, in the hope that the programme's reach can be extended to audiences not usually associated with serious political debate, such as younger age groups. In this and other respects, the makers of public access broadcasting have moved closer to what is by any standards a form of political *infotainment*, where

the entertainment function is viewed as an essential pre-requisite for the achievement of their democratic objectives. To entertain successfully is to engage the audience, from which – programme makers believe – the normative democratic aims of access broadcasting may more readily be achieved.

Some critics argue that these goals are irreconcilable since, as commercial pressures intensify, the demand for audience-grabbing entertainment will always tend to supercede and negate the functions of illumination and interrogation. Peter Dahlgren, for example, writes that “while popularisation can and has been in many cases a positive development, bringing more people into the public sphere, by most accounts today popularisation is degenerating into trivialisation and sensationalisation” (2001: 33). For other commentators, the provision of useful political information, critical scrutiny of elites, and entertainment should not be viewed as mutually exclusive goals. John Street has observed that “the traditional boundaries marking where politics ends and entertainment begins no longer hold” (2001: 3). Della Carpini and Williams argue that “entertainment media often provide factual information, stimulate social and political debate, and critique government” (2001: 161). If one of the democratic aims of access broadcasting is to motivate and mobilise citizens into taking an interest in politics, then making entertainment of political debate becomes a valid element of an effective programming strategy.

The development of public access programming in the UK has not, however, prevented a decline in voting rates, and to that extent has had little discernible impact on the crisis of democratic participation. Media effects, of course, are rarely straightforward, and what people do with the information they receive from access programming will always be dependent on the content of the information, and the context in which it is received by the citizen. Cynicism about politics, where it exists, may not always be retarded by, and indeed may be an intelligible response to exposure to politicians in the media. In this sense, we would argue, successful access broadcasting may turn people off institutional politics as much as it motivates them to go out and participate in elections. That said, we conclude that access broadcasting does contribute to what has become in the UK a distinctive political culture of mediated public debate. This emerging culture of access coexists with a broader crisis of democratic participation.

Access broadcasting and the Internet

The low turnout in the 2001 general election has led broadcasters in the UK, especially the BBC, to review their provision of political programming to study alternative ways in which new audiences, especially the under 45s, might become more fully engaged with politics (Kevill, 2002). Access pro-

gramming is seen as a element in persuading these audiences to engage with the political system, often in conjunction with the internet.

In recent years the UK government has actively encouraged the development of the Internet as a democratic tool. The net is seen as an ideal medium to communicate directly with the public across a wide range of government services, to provide more information to people, and to “drive forward citizen participation in democracy” (Office of the UK e-Envoy, 2001), especially among social groups that currently feel excluded from the democratic process. For Dick Morris, former strategic adviser to Bill Clinton, “the net offers a potential for direct democracy so profound that it may well transform not only our system of politics but our very form of government... Bypassing national representatives and speaking to one another, the people of the world will use the Internet increasingly to form a political unit for the future” (quoted in Coleman and Götze, 2001: 8).

Academics, too, have stressed the possibilities of the net in reshaping and reinvigorating democratic institutions and processes (Blumler and Coleman, 2001). At the same time, as already noted, British broadcasters have spearheaded the use of Internet channels for public participation in political debate. As yet, however, relatively little is known about who uses these websites, and why, and if users perceive them to be important communicative spaces, access to which has tangible political outcomes. The ESRC-funded research on which this chapter is based therefore included a web-based questionnaire on UK audience attitudes to political participation on TV, the radio and via the net.

The survey addressed users of the website run by *Channel Four News*⁷, which offers viewers to the programme further information about the main news items of the day. Respondents comprised a broad range of socio-economic groups, representing all parts of the United Kingdom. A prominent feature of the survey, consistent with the pattern of gender bias seen in public participation broadcasting was the heavy under-representation of women (78 per cent of respondents were male, despite the fact they constitute only 50 per cent of the total *Channel Four News* audience⁸). Many of our respondents viewed themselves as active participants in the democratic process. More than one-third regularly (at least once a month) listened to radio studio debates such as *Any Questions?*, with 58 per cent watching TV studio debates such as, *Question Time*. Also 78 per cent voted in the 1997 General Election (compared to the national average of 71 per cent). Finally, 33 per cent of our respondents had contacted their local Member of Parliament or Councillor in the past year, and 53 per cent had signed a petition in the past twelve months.

Several survey questions related to political participation in website chat rooms or message boards. We found that 23 per cent of respondents had taken part in one or more chat-room discussions or had posted messages on the web site. The main reasons cited by our respondents for taking part in such debates were due to a strong interest in the subject matter, seeking more

in-depth debate, the attractiveness of anonymised participation and the ease of participation (from home). Some participants were merely curious to take part in an on-line debate. We asked users if they felt that website discussions boards were a useful addition to the political process, and if so, why? Nearly three-quarters of respondents stated that they were because they provided a platform for public opinion to be aired and expressed. Others felt that websites provided a low-cost method of participation. However, other respondents believed that websites and discussion board had little discernible impact on the political process, and some argued that message boards only provided an outlet for opinionated people.

The survey indicated that websites such as that run by *Channel Four News* tend to facilitate talk between (male) citizens and groups already involved in, and committed to, the political process. This finding is consistent with our study of access programming, which revealed that many participants are those relatively 'active' citizens who are already engaged and interested in 'real' politics. These findings are also consistent with other net-related participation studies, as Peter Dahlgren argues:

The evidence thus far is that the Net is a tool, a resource for those with political involvement, but that it generally does not recruit large numbers of new citizens to the public sphere. The Net is not likely to counter the 'great withdrawal' from mainstream politics... (2001: 51)

Conclusion: Limits on participation

There are today more channels for access to political debate available in Britain than has ever been the case, routinely subjecting the British political elite, up to and including the prime minister, to critical scrutiny of a qualitatively different kind from that to which the British people have been accustomed. There has, in addition, been a convergence of broadcast and on-line media in the service of access. We have shown that British public service broadcasting continues to take seriously its remit to provide spaces for access to political debate, and how the makers of public participation broadcasting increasingly utilise the interactive potential of e-mail and Internet channels to better achieve their democratic aims. This chapter has identified some of the limits to this process, but the broadcasters' efforts to address the crisis of democratic participation through the imaginative use of access media continue. They should not be expected to resolve the crisis of democratic participation on their own, but those concerned for the health of democracy should welcome and support their development as one element of an evolving political culture.

Notes

1. The research on which this chapter is based was conducted as part of the Economic and Social Research Council's Democracy and Participation programme (project reference L215 25 2016). It represents an edited and combined version of papers given separately by McNair and Hibberd for the RIPE2002 conference in Finland.
2. These phenomena are not restricted to the UK, but are a feature of many mature democracies throughout the world.
3. This critique can be contested, of course. See *Journalism and Democracy* (McNair, 2000) for a book-length qualitative evaluation of the political public sphere.
4. If such encounters still take place in modern campaigns, they are more often than not controlled with sinister precision by public relations and communications professionals whose job it is to prevent unscripted moments of reality intrusion.
5. The article is based on data assembled from interviews and focus group discussions conducted with the various actors involved in the production and consumption of access programming, including the makers of the programmes (presenters, producers, commissioning editors and researchers. Interviews with all of the above were conducted in London, Bristol, Manchester, Glasgow and Edinburgh between August 2000 and June 2001), many of those who participated in access programmes, and focus groups of audience members conducted in London, Glasgow and Stirling. The programmes selected for the study include the major examples in a range of formats produced by the terrestrial TV and radio channels.
6. See McNair, 2000, pp118-120.
7. It is important to note that the respondents were self-selecting and, as such, are not representative of net users in general. Our respondents were also highly civic-minded. Furthermore, this part of the research only looked at one website – albeit a popular one. The questionnaire was distributed in December-January 2000-01, and attracted 436 responses from website users, on questions about attitudes to mediated political participation and to access programmes on TV, radio and the net. The survey lasted one month in order to gather a sample that adequately represents all visitors to that site. The survey also consisted primarily of pre-coded questions in order to encourage response rates and therefore improve the reliability of the data.
8. The age profile of our respondents was young. Seventy-one per cent of respondents were aged between 16 and 44 percent. Eighty-six per cent of respondents classified themselves as British White.

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