New Media and Political Efficacy

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Building upon findings from a series of nine nationally-representative panel surveys, focus groups were conducted within the Leeds area in order to explore ways in which a broad range of participants interact with and reflect upon structures of political power, both within their local communities and beyond. The paper considers four themes discussed by focus group participants: Firstly, the ways in which people establish confidence in their local environment and how these relate to a growing estrangement between local and political worlds; secondly, the perceived potential of the Internet for acquiring useful information and linking with like-minded others; thirdly, the disconnection between participants' sense of local belonging and their capacity to influence the affairs of their locality through electing accountable political representatives; and fourthly, the value of the Internet as a space for symbolic display: a means of asserting solidarity in the absence of physical association. The paper concludes by discussing the theoretical implications of this research and considering the role of the media in creating 'confidence-building devices' that might enhance political efficacy.

The research reported in this paper addresses prevalent contemporary anxieties about public disengagement from the democratic political process. (Hay, 2008; Coleman 2005; Pattie et al., 2004). A former leader of the House of Commons acknowledged the popular mood of estrangement from institutional politics when he observed that "Too many people believe that government is something that is done to them. Westminster must stop giving the impression of being a private club and instead give the public a greater sense of ownership" (Hain, 2003). The sense of alienation and distance from government described by Hain is best understood in relation to the concept of political efficacy, which refers to people's beliefs in their ability to understand and participate effectively in governance, be it at the national, local or

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more immediate level. Feelings of political efficacy are ineluctably bound in with perceptions of the responsiveness of political institutions to the presence of citizens as significant actors in the political process.

In the hope of making government and other political institutions more accessible and trusted, a range of innovative communication techniques have been introduced, including online parliamentary consultations, e-petitions to the Prime Minister and politicians' blogs. These have sought to exploit the interactive features of digital technologies with a view to narrowing the perceived gap between government and governed and establishing a meaningful link between local experience and political authority.

The aim of this paper is to discuss the ways in which these emerging opportunities for interactive communication between citizens and their political representatives might enhance feelings of political efficacy. We begin by examining the concept of political efficacy and its relationship to various forms of media use. We then introduce our own research questions and perspectives, reporting on our findings from focus groups in which we explored how citizenship is imagined and performed in the context of a digitally interactive media environment. We conclude the paper by offering some tentative conclusions that we hope might inform future research and policy agendas relating to the relationship between new media and political efficacy.

I.   *Political Efficacy*

To experience a sense of political efficacy is to believe that a communicative relationship exists between oneself and the institutions that govern society. As Easton and Dennis put it, to be politically efficacious an individual must be able "to construct a psychic map of the political world with strong lines of force running from himself to the places of officialdom." (Easton & Dennis, 1967, p. 26). Studies report that citizens who feel they can bring about political change, individually or in concert with others, are more likely to be actively involved in politics (Campbell, Gurin & Miller, 1954, p. 194; Milbrath, 1965, p. 59; Sullivan & Riedel, 2004, p. 4353). In survey research, this empirical conjunction has proven strong enough for political efficacy to be a relatively effective predictor of political participation. Milbrath, on the basis of a synthesis of existing survey research, found that "persons who feel efficacious politically are more likely to become actively involved in politics" (Milbrath, 1965, p. 56) (See also Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba, Schlotzman & Brady, 1995; Finkel et al., 1989; Chavis & Wandersman, 1990).

The concept of political efficacy was introduced to political science by Angus Campbell and his colleagues from the Survey Research Centre, University of Michigan in their first U.S. national election survey in 1952 election study, *The Voter Decides.* Subsequent political scientists have refined the concept, distinguishing between 'internal' and 'external' efficacy, where the former refers to citizens' confidence in their own political capacities, while the latter refers to citizens' image and experience of the responsiveness of political institutions and actors (Converse, 1972; Balch, 1974). Furthermore, political scientists have distinguished between citizens' evaluation of how much political influence they think they *actually* have and their normative interpretation of how much political influence they *should* have in a properly functioning democracy (McClusky et al., 2004).

Much political efficacy research since the 1960s has used survey and experimental analysis to locate convincing chains of cause and effect between exposure to broadcast media and an individual's sense of political efficacy. Robinson's conclusion that watching television news serves to "frustrate subjects, forcing them to turn inward and doubt their own ability to comprehend and cope with politics" (Robinson, 1976, p. 417) was consistent with a tradition initiated by Kurt and Gladys Lang (1953 & 1967) and pursued in later years by other scholars (Newton, 1999; Putnam, 2000). Other academics have found a positive relationship between some forms of media use, particularly for news consumption, and political efficacy (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; McLeod et al., 1996; Norris, 2000; Scheufele, 2002; Aarts & Semetko, 2003; Moy et al., 2005).

As with television and radio, the emergence of the Internet and other digital information and communication technologies (ICT) resulted in diverse and ambivalent speculation about the implications of the new medium for democracy, in general, and political participation, in particular. Scheufele and Nisbet's (2002) study, based upon a telephone survey of 468 residents of Tompkins County, New York, found that "the role of the Internet in promoting active and informed citizenship is minimal." Lee (2006), on the other hand, has reported that exposure to online news sites and the use of the Internet for sending or posting political messages were relatively significant predictors of internal political efficacy. Di Gennaro and Dutton (2006), drawing upon findings from the 2005 Oxford Internet Survey, arrive at the more optimistic conclusion that

> . . . the Internet appeals to those people who think that governments are not responsive
> to citizens' concerns. Perhaps they think that the Internet will help their chances of
> being heard and have an impact on the political process (p. 310).

Di Gennaro and Dutton's findings are consistent with some broad trends that we have observed in findings from our own national representative panel study (Futura.com),[1] designed to capture a wide

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[1] Overall, futura.com was designed around a longitudinal panel, initially recruited in late 1996. Fieldwork was conducted by NOP research. Details of the project can found in Svennevig (1998), Svennevig, Morrison & Towler (1996) and Byfield & Svennevig (1995). The project tracked public opinion and use of a range of existing media and emerging digital technologies, as well as monitoring social activities and issues. The guiding principle underlying futura.com is that of context: the impact of any external change — be it technological, social, political, physical — has to be placed into and interpreted within a social context.

The project was based around an initial UK representative panel of 6,500 households recruited in late 1996. The original sample was boosted in 2002 using volunteers from NOP Omnibus survey respondents. There were a total of 7 waves conducted between 1996 and 2003, whereby each adult household member was sent self-completion questionnaires approximately every 12 months. There was also a programme of qualitative research which looked at key issues as required. As with all panels, this initial sample size has declined over the years for a variety of reasons. The panel was maintained, and postal surveys run for the University of Leeds by NOP.

range of data about people's experiences, attitudes and media uses over a 10-year period of social and technological change: 1996-2006. In this paper we seek to contribute to the complex story of the relationship between media and political efficacy.

II.   Research Questions and Method

The exploratory research reported here seeks to build a picture of how, in an era of new media interactivity, citizens come to imagine the political and themselves as democratic citizens. In conducting this study, we departed at the outset from the traditional political science approach to efficacy which we argue pays too little account to how the political is constructed on the ground in the course of people's everyday activities, experiences of authority and encounters with mediated political images. We argue that before one can begin to talk meaningfully about citizens' political beliefs, practices, expectations and self-confidence, it is necessary to understand how they come to make judgments about social life as they find it and how such subjective orientations come to be acted upon. This entails an understanding of how available channels and networks of communication enable citizens to express themselves; access, generate and share information; and reach those who are in authority.

In this paper we present qualitative data drawn from seven focus groups, conducted within the Leeds[2] area, designed to explore the relationship between new media use and political efficacy. In the focus groups we explored ways in which a broad range of participants interacted with and reflected upon structures of political power, both within their local communities and beyond.[3] Participants were recruited

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Svennevig, M., Needs, Not Nerds: Researching technological Change, *International Journal of Advertising*, October 2000.

Svennevig M., Morrison D. E., & Towler, R. T., Researching the Future of Communications in the UK, Proceedings of ARF/ESOMAR Worldwide Electronic and Broadcast Audience Research Symposium, San Francisco, April 1996.

[2] Leeds is a city in Yorkshire in the north of England, with a population of approximately 750,000 in its wider metropolitan area.

[3] At the time of recruitment, participants were told that the purpose of the research was to understand how people thought about politics. Each group began with a series of questions designed to locate the participants in their everyday existences. These focused on how long they had lived in the area; how they felt about it; changes to the neighbourhood; and their networks of friends and acquaintances This questioning gave rise to further questions probing participants' feelings of safety in their local area. These proved extremely fruitful for later questioning about political efficacy, for exposure to neighbourhood crime or anti-social behaviour often brought them into contact with the police. Their accounts of how the police responded to their situation opened up a wider discussion about how responsive they felt authorities across a range of domains were to their needs, demands, and aspirations.

to reflect a broad socio-demographic range; a spectrum of attitudes to political participation, from the alienated and disengaged to active participators; and a diverse mix of new-media users and non-users.[4]

The questioning then moved to a closer examination of beliefs in responsiveness of systems, institutions and social actors. In response to frequent claims of being ignored or dislocated from cultural power, we began to ask participants whether they had ever complained to any organisation or authority, making clear that this might include a range of complaints about issues such as refuge collection, treatment of their children in schools or protest against a local planning decision. Examples given in response to this line of questioning led to questions relating to involvement in formal politics, such as voting, contact with local government officials, local members of parliament and letter writing to press. It was in examining 'political action' — which was given a very wide acceptance of meaning — that discussion of new media in communicating and affecting political decisions was usually raised by participants.

Our overall approach in these focus group discussions was to attempt a grounded or naturally occurring conversation with the participants whereby they constructed the political meanings by which they operated and judged the world. This constructionist approach meant that flexibility within groups was required in following how participants experienced and understood situations and issues. This involved revising questioning in response to examples raised by participants rather than being too rigidly constrained by a pre-determined question framework.

[4] Seven focus groups were recruited in June and July 2006 specifically for this study, all in the Leeds area. The composition of the groups ranged from 'politically alienated' – to those who were 'politically engaged.' The groups also covered both sexes and a range of ages and social grades, and each ran for between 1.5 and 2 hours.

Group 1	Female, 30-60, C1C2, D	'Alienated' - not voted in any UK election in past 3 years and not taken part in any of a range of political activities
Group 2	Male, 18-50, C1C2, D	'Activists' – must have done four or more from a range of political activities in the past 3 years
Group 3	Female, 18-50, B, C1C2	'Activists' – must have done four or more from a range of political activities in the past 3 years
Group 4	Male, 18-40, B, C1C2	Internet users — must have done four or more of specified on-line activities in the past 3 weeks
Group 5	Female, 18-40, C1C2, D	Internet users — must have done four or more of specified on-line activities in the past 3 weeks
Group 6	Female 50+, B	No other specific requirements
Group 7	Male 20-30, B, C1	No other specific requirements

Although participants were recruited to reflect a broad socio-economic range, the differences in response to questions of efficacy between the groups were not marked to the point worthy of analytical attention.

Of course, one cannot, in any strict methodological sense, generalise from these findings to the population as a whole: focus groups are good for gathering the range of opinions that exist in a population, but not the distribution of those opinions. (Morrison, 1998: Chap. 5). We are confident, however, that the findings from the focus groups, particularly where there were recurring patterns of response, are likely to be replicated by more representative research.

In the following four sections we set out the key themes raised by participants in relation to our study. In the final section we draw some tentative conclusions and raise questions for future research.

III.   Confidence in the Local Environment

Most of the participants in our focus groups inhabited a world of settled expectations. They were born and had lived all their lives in Leeds; as, in most cases, had their parents. They liked the area; indeed, many of them appeared to have an enormous affection for it to the point of protection. Several participants spoke warmly and knowingly of the areas in which they lived, both in present and past tenses. Typical responses to our opening question about where participants lived and how long they had lived there (asked to each participant in turn) were:

> I've lived in Horsforth all my life and my mum and dad, grandma and granddad have. So lots of generations in Horsforth and I know virtually everybody . . . I'm scared to fly the nest. One of my brothers has gone to live in Wales. He's the only one out of four generations that has gone. I couldn't do it. It's never appealed to me. I love knowing everybody and it's really nice. (Group 1)

> Leeds born and bred. Lived in four houses all within 500 yards of each other, and my parents lived here. I went away for three years, then came back to Leeds. (Group 4)

Neither were the differences between those recruited by attributes: activists, Internet users, politically alienated. From a methodological perspective, had the sample been larger, as for example sample sizes associated with survey research, then data may have produced observable or recordable differences between groups. As it stood, and as is often the case with focus groups, the small numbers do not readily allow the emergence of patterns, indicative of complex sets of relationship as opposed, for example, to patterns of opinion relating to, say, party political preferences. Our constructionist approach in having individuals say what the political is, rather than impose formal categories of the political, saw the emergence of agreed meanings about the nature of political process and the effectiveness of communicative exchange, no matter what the form or mode of transmission. This area of examination is to be continued, and the insights gained from the focus groups have fed directly into the development of a survey instrument for the next stage of the planned research. The survey research will continue the constructionist approach, but the increase in sample size, will allow for analysis of differences in constructions of meanings between groups.

> I'm only five minutes away from where I was born and bred me, so I still know a lot of people I went to school with and knocked about with. . . It gives you a bit of security, doesn't it? You know there are people around that you know. You feel confidence. (Group 2)

Most participants were involved in various local networks, the most important of which revolved around their children's' school:

> I think everybody knows most people, especially if they've got children at school. Even the old folk as well, because they come in and help at schools. (Group 5)

> When you're at school you know all the mums, and then it doesn't have to be at school – it can be the holidays, and you go shopping and it can take you two hours because you see so many people that you know. (Group 1)

> My wife's the one who's the social one, and it's mainly going to the schools as the kids have grown up. She's the one who knows most of the neighbours and tells me what's going on, but I tend to just say "hello" to people. But my wife has a natter with their wives. . . .We know most of the people around us. (Group 4)

Although the local schools are regarded as central points in the community, participants were unconfident about their capacity to influence school policies. Indeed, as soon as the conversation moved from discussion of school as a communal gathering site to school as an official institution, the language of sociability turned into a discourse of suspicion, dominated by a *them* and *us* attitude. For example, in several of our groups, participants gave accounts of bullying in their children's schools. But school authorities were perceived as being unable or unwilling to deal with this situation:

> I don't think you do get support in incidents . . . there is too much PC stuff going on and there's a lot of kids that should be kicked out of school. (Group 1)

Another participant was involved in a campaign to keep her local school open, but she felt that forces above and beyond the locality in which she lived were involved:

> At the end of the day, you are only on this earth once and you want to make sure that you maximise every opportunity and everything goes as well as it can for every minute of the day, and when your life is in other peoples hands, then you cannot feel empowered. At the end of the day, decisions like this school building, you are powerless because it is local government subject to central government's mandate that will decide the future for your children. (Group 6)

Similarly, there was a common sense that participants were unable to communicate with the police when their communities were faced with problems of disorder. Although having influence upon local

policing is not conventionally regarded as a determinant of political efficacy, for many of the participants this was seen as a key example of 'the system' not listening or responding to their anxieties and was presented as a justification for withdrawing from the political process. One man explained that "I've complained to the police about kids nicking motor bikes or hanging around street corners." We asked, "What happened when you complained to the police?" to which he replied, "Not a great deal, to be honest – subsequently it's not something I would spend my time doing." The non-responsiveness of the police and his subsequent withdrawal from further complaint demonstrates a lack of faith in the local political process. We asked, him, "Before you complained, what did you expect?" He said:

> I expected some kind of action – I expected them to do something about it. The reason why I did what I did was because there was a Residents' Association which was quite heavily subscribed to, encouraging people in the community, if there were incidents in the community, to contact the police because there was a growing problem with a group of kids who were hanging around in the evenings. . . I am a little bit indifferent to it now, because I felt I was trying to be public spirited, but didn't get anywhere. (Group 7)

The lesson here, for political efficacy, is that the existence of a communication channel counts for nothing if information is not acted upon. This disjuncture between a local commitment to neighbourhood orderliness and a failure of institutional response reflects a wider sense in which participants felt that their capacity to understand and affect clear norms of social behaviour was undermined by policies and priorities from which they felt estranged.

Most of the participants articulated a clear link between their sense of local belonging and their sense of estrangement from what they saw as 'the political world,' which does not seem to respond to their understandings, language and values. This non-recognition of the political world as their own indicated a profound dislocation between their 'common sense' understanding of rules governing everyday life, social exchange and appropriate expression and official constructions of such rules which were regarded as somehow alien and unsettling, in the sense that they were seen as emerging from an inaccessible distance, disrupting deep-rooted patterns of local culture.

This sense of dislocation was most vividly experienced in relation to 'official' language, which was almost universally referred to by the disparaging term, 'political correctness.' Participants lamented the fact that meanings seemed no longer to be localised; that the interconnectedness of modern society had facilitated the penetration of values – views of the world and its rightful ordering which by extension included how it ought to be addressed – to groups whose world excluded such definitions. One participant confessed that:

> I feel intimidated. That might be just me. I get nervous when I talk to the teacher. It's any situation like that, when you have to talk to anybody who's above you, or even if they are rich I get intimidated. I felt embarrassed. (Group 3)

Modernity is predicated upon extensive and expansive communication, but the exponential development in communicative networks has had the effect of privileging the common over the specific; of

seeming to deny difference in the pursuit of harmony. So, for several participants, a sense that language was no longer their own and local distinctions no longer respected led to a kind of retreatism: an unconfident withdrawal from the discourse of official politics. Ironically, communication technologies were seen as contributing to the erosion of local identities by forcing them to adopt protocols of expression and practice which undermined communal autonomy. For example, when speaking about the organisation of a protest intended to keep open a local school, participants acknowledged the convenience of using e-mail, as opposed to putting letters through hundreds of doors, but at the same time felt that this form of communication led to a fragmentation of community:

> It is still just a form of communication, and it takes away from the community spirit because it limits conversation. (Group 6)

> I think that's what caused some of the problems between parents, because it's been texting and e-mails and so actually the true message has not got across properly. (Group 6)

Other participants were concerned that 'the media' in general was displacing autonomous thought and action:

> I think the general persona of the public is just getting watered down and the fact that we get brainwashed by everything, not just politics, by TV, by media. Half the country, if not three quarters of the country, watch poxy *Big Brother* and other sorts of programmes and it is brain numbing TV. (Group 4)

In the face of institutions which possess huge communicative resources – government, the media, digital information networks – many participants felt impotent and locally isolated. As one participant put it, "Ultimately, you feel powerless because you feel that you're just a small cog in a massive wheel." (Group 6)

IV.   The Potential of the Internet

In the light of this sense of dislocation from structures of power and sense-making, several participants appeared to regard the Internet as a potential means of acquiring useful information and linking with like-minded others. This accords with findings from other research regarding the capacity of the Internet to increase citizens' awareness of political issues, communicate with one another about them and affect political outcomes (Livingstone et al., 2005; Shah et al., 2001; 2005; Tolbert & McNeal, 2003; Bimber, 1998).

Numerous examples were given of how the Internet had facilitated social bonding around common interests such as music and football. One man explained how he could not trust any of his immediate neighbours:

> When my dad goes on holiday he gives his next door neighbour his key and they go
> round and water the plants, open and shut curtains. I think I've lived in my house for
> five years, but I wouldn't trust anybody around my house with my keys. We live next
> door to an 80-year-old bloke. I don't think I'd even trust him with my keys. (Group 2)

But this same person had formed friendships through an online forum that were strong enough to penetrate the sanctity of domestic space:

> I've met people on music forums and we've met up in different places in the country and
> we've stayed at their house. I've got almost best friends that I've met through the
> Internet forums through discussing music. We were discussing music and I said "I'm
> DJing up your way, why don't you come and see us?" and "my ex-girlfriend and his
> girlfriend became best friends – they see each other every weekend." (Group 2)

In some cases, this experience of online sociability spilled over into political practice – or, at least, aspiration. One participant, having expressed some despair as to the possibility of exerting any influence upon the political system, felt encouraged by the possibility that

> You could start a protest now on a message board and I reckon we could probably get
> 150 hits for it by the end of the week. (Group 2)

Another observed that

> I can access information a lot more readily, and what information I find, I have to find
> both sides of an argument. (Group 1)

Asked whether the government should proactively seek their views on matters of policy by sending them e-mails and inviting their comments, there was broad support. One participant noted that 'when you open a new e-mail address you tick these boxes if you want to receive mail regarding music, sports, travel etc.' and wondered whether the same could be offered by government:

> If they did that when you opened a new e-mail address that said "Are you interested in
> education, transportation," things like that – you could get monthly updates. (Group 2)

Most participants responded positively to the principle of a more interactive relationship between representatives and represented:

> It's good for politicians to gauge public opinion at various stages rather than waiting
> until a local or general election to be able to understand what the electorate are
> thinking. (Group 7)

There need to be more forums for public opinion in between elections, and there isn't that apart from the local councillor or local party canvassing you on the doorstep, invariably six weeks before they ask you to vote for them. (Group 7)

But underlying this acknowledgement of the potential for more convenient information-gathering and opinion expression was deep scepticism as to the commitment of politicians and officials to respond to such input:

A: I think that's what the government like to say − because they've got a flashy Web site that says you can contact us at any time . . .

B: They need to encourage people to look at it. That Web site may exist, but they need to be saying to people "Look, if you've got a problem come here."

C: You need to be made aware.

A: Yes, but if you were made aware you might complain and they don't really want you to do that. (Group 3)

You can voice your opinion, but you don't see the response for a long time and you don't really know how you can contribute. (Group 6)

I think you can contribute, but you're not sure how you are making a difference to government policy. (Group 6)

The technological potential to connect citizens to each other and to public institutions was regarded as an opportunity to create a more transparent and associative democracy, but this was radically undermined by a general lack of trust that interacting citizens would be listened to, recognised as representing valid positions or allowed to influence the policy process. Ironically, the experience of digital interactivity in other social relationships, such as shopping, banking and even interacting with the mass media, such as voting in talent competitions, led people to feel even more frustrated by the institutional distance between government and themselves. Without being translated into experiential reality, it seems to be the case that as the scope for more accessible relationships increases, political efficacy declines further

V.   *Attitudes to Politicians*

A feeling of deep cynicism toward politics and politicians was prevalent in all of the groups, consistent with findings from survey research (Levi & Stoker, 2000; Putnam & Pharr, 2000; Coleman, 2005; Christensen & Laegreid, 2005; Hay, 2008). A typical comment was, "It's politicians, they'll say anything to get themselves elected and once they're in power it tends to subside" (Group 7). We observed a disconnection between participants' sense of local disorder and their capacity to remedy it through electing accountable political representatives. Those in our sample revealed a remarkable lack of faith that

voting made much, if any difference, to their lives. There was, furthermore, a strong belief that once elected politicians were no longer interested in listening to or courting the electors. As one participant put it:

> I think it's to do with a kind of hierarchy in society, isn't it. I think you almost feel a detachment. I class myself as working- to-middle-class and I feel as though I have no role or say in policy apart from when I go to vote . . . I voted for Tony Blair and I feel very disillusioned by the Labour Government, so how do you change that? How do you find a forum to be able to say "I haven't got any faith in you and I'm not getting back what I believe in and what I put you into power for?". . . Do we complain? Do we have a voice to be able to say what we believe in? . . . You could say 'why not write a letter to my MP or send an e-mail' and it's because it wouldn't make any difference. (Group 7)

The same participant went on to state, to the universal acclaim of other group members, that "I don't think they have much idea about the commonality of life as experienced by the normal everyday person" (Group 7). Another participant stated that "They don't have a clue how normal people live; they're not in touch with reality" (Group 5). This sense of disjunction between the rules and protocols of political behaviour and everyday life was articulated by one participant who stated:

> . . . if I was to do professionally in my job what a lot of politicians do, I would have been sacked a long time ago. The fact that they can deliberately lie, deceive, they can hide things, cover up things, I find personally objectionable. (Group 7)

One participant expressed his belief that no party would make any difference to his material well-being:

> My job will remain the same, but what will change is different governments will cut the budget by different amounts. My pay rise will never be more than the rate of inflation. (Group 4)

Given this sense that politicians are 'all the same' and unlikely to represent the will of citizens, might interactive communication technology be a way of making them more in touch and accountable? A recurrent response to this question was to doubt the effectiveness of communication across distances – of both geography and culture. Participants placed their trust in traditional forms of interaction, not because they are technophobes, but because the apparent immediacy of the Internet is not matched by institutional transparency and responsiveness. Government seemed to be something of a remote void, characterised by risks of miscommunication and neglect:

> I've always preferred to talk to people because I think it's very easy to delete an e-mail. (Group 3)

> If you do send an e-mail to your MP, how are you to know its going to actually be him that replies to it? It might be his secretary that sends a generic e-mail to everyone who

sends him an e-mail. So it's the old "if you can't see who you're talking to, it can be positive or it can be negative." (Group 2)

If you want a reply from someone, I still think a letter is better than an e-mail because at the end of the day it's still more personal and you've got a signature at the bottom – that means a lot, even if it is photocopied. (Group 2)

I wouldn't know where to start for government departments and MPs. I wouldn't know where to begin to look for that sort of contact information. Even if you did find it, I think it would be the old delete button when you hit it. I couldn't be bothered . . . . (Group 2)

You send an e-mail and you can say what you want, but the response you get back doesn't match what you were saying. But if you were talking to someone and if you can get a name and you can say 'When are you going to come back to me?' and if you say 'If you don't get back to me, I'm gonna ring you back,'it seems more immediate and taken more seriously. (Group 3)

This skepticism toward the Internet as a medium of indirect representation led participants to seek ways of using it for more direct, symbolic self-presentation.

VI.   *Symbolic Politics*

If traditional political choices between rival parties and candidates were deemed to be irrelevant or futile, so too were traditional forms of autonomous collective action, such as trades unions:

Men used to get very active through unions. They had all the clout taken away from them. At least if you had gone through every other avenue you could go on strike and vote with your feet. You can't do that anymore. It's all been taken away . . . (Group 5)

In the absence of these traditional forms of mass representation, participants explained how they were turning to less institutionalised forms of protest, more often concerned with the expression of symbolic values than the pursuit of instrumental self-interests. As Edelman (1967) has argued, much political communication serves a symbolic function of raising the existence of hitherto neglected issues and contesting the political meanings of culturally-sensitive concepts. The Internet was regarded by some participants as a space for symbolic display: a means of asserting solidarity in the absence of physical association. Several gave examples of how they had participated, virtually or in person, in demonstrations which had increased their sense of political confidence. As one participant explained, "I think the confidence came from strength in numbers more than anything" (Group 7). The Live8 rally in Edinburgh in July 2005 was regarded as an example of how the Internet could be used to promote effective collective action:

They did an appeal on the Internet to tell you where you go in and sign like a digital petition. So you go into the Oxfam website and sign this petition and it was sent off to

> various leaders in the world. It got sent off to the G8 Conference – Bob Geldof delivered
> it in person. A printed booklet of everybody's names. So that showed – that made an
> effect. (Group 2)

We pressed this participant to explain how the online campaign had been effective. He said:

> It gave . . . a social presence . . . it created a visual demonstration . . . I think there
> was 275,000 people signed the petition in the first 48 hours. You couldn't get 275,000
> people up to Gleneagles in Scotland, but at the end of the day it was a show of strength.
> (Group 2)

This ability to contact those with similar political beliefs in an instant, nationally and internationally, was perceived to have made a difference to the political communications process. The question, however, in the context of political efficacy, is whether any of these new communication opportunities make a difference to the political listening process. To listen is to recognise the existence of the other. For several participants, while new media opened up new channels of lateral communication, they failed at the level of vertical communication when public protest was ignored by politicians. For example, when discussing the mass demonstrations against the Iraq war, a general conclusion was that 'it hasn't made a bit of difference' (Group 1). This lack of responsiveness to the protests made people feel powerless. At a local level, a woman in one of the groups explained how she went about organising a demonstration against the siting of a telephone mast:

> First of all, I went on the web and contacted a group that fight against this sort of thing,
> a protest group. There were loads of forms which we reprinted . . . I went around with
> these forms, got loads of petitions signed, sent them off to the rubbishy councillors, sent
> them off out of my own money. Nothing got done. . . . I waste my time, but I like to
> know I've done something about it, even though it's ineffective. (Group 1)

Asked why she thought that 'nothing got done,' she explained that she:

> . . . rang the councillors and they said 'Oh yes, we'll back you.' Nobody backed me.
> Everybody signed. Sent if off. Nothing done. Tough . . . They don't care about us.
> (Group 1)

This woman's experience of the Internet was as a valuable source of information about how to protest, but, at the point of contact with official power, she felt let down by the failure of local councillors to respond effectively.

Faced with this problem of being able to organise effective lateral networks which are then frustrated by vertical blockages, participants explained how they turned to old media – specifically, the local press – as a way of forcing political authorities to listen. One participant explained how she attempted to persuade the council to cut a hedgerow that was blocking her driveway:

> I complained twice, first of all to a head of department and then I went straight to the
> councillor who did act, but not quick enough. But when I rang up again and said I'm
> going to the press with this – there was action taken within 24 hours. (Group 3)

In the realm of symbolic politics, a key function of digital media is to provide instant connection to the mass media which can then be used to embarrass elected representatives and force them into symbolic retreat. Although the mass media are seen as being more accessible than they were in the past, participants were sceptical about their willingness to let them tell their own story. When asked whether she believed that press exposure led to action being taken by the local council, the above-quoted participant pointed out that "I've never had a lot of dealings with the press . . . I think they can blow things up . . . but it's a means of getting something done" (Group 3). Much like politicians, who rarely trust the press, but recognise its importance in strategic communication, this participant understood the symbolic value of exposing her story to mass circulation, even at the risk of it becoming distorted in the process.

VII.   Conclusion: Attachment, Estrangement and Digital Communication

As we made clear in our methodological introduction, we do not presume to generalise on the basis of our qualitative data, even though it does seem consistent with some trends in our quantitative and longitudinal data. Our initial research points to the importance on what might be called the 'politics of the mundane' in forming levels of political efficacy. We draw three conclusions from our study: about the nature of local attachments; the problematics of mediated communication beyond the local; and the potential role of what we are calling 'confidence-building devices' in boosting and sustaining the political efficacy.

Our first conclusion places emphasis upon the importance of local attachments. Contrary to some claims regarding the death of distance, the world is lived locally, at least for most people, and it is to the elements of everyday life that evidence for the effective operation of participatory democracy needs to be looked. Indeed, our findings to date suggest that political efficacy is formed in large measure through interaction in the immediate setting of the locally experienced world. It appears to be the case that political efficacy depends upon structures of confidence arising from empirical experience of the effectiveness of intervention. The most telling tales are those learnt close to home. Everyday encounters with authorities, such as school teachers, police officers and local authority officials, play a vital role in political confidence-building. Time and again in the course of the focus groups we witnessed how lack of satisfactory outcomes in local political action affected beliefs in general about the ability of ordinary people to exercise influence over the political system.

Participants in our focus groups exhibited a strong sense of attachment to their local environment, not simply as a place of origin and return, but as a known culture in which communally shared meanings made sense to them. As Saunders and Williams have put it in their essay on 'the constitution of home,' the places that we identify as home provide the base point around which local and national politics revolve and constitutes 'a nodal point of our society, the locale through which individual

and society interact' (Saunders & Williams, 1988, p. 84). In an era of globalisation, local specificities of social and cultural practice are displaced by institutional and regulatory modes which are unaccountably distant in space and time, and cultural identities are flattened as they are irresistibly subsumed by dominant sources of global meaning. Our findings point to a strong linkage between the breakdown of local attachment and an explicit sense of political inefficacy. Typical of these feelings was the comment: "For me, I accept that I can't make a difference to big things or big changes, so I don't try to" (Group 2).

Secondly, we conclude that mediated communications beyond the local sphere have both 'opened up the world' to many people, bringing them within reach of news, values and images which can politically subvert the intimate power relations and settled prejudices of cosy domesticity, while at the same time as acting as a culturally disruptive force, imposing its vastly asymmetrical repertoire of symbolic resources upon fragile life-worlds. The instrumental role of the media as a globalising force has long been implicated in this process of cultural homogenisation. (Giddens, 1990; Tomlinson, 1999; Rantanen, 2005). Politics has become intimately entangled in this process of industrially-centralised mediation, so that, for most people, their main experience and knowledge of political representation is derived from television. Politics comes to be seen as a remote, ethereal form; a culture in its own right, which does not easily translate into the daily discourse of vernacular citizenship. The language of politics seems to have become removed from the material contestations with which it was once preoccupied, and with that removal has emerged a preoccupation with symbolic language and prohibiting gestures which our focus group participants interpreted as an affront to their own 'common sense.'

According to Castells, new social networks of resistant identity, facilitated by digital information and communication technologies, constitute the principal *locus* of contestation against the forces of hegemonic globalisation (Castells, 1997). We did not observe much evidence of this resistance, although we did find that participants in our focus groups were using the Internet in three potentially democratising ways: to seek practical and diverse information that would strengthen their civic roles; to communicate with like-minded others, sometimes around issues of cultural values; and to create occasions of symbolic visibility, such as in the mass 'Make Poverty History' petition and in 'going to the press' to expose ineffective political representation. As well as these specific uses of new media, participants shared a general optimism about the communicative possibilities of being online, especially as parents, consumers and hobbyists. But this optimism stopped short at the point of democratic citizenship. A widespread lack of trust in the consequences of interactivity, often inspired by bitter experience, led participants to doubt the value of sending messages to representatives who would not respond to them. This non-responsiveness was all the more disappointing given their experience of successful interactivity in other contexts. The more accessible the Internet made politicians and political institutions, the more distant their non-responsiveness made them appear and the more political efficacy atrophied.

Our focus group participants were not indifferent or apathetic. Several of them combined political frustration with a strong normative awareness of their civic obligation to try and make a difference. As one of them explained:

> I'm as guilty of sitting back – and I'm thinking about the Iraq war and how offensive
> that was, how much protest, how obvious it was to the vast majority of the country that

we shouldn't have done this or that, or entered into it, and shouldn't still be there. There are countless people that have complained, written letters, e-mails, signed petitions, done whatever it might take, but they are still there and the decision was made. (Group 7)

Both at the global level of third-world poverty and international warfare and at the local level of siting phone masts and cutting hedgerows, there was a feeling of communicative estrangement from powerful institutions, both because they lacked a shared moral language and because those in authority seemed to lack respect for everyday experience and 'ordinary knowledge' (Maffesoli, 1996).

Thirdly, we conclude by reflecting upon conceivable policy interventions that might increase general levels of political efficacy. We would argue that attention should be paid by those seeking to understand, or indeed stimulate, political efficacy to what might be described as 'confidence building devices.' These need not necessarily relate to activities that are traditionally viewed as carrying political meaning or implication. Forms of symbolic expression and affective mobilisation are too easily overlooked by the traditionally instrumentalist political-science perspective. While arguing that political efficacy is structured by 'confidence building devices,' of which experiences of direct empirical action at the local level are important, we also learned from participants that symbolic images of political processes and actors gleaned from the media – television most notably – were very important in forming judgments about the responsiveness of the 'distant' political world to public direction. We are interested in pursuing further research to explore the ways in which mediated images of power, citizenship and political relationships affect viewers' sense of political efficacy. One of the authors has conducted an initial research study into depictions of the political in soap operas (Coleman, 2008) and we plan to use familiar scenarios from soaps and other popular dramas in future qualitative investigations designed to enable citizens to articulate their own conceptions of political efficacy, in much the same way as Morrison used video material in an earlier study to enable focus group participants to arrive at their own definitions of violence. (Morrison, 1999) One of the authors has also conducted research into public interaction with reality television shows in which viewers vote for participants to be rewarded or evicted. (Coleman, 2003, 2006) Such mediated interactions encourage a belief in individuals that they can affect outcomes in what is in effect a mass voting situation. But more than simply contributing to the aggregation of votes, participants in this form of interactivity come to believe that they are shaping a narrative in ways that reflect their own moral values and preferences. Engagement with shows such as *Big Brother* may not be politics as traditionally described, and may appear trivial in terms of implications for the social order, but it is not trivial in terms of understanding decision making processes and the relationship between commitment to exercising one's voice and the realisation of effective outcomes. We would argue that there are policy lessons in such popular cultural interactivity which could contribute to a more efficacious political democracy. It is by no means clear in the modern communicative world which lessons apply where: how experiences in one communicative quarter might be carried over as influences on other communicative areas.

Our research suggests to us that the formation of political efficacy is in large part a consequence of experiential engagement with authority, often of a very mundane, localised kind, combined with mediated experiences and narratives of political authority where direct experience of engagement is

limited. In the next stage of our research, we intend to explore in greater depth the nature of this dialectical relationship between experiential and mediated foundations of political efficacy.

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