

Modes of engagement with musical talent shows: Studying audience engagement as a set of experiences

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Abstract:

Audience engagement is attracting increasing attention in various academic disciplines. During the past few years, the industry- and technology-oriented conceptualizations of engagement have been challenged by a more audience-oriented understanding. This article aims at contributing to the development of a more nuanced audience-oriented approach. First, we make a theoretical contribution by bringing together the still limited literature on engagement and its disparate conceptualisations; secondly, we use the analysis of an empirical case study to demonstrate audience engagement as a set of experiences. Our analysis builds on the empirical material produced by two rounds of exploratory focus groups with viewers of musical talent shows in four locations: Saarbrücken/Germany, London/UK, Tampere/Finland and Aarhus/Denmark. From this we identified a number of modes of engagement which derive from both textual and contextual factors. These include character engagement, habitual and ritualistic engagement, and ludic engagement. We also discovered that audiences at times disengage or actively resist engagement.

Keywords: audience studies, engagement, television programme formats, involvement

A few years ago, audience ‘engagement’ emerged as a buzz word, used by both media industry and television scholars. The concept is not new, but in industry circles it has gradually moved from the periphery of media and advertising discourses to the centre of how media organisations and advertisers think about audiences (Napoli, 2011: 95; see also Moe, Poell and van Dijk, 2016). The growing interest in engagement is connected with the larger transformations in media production and consumption caused by digitalization. Due to the explosion in the variety of mobile devices and digital media content, audiences can now engage with media texts in countless ways. The other side of the coin is that they get easily distracted. This has, at least in parts, created the TV industry’s current interest in ‘engagement’ and stimulated research into audience engagement.

However, despite the growing prominence of the concept, no clear definitions or consensus about what ‘engagement’ actually means exists (Napoli, 2011: 95–96; Evans, 2017; Hill and Steemers, 2017). Engagement has emerged as the consensus umbrella concept, in lieu of related, perhaps even synonymous terminologies such as connectedness and involvement (Napoli, 2011: 95). In this article, we analyse audience engagement as a set of experiences. We de-construct the concept by identifying modes of engagement among transnational television audiences of musical talent formats. By building on a number of recent typologies on ‘media involvement’ and ‘media engagement’ (Simons, 2014; Eichner, 2014; Evans, 2017; Hill, 2017) as well as theories on media engagement as a ‘set of experiences’ (Peck and Malthouse, 2011; Tammi, 2016), we aim to address both textual and contextual factors that allow or prevent engagement. Moreover, we aim to develop a previously under-studied mode of engagement, that of ‘disengagement’. The discussion on audience engagement has long been dominated by industry- and commercially-driven discourses, which stem from measuring what people do and for how long. By analysing audience engagement as a set of experiences, we aim to contribute to the understanding of engagement as an audience-oriented concept. This approach allows us to focus on the beliefs and motivations people have in terms of media rather than analysing the actions they take.

The empirical data stems from two rounds of focus groups conducted in 2013-2014 in four different zones of consumption, London/Britain, Aarhus/Denmark, Tampere/Finland and Saarbrücken/Germany. The aim was to explore and identify the ways in which transnational audiences engage with musical talent shows and make sense of them. The shows discussed were either local adaptations of international formats or their original versions. In particular, our 43 participants talked about *The Voice*, *The X Factor*, *Idols* and *Got Talent*. Our first publication focused on a particular aspect of reception, ‘The Duality of Banal Transnationalism and Banal Nationalism’ (Esser, Jensen, Keinonen and Lemor, 2016). The article at hand focuses on the modes of engagement uncovered during the analysis.

Recent theorisations on audience engagement

Audience engagement has recently attracted increasing attention in various academic disciplines. The prominence of the term, however, has its origin in the media industry, where 'engagement' is usually conceptualised and analysed in terms of the content the audience is consuming, the platforms they are using and the actions they are taking. Moreover, the advertising industry traditionally measures the effects of advertising in the form of recall, attitudes and behavioural effects. Combining the two, Philip Napoli (2011: 97–98) lists 20 'definitions' of audience engagement, varying from the average time spent with the media product to emotional connection to collective qualitative experiences. Most of these definitions derive from papers published by the Advertising Research Foundation and aim at gathering information for commercial purposes. Thus, they are only capable of measuring what they were designed to measure. As Napoli (2011: 100) states, it also remains somewhat unclear at this point where exactly the concept of engagement ends and where the effects of engagement begin. Aiming for clarification, Napoli (2011) presents a summary of the definitions and suggests four possible components of audience engagement and studying the ways in which they can be quantified. These components include, 1) the patterns and duration of audience exposure (exposure-derived approach), 2) appreciation and emotional response, 3) recall and attitudes and 4) behavioural responses.

The meaning of engagement within the advertising and television industries thus encapsulates a pragmatic, goal-orientated understanding, which is mostly quantified, especially when it comes to TV programmes. But there are also new currencies of engagement, emanating from academic research, that include 'audience measurement and cultural resonance' (Hill, 2017: 5–6). As Jenkins (2006: 63) states, for years, fan groups have argued that television networks should focus more on the quality of audience engagement and less on the quantity of viewers. Now advertisers and broadcasters are increasingly coming to the same conclusion. While the entire discourse around engagement in the TV industry thus far has 'fundamentally been a discussion about how to preserve the existing advertiser-supported business model' (Askwith, 2007: 24), scholars are trying to develop a more holistic and nuanced understanding of engagement (see also Hill, 2017: 6).

Nele Simons (2014), for example, has been studying engagement in the context of cross- and transmedia TV drama. For Simons, engaged TV drama viewers are those 'who do more than just watch the episodes through live broadcast television; they actively engage with TV drama by personalizing their viewing practices (when, where and through which technology), by communicating about it, by consuming cross- and transmedia elements of TV drama, or by producing TV drama-related content' (ibid.: 2225). But, as Simons rightly notes, television programmes are increasingly consumed through personalised viewing practices. Whereas the use of streaming services provided by both national broadcasters and international media companies previously signalled 'engagement', this behaviour is now moving to the mainstream of television viewing. What was previously regarded as engagement or even fandom, may soon come to be regarded as regular consumption of television content. This means that Simon's definition of engagement may become

obsolete. There may no longer be a difference between ‘regular viewing’ and engagement. More nuanced accounts of engagement have become necessary.

Recent studies also include two productive attempts to chart the various types of engagement. Liz Evans (2017) sets out her typology of engagement based on extensive empirical research, which involved both interviews with audiences and producers of transmedia content. She distinguishes between three, overlapping, types of engagement: Immersive, Interactive, Para-active.

Whilst immersion can happen with all kinds of media content, interactive engagement requires a more active engagement with the medium and its content, as happens, for example, when playing a video game. Para-active engagement, on the other hand, takes place when activity happens around the consumption of the primary text, often involving another medium, like for example, tweeting about the show being watched. Interestingly, Evans (2017) found a discrepancy in how practitioners talked about engagement and how audiences described it. While practitioners highlighted the interactive and para-active elements, audiences equated engagement with immersion, with ‘being captivated’. Evans’ findings on how audiences identify and understand engagement is significant and supports our own findings, as we will see later on.

Annette Hill (2017) introduces the idea of a ‘spectrum of engagement’. Like Evans, Hill draws on research of both production practices and audience participation. The spectrum of engagement she describes includes ‘emotional and critical modes, switching between positive and negative engagement, to disengagement.’ Positive engagement includes, for example, emotional identification with a character, voting for the underdog and sending encouraging tweets, while negative involvement includes emotional dis-identification with a character, voting to eliminate and trash talking on Twitter. The spectrum of engagement pertinently captivates engagement as multiform, where engagement is based on core elements but experienced in diverse ways. Importantly, it also works across different contexts, including time and space. Moreover, Hill presents the crafting of engagement through a case study of the talent show *Got to Dance*, and as such her study bears a generic resemblance to our research. There are noticeable similarities in relation to our own findings regarding, in particular, disengagement and the spaces of everyday life, to which we will return later.

Another recent strand in the academic discourse of engagement, addresses it as a ‘set of experiences’ that readers, viewers or any other consumers have with a media title (Peck and Malthouse, 2011: 4; Tammi, 2016: 53). Peck and Malthouse (2011), who study audience engagement in relation to journalism, understand ‘experience’ as a set of beliefs that people have about how a particular media text fits into their lives. Their approach differs from the above in that their analysis of experiences focuses on the context of consumption and reception. In other words, like Tammi (2016), who explores the consumption of magazines, they see the relationship between text and reader as being determined by things that lie beyond the text (Peck and Malthouse, 2011: 4); the contexts

of everyday life – the social, spatial and temporal practices in participants’ lives (Tammi, 2016: 53).

On their own, none of these conceptualisations is sufficiently holistic: The studies by Peck and Malthouse (2011) and Tammi (2016) lack the analytical tools needed to deconstruct engagement. The studies on engagement introduced before focus on the modes of engagement and the various actions audiences take (such as watching, voting, tweeting) but somewhat neglect the every-day life context of consumption and also the emotional aspects of engagement. The related, and we could argue synonymous term, ‘involvement’, which originated in game studies, is hence another useful addition for studying the ways in which audiences attach themselves to talent competitions. Susanne Eichner’s (2014) model presents ‘media involvement’ as a two-staged process that is embedded as ‘media action’ in everyday life. Eichner takes into account the recipients with their socio-cultural and individual dispositions and how they appropriate media texts that consist of specific media ‘attributes and textual aspects’. She also identifies a number of modes of involvement and situates them on a scale, ranging from high to low involvement. Immersion/presence and agency both represent high involvement. Other modes are situated on the low end of involvement and discussed in terms of their relationship with agency. Character involvement, ludic involvement, excitement, spectacle, analysis and habitual involvement are either allowing, facilitating or constituting factors for the mode of agency, while inspiration has no direct correlating effect on agency (ibid.: 137–162). We will return to some of this in our analysis.

By combining these various conceptualisations, we get a more well-rounded, holistic picture of the different ways in which audiences engage with media texts. **Table 1** provides a summary.

Model/ typology	Dis- engagement	Low engagement			High engagement
Simons’ (2014) definition of engagement		Personalizing viewing practices > communicating about the content > consuming cross-media elements > producing related c.			
Evans’ (2017) typology of engagement		Immersive (e.g. watching a film)	Interactive (e.g. playing a video game)	Para-active (e.g. tweeting)	
Hill’s (2017) spectrum of engagement	Critical modes	Positive and negative engagement: emotional identification or disidentification with a character, voting, tweeting			
Eichner’s (2014) model on media involvement		Character involvement, ludic involvement, excitement, spectacle, analysis, habitual involvement and inspiration	Immersion/presence	Agency	

Table 1: Typologies on audience engagement

Methods and materials

Our analysis builds on the empirical data derived from conducting two rounds of exploratory focus groups with a total of 43 viewers of musical talent shows in these four locations: Saarbrücken/Germany, London/UK, Tampere/Finland and Aarhus/Denmark (see table 2).

The focus groups were first formed for a transnational audience study aiming to shed light on the meanings viewers take from musical talent shows in relation to geographical location, national belonging and to the formats' local-global nature. Thus, in our first publication on the study (Jensen, Esser, Keinonen and Lemor, 2016), our findings clearly indicate an increasingly complex cultural engagement and sense of cultural space and curiosity in viewers, revealing a fascinating display of banal nationalism on one side and banal transnationalism on the other. However, as the exploratory discussions also very much revolved around other, related topics, such as the reasons for watching musical talent shows and the use of additional platforms, the focus group transcripts also provide valuable material to explore audience engagement with (transnational) multi-platform television formats.

In each of the four cities we ran two rounds of focus groups. An audience ratings analysis of *Idols*, *The Voice*, *X Factor* and/or *Talent* for the years 2010-2013 had shown that young people in the 18-24 age bracket were the most avid adult viewers of musical talent shows, followed by females in the 25-39 age bracket. Consequently, the respondents for the first round were recruited among students aged 18-24 of mixed gender, and a second round among females aged 25-39 (Ibid.). The variety of the age, gender and ethnic origin of the respondents allows us to explore the various modes of engagement. Overall, the analysis of our empirical data substantiates the relevance of some of Eichner's modes of involvement, as well as Hill's conceptualization of negative engagement. It also substantiates Peck and Malthouse's (2011) and Tammi's (2016) argument that the context of everyday-life has a significant bearing on the form that engagement takes, and confirms Tammi's observation that some TV programmes are consumed in particular for group and/or family viewing.

Geographical location	Age group: 18-24	Age group 25-40
Saarbrücken/ Germany	1 German male, 1 Polish-German female, 1 Moldavian female	1 German female, 2 French females, 1 German-Lebanese female
London/UK	2 British ethnic-minority females; 1 British ethnic minority male; 1 British Caucasian male, who had lived in Australia; 1 Greek male; 1 British-American female, 1 German-British female, who had grown up in Zimbabwe	Group 1: 4 British Caucasian females, 1 British ethnic minority female, 1 Spanish female, 1 New Zealand female Group 2: 2 British Caucasian females, 1 Russian female
Tampere/Finland	3 Finnish Caucasian females and 1 male, 1 multi-racial female	5 Finnish Caucasian females
Aarhus/Denmark	4 Danish Caucasian females	6 Danish Caucasian females

Table 2: Overview of focus group participants

Character engagement within musical talent formats

The first mode of engagement we identified within our focus groups is character engagement, which may express itself as either identification and closeness or parasocial interactivity (see Eichner, 2014: 147). Parasocial interaction refers to a specific media communication situation whereby both recipients and media actors, like hosts, moderators and news presenters, act ‘as if’ they were actually interacting, thus constructing the illusion of face-to-face interaction while missing the reciprocity (ibid.: 150). However, whilst this latter form of character engagement did not figure in our focus groups, we observed multiple examples of identification.

Media texts provide various points of identification. These points are most often established by characters to which the spectator can relate to in an identificatory way. Identification thus refers to the psychological process ‘by which recipients occupy the position of the character completely, so as if the events occurring to the media character happen to themselves, and as if the ambitions and feelings of that character were their own ambitions and feelings’ (Eichner, 2014: 147–149). These experiences are exemplified, for instance, by participants in the Saarbrücken young focus group (age 18-24):

It was like that sometimes I really wished they would win, from Sunday to Monday morning I have somehow internally ‘overcome’ that [she really felt for the contestant’s tension of knowing if he made it to the next round] uh (laughs) ... Yes, it was almost like that (GK, young female, Saarbrücken).

Yes, I think so, that one can identify with certain favourites (GT, young male, Saarbrücken).

Hill’s concept of ‘positive engagement’ (2017: 7) includes emotional identification with a character, which invites sympathy and empathy, voting for the underdog and sending encouraging tweets, for example. Our respondents talked at lengths about both their favourite and least-favourite contestants and their abilities. Despite being highly critical towards the genre and able to ‘see through’ the mechanisms and the staging logics of the programmes, they seemed to respond positively to individual shows, episodes or even only individual contestants, with whom they identified. One London participant stated:

I like some participants that are really ordinary. For example, I remember from X Factor last year there was a lady who was working in Tesco’s and she always wanted to sing but she never had a chance, because she was a bit chubby and everybody told her that she’s not capable of doing anything in her life and she’s stupid. And then she went there and she sung like, wow, she was amazing. I mean, I couldn’t relate to her, but just the fact that she’s ordinary, that she’s not like a very beautiful girl with a good voice, she’s just an underdog. Nobody expected her to be that good (GBN, young female, London).

Also, participants in the adult focus group in Finland voiced similar experiences of identification with a contestant who is:

Somebody really nice (SK, adult female, Tampere).

Either really talented or otherwise a sympathetic person (HK, adult female, Tampere).

Although various factors such as attitudes, values and interests, gender, age and ethnicity may determine the process of identification, it cannot be reduced to similarity or homophily. Media texts provide multiple positions to identify with and it is up to the recipient to decide which subject position to hold, or even whether to employ multiple positions (Eichner, 2014: 148–149). Identification may also occur in relation to the coaches rather than, or in addition to the contestants:

You indeed can also be part of the jury, because you have also a voting option (GT, young male, Saarbrücken).

In this particular format [The Voice of Finland] you may identify with a coach, because they have such strong personalities (TK, young male, Tampere).

You kind of put yourself in the position of the judge and it's, 'What would I say?' (CD, adult female, London).

Recipients may also feel close to the media characters. It is a form of imaginative or attributed closeness (Eichner, 2014: 149) that is different from identification. This aspect has been theorised by both Hill (2005) and Jenkins (2006) and is linked to the very special relationship that develops between participants and audiences. In talent shows, audiences are not staged as 'spectators' but as people, in whom the participants on screen confide, mainly because they are dependent on audience votes. As a result, audiences develop emotional ties to at least some of the participants. The following quotes exemplify this:

They're quite protective as well, aren't they? For example, Ryland, when he used to get bad reviews and things like that, so many people would write in loads of positive points, even though he didn't really have much talent, they really formed this emotional attachment to him and became so particular about him (DZ, young female, London).

I think Karoline (contestant on Danish *The X Factor*) is such a good person, and nice. For example, that story they tell about her. That she is not so confident all the time. That's really, really cute – and not like, 'my mum died four years ago'.

They portray her in a really nice and sympathetic way (DA, young female, Aarhus).

Many respondents – especially in the two smaller countries of Denmark and Finland – had known contestants on the shows, and maybe even auditioned themselves. Among the four women in the Danish focus group, two (DI and DK, both young females) had tried to audition for talent shows when they were younger, and all of the participants in both of the Danish focus groups had had acquaintances, friends or family competing in one or more of the different shows. In these cases, it is not about imaginative or attributed closeness, but real closeness.

Nevertheless, engagement is not always positive. ‘Negative engagement’ according to Hill (2017), may include emotional dis-identification with a character, closing down sympathy, voting to eliminate or ‘trash talking’ on Twitter. These two emotional modes often work in tandem, and television professionals are able to carefully craft both positive and negative emotions even with reference to the same character. Thus, they invite audiences to emotionally invest, positively or negatively, in a story (Hill, 2017: 7–8).

Habitual engagement and shared viewing

Attention to the relationship between people's interpretations of television programmes and the social context in which the viewing takes place can be traced back to the 1980s. Empirical research since then (Morley, 1986; Silverstone, 1994; Silverstone and Hirsch, 1992) has been pointing out how individuals' reception and selection of television programmes are strongly influenced by the place of consumption, particularly the home, and the people present during the act of watching. The context of space is also significant to a spectrum of engagement, including live venues, television distribution and digital spaces, and the spaces of everyday life (Hill, 2017: 10; cf Peck and Malthouse, 2011; Tammi, 2016). Indeed, television viewing is a social activity and therefore cannot be isolated from other forms of social behaviour, and cannot be analysed outside the domestic sphere where most of the viewing experience still takes place.

Habitual involvement refers to the ritualistic and routine-like character of television reception. ‘While routines are individual actions, rituals can be understood as the collective and social form of routines, structuring the everyday life and allowing for escapist fantasizing and daydreaming’, says Eichner (2014: 157). Media reception is often embedded in the routines of everyday life (*ibid.*: 157), but weekly routines may also emerge, for example, in relation to television schedules (Tammi, 2016: 147). Media is thus used in a ritualized way (Eichner, 2014: 157). Habitual engagement figured strongly in our focus groups. Some of our respondents, such as a woman in the Finnish adult focus group, emphasized the importance of family routines:

My viewing is pretty much orientated by what the kids are watching. Now that they are interested in *The Voice* [of Finland], it is perhaps the one I watch most (SK, adult female, Tampere).

For probably a couple of years I did watch the whole thing, like auditions and the whole show and we would bet, I don't know if it was money or what it was, but say who we thought was going to win at the very beginning with a couple of friends and we would make an event of the finals. For two or three years we did that, but no more (EV, adult female, London).

Tammi's recent study (2016: 147) also confirms that people with small children or teenagers often appreciate media activities and media titles which can be shared with the family. Consequently, our finding that men and women over 55, in all four countries, were the group least likely to watch musical talent shows, can be explained, at least in parts, with the reality of children no longer living at home when their parents are that age. In our study, the focus groups reflected all the ritualistic practices of television viewing: at home, with friends, in a relaxed atmosphere, discussing the programme. It might be the musical talent genre that invites these practices of consumption, the way these programmes are structured, the fact that they host a game, a contest, and entail a selection phase and a jury. These are all elements which facilitate group viewing.

Growing up, many participants in all our young focus groups had watched the talent shows with the rest of the family at home on a Friday or a Saturday night. Now, as young adults, some of them watch with their friends instead and/or still with their family if they visit home:

When *DSDS* (the German Idols version) came out, I used to follow it because that was normal: the evening then was watching the television while eating and I also liked that one could watch and discuss with others what one had watched. It has been a few years ago now... Today, I'm sometimes made to watch it by my parents at their house, when I go over for dinner, otherwise I don't watch it anymore (GT, young male, Saarbrücken).

It is entertaining and with my partner we like to watch together and talk about it. It is not like a movie that one watches for two hours; here one can talk while watching (GM, adult male, Saarbrücken).

I watch *The X Factor* in a group. I wouldn't watch it by myself, I watch it with family and friends, because I like to see their reaction (DS, young male, London).

Three respondents explicitly commented on the ritualistic nature of viewing:

For us it also started as a family ritual. (...) It was always on a Sunday and we had some food, too. And because my family is big we also crossed our fingers for some participants and sometimes we sent SMS (GK, young female, Saarbrücken).

I watch it at home with my parents on a Friday evening, and it's really cosy. We make popcorn or something and make it into a little event that night (DI, young female, Aarhus).

That's pretty much the reason why I watch it on a Saturday night, because it's kind of a routine for our family to, sort of huddle in the front room and get everyone in front of the TV, takeaway night (...) I wouldn't watch it on my own (JJ, young male, London).

Ritualistic, communal viewing was only one part of our equation of viewing practices found in all four locations, though. An important and related aspect is the fact that many musical talent shows constitute media events. Many of the musical talent shows are broadcast—at least partly—live. Pre-recorded quarter-finals may be followed by semi-finals and finals that are staged as large live events. As Jane Roscoe (2004: 365) states, these 'events' require audiences to invest emotionally and commit to a viewing schedule that can run up to several weeks. Our focus groups confirm that media events entice people to participate and to acquire what may be perceived as the necessary social currency for participating in group conversations about media texts and events, composed of popular culture. During the past decade, big talent shows in particular seem to have constituted such events. Participants from Tampere explained this as follows:

You kind of want to watch it on Friday night, when it is on, because you know that some of your friends may be watching, too. It is one of the good things of a live show that you can discuss it with someone else (RR, young female).

Yeah, I think the shared experience is a major part of it (NM, young female).

Finland is such a small country that you can feel like everybody is watching [the same show] (NM, young female).

The majority of respondents across all focus groups directly or indirectly pointed to the aspect of sharing and to routine-like or ritualistic viewing as key attractions of the genre. This implies that communal habitual engagement is a central mode of watching talent competitions. As far as this genre is concerned, the social, spatial and temporal practices in

the participants' lives (Tammi, 2016: 53) thus may actually have a greater stake in the engagement than the media text itself. As one Danish respondent poignantly put it:

When you look at what makes us watch it, there's no other choice. It's a lie, I know, we can turn it off. But we don't have a choice. That's what we do. That's what families in Denmark do on Friday evenings at 8pm. We watch TV (DB, adult female, Aarhus).

Reality television, as a kind of mediated gossip, provides viewers with means and material for ritualistic interaction. Viewers like to share their compassion with the people, who are voted off *X-Factor* and *Idols*; their condemnation of the judges' unjustified rants or participants' choice of song and hairstyle; and their indignation and/or fascination with judges and participants alike. The functions of talent shows thus equal those of daily television soaps and gossip magazines, in which the actions of characters and celebrities, respectively, are not just under viewer/reader scrutiny, but are deliberated in public (cf. Turner 2005). These functions were clearly exemplified in the responses of our participants in the UK and Finland:

That's always the entertaining part, when people argue over social networks or when you get a parody, pages made up of all sorts of stuff (MA, young female, London).

I watch it (...) because I've heard somebody talking about one of the contestants or judges and I want to see what they were talking about (DZ, young female, London).

I think a major reason for watching the Finnish adaptations is to be able to join the water-cooler discussions (RN, young female, Tampere).

Even the focus group respondents who proclaimed not to like musical talent shows, or at least not anymore (which quite a few of our participants enunciated), were well versed when it came to the names of participants, individual acts or talking points. Discussions about talent shows and social media, too, revealed the desire to be part of this event:

Twitter goes crazy with *X Factor*. (Interrupted by MA: Annoyingly crazy, yeah.) And Facebook. Probably about eight of the trending topics are to do with *X Factor* (DF, young female, London).

I check because if I'm at work I will go on my Facebook, because I don't tweet about these things, but I'll go on my Facebook to find out what's going on, because then it makes me more excited to watch to see what happened. My

friends, they give me an update of everything, from what Tulisa is wearing, to Nicole Scherzinger, whose outfit was better, whose performance was rubbish. So, I like finding out about the information beforehand, because then it makes me look forward to watching it. So, then when I'm watching it, I can actually add my own opinion to it and critique it or praise it. I do like to know about it. I don't avoid it [social media], I actually go to find out (JG, young female, London).

In short, para-active engagement (Evans, 2017) as well as people's social, spatial and temporal practices (Hill, 2017; Peck and Malthouse, 2011; Tammi, 2016;) seem more important for the engagement with talent shows than the programmes themselves. Textual 'immersion' (Evans, 2017) in these programmes, rather than individual characters, seems to be a less decisive factor.

Ludic engagement

Thus far, we have discussed character involvement and habitual involvement, whereby the latter in our case includes communal viewing and the enjoyment of discussing talent shows with others, both face-to-face and on social media. Of Eichner's (2014) other modes of involvement, immersion/presence, ludic involvement, excitement, spectacle, analysis, innovation and agency, ludic involvement was the one that figured most in our focus groups. According to Eichner (2014), in ludic involvement play is constituted by the framing activity of the recipient rather than being characterised by textual traits. In the case of talent shows, we could argue that voting for the participants is a form of ludic involvement because the viewer is able to vote, or not vote, according to his/her own interests, not to those of the show (*ibid.*: 151–152). The competition format is very suitable to become a social activity game like *Pictionary*. Viewers are called to choose their candidates (either those they think are more talented, or more entertaining, or those they think the jury will pick according to their agenda). This is a simple game which attracts all types of television viewers, even those with a more critical stance. For example, GT in the German focus group on several occasions showed his knowledge of the marketing aims of talent shows and how the jury looks for a contestant with a particular profile to win. Even so, that didn't prevent him to play along and enjoy guessing who would be picked as the winner. Many respondents in our focus groups had cast SMS votes. Some respondents, such as Danish DA, had voted because she took pity in a contestant, who was in danger of being voted out. However, most respondents had voted because they somehow liked the contestants and wanted to keep them in the competition.

Making comparisons between the contestants can also be regarded as a form of ludic involvement, since it often precedes the decision to vote for a character. According to Annette Hill (2005: 67), the performance of contestants in reality television gives viewers an opportunity for 'thick judgmental and speculative discourse around participants' motives, actions and likely future behaviour'. This is what Tasha Oren, writing about competitive

cooking shows, calls ‘the enjoyment of judging’ (Oren, 2013). The following quotes are instructive in this respect:

I also find it interesting when the judges have to perform with the contestants. It’s always nice to compare who’s better. I quite enjoy that and, mostly, the contestants, I find, are better singers than the actual judges (DZ, young female, London).

You know that the two contestants, Cresten and Amanda, that have never been in the danger zone [of getting voted out of *The X Factor*], they’re the ones. So, you somehow know that the contestants that are really bad, they get the boot anyway. They have to be there for the fun of it but they get voted out [eventually] (DA, young female, Aarhus).

The comparisons may also extend beyond the contestants of the show to include other local versions of the format or references to national cultures, as demonstrated in our previous publication (Jensen, Esser, Keinonen and Lemor, 2016). In these instances, the involvement becomes a mixture of ludic involvement and identification.

Disengagement and resisting engagement

One aspect of audience engagement, which has been largely ignored by the previous studies on the subject, is disengagement. The exception is Hill (2017), whose spectrum of engagement extends from positive engagement to negative engagement and ‘disengagement’. According to Hill, ‘disengagement can be sudden, a brusque disconnect with series, or it can happen gradually, an increasing awareness that the presence of a series in your life is gradually becoming an absence’. The reasons for disengagement vary from contextual factors to dis-identification and disaffection (Hill, 2017: 8). As Hill (2016) notes, there are a number of practical or contextual factors that may prevent people from watching television. In her study on the television drama format *The Bridge* she hints at people disengaging because of the weather or because they did not know the series was on (Hill, 2016: 4). We had similar findings in our focus groups with participants stating that linear television was not always available because the subscription fee or the television set were too expensive, because they did not have the time to watch every show, or because the broadcast time did not, or no longer suit them:

It’s bath time, dinner time – it’s not working for us at the moment (EV, adult female, London).

As Hill notes, ‘how people make space for television content is perhaps one of the most pressing issues for engagement, shoring up time to make space for television drama as binge viewing, compared with integrating live television into everyday life and family

routines' (Hill, 2017: 11). As the above quotes shows, everyday life and family routines may also lead to disengagement.

However, what captivates our interest here is the fact that the modes of engagement may also emerge as reverse experiences, going from positive engagement to negative, or critical engagement with musical talent shows, and eventually leading to disengagement. When our focus groups were gathered to discuss musical talent shows, all our respondents had been watching these shows at some point in their lives. They all had experienced some sort of engagement with the media text, but a notable number had given up watching these programmes after several years of avid viewing. The reasons for this could be found in some of the other modes of engagement. Participants from the Finnish focus group, for instance, voiced the lack of character engagement leading to dis-identification or disaffection within the course of a season:

If your favourite [contestant] is voted off, you lose interest. After that I don't necessarily continue watching (RR, young female, Tampere).

When it comes to other viewers, I think identification is really important with all these formats, that you find your favourite among the contestants. Then you are really disappointed if he gets eliminated and promise you'll never watch the show again (TK, young male, Tampere).

I've noticed that if I don't have a favourite contestant in the final rounds, I may not watch those episodes (SK, adult female, Tampere).

Character engagement may also be shattered by identification 'wearing off' due to a more critical mode of viewing adopted over time. Many of our respondents noted how they came to 'see through the formats' and producers' attempts to manipulate the audience. Others pointed out how talent competitions ceased to be new and exciting, or became 'watered down':

I did watch *X Factor* quite a lot, but I always had a favourite, like Diana Vickers was my all-time favourite; I loved her - awkward disposition on stage with all her hands. I thought she was delicious. Now *The X Factor*, I don't like the beginning of it. I find it very manipulative. I think they prod for your sob story and then they spin that. I don't enjoy the people who can't sing; I find that quite dishonest (LP, adult female, London).

I normally support the underdog, but like you say, more and more they try to make everybody appear like that now. So, now I don't have anything to identify with in that way, I suppose (NW, adult female, London).

I'm sorry but don't all the contestants look too much alike? I'm thinking that Denmark isn't all that big that they can fill the shows with unique talents. Can they? In my opinion, it becomes so watered down in a way (DM, adult female, Aarhus).

All this chimes with Michelle's argument (2009: 142) that television viewers for quite some time now have adopted a more sceptical and critical stance towards reality TV.

But there is something other than gradual disengagement that needs to be brought to attention. Many participants in our focus groups indicated actively resisting 'higher' (Eichner, 2014) or deeper modes of engagement, such as consuming the television shows' para-texts. Quotes from some of the young Tampere respondents exemplify this:

It is not interesting enough that I'd want to spend more than an hour a week [on this show]. I'd feel pathetic [--] like I don't have other interests in my life (NM, female).

It was fun to watch but I don't have the need to participate in the format to the extent that I'd use something like that [a mobile app] (RR, female).

I wouldn't devote any more of my life to such a commercial format [--] It would feel nerdish, if I subscribed to some extra content (RN, female).

In her study, Tammi (2016: 145–146) is using the word 'meaninglessness' to refer to her participants' accounts of media as a 'waste of time'. In practice, meaninglessness emerged as not recording programmes or storing magazines, not concentrating on the text, or not allocating time for specific titles. Whilst this was also true for some of our focus group respondents, who had come to limit their viewing to when it suits them, watch only short clips on YouTube, rather than the whole show on television, or use talent competitions as 'wallpaper' whilst doing household chores, others still watch the whole television show, but reject more enthusiastic forms of engagement or fan-like behaviour as a result of critical reflection. Thus, we argue, that we need to add to the mode of disengagement that of *actively resisting* certain types of engagement. Moreover, we should take note that disengagement can happen gradually and almost unnoticed, or it can be caused by active resistance to some or all forms of engagement at some point in the viewing history of a particular show.

Conclusions

In this article, we have been studying audience engagement as a set of experiences. By combining various existing theorisations of engagement and involvement and adding our own audience research findings, we have aimed at developing a more holistic understanding of audience engagement. Studying audience engagement as a set of experiences moves the

focus from the actions people take (often by using technological devices) to the beliefs and motivations they have about their relationships with media texts. We have clarified our approach by taking a closer look at three modes of engagement in particular: character engagement, habitual engagement and ludic engagement. Importantly, as our findings confirm, engagement does not only emerge from the media text itself but also from the context of media consumption. Any future categorisations of engagement should recognise this and consider both textual and contextual factors.

In addition, our research found that audiences not only engage with media texts, they also disengage for various reasons and sometimes even actively resist engagement. This, too, should be taken into account when studying engagement. To date, the industrially-driven discourses on media engagement, which are mainly concerned with the uses of technological devices and applications, have mostly ignored the reasons and ways in which audiences resist engagement. There are, however, recent academic studies on engagement, which contribute to the understanding of engagement as an audience-oriented concept and provide more nuanced categorizations. Some of these, such as Hill (2017), also take a broader approach by discussing disengagement and its contributing factors. Our research contributes to this, highlighting further the active role of audiences not only in engaging with media content but also in resisting and discontinuing engagement. As our findings indicate, the reasons for disengagement may be found both in textual factors, such as dis-identification, and contextual factors, such as changing family routines. Audience members may also critically reflect on their relationship with a particular media text and, as a consequence, actively resist para-active modes of engagement, such as using mobile apps, or other deeper modes of engagement. Reasons for disengagement or active resistance cannot be identified or measured by the common currencies of industry research, audience ratings and social media analytics.

A more audience-oriented approach to engagement can thus provide us with new insights, and as we have analysed focus groups in four different countries, we can safely contend that at least the modes of engagement we have identified are not bound by national or cultural borders. However, there is a need for more research on both resisting engagement and engagement in different contexts, including the space and time of media consumption and audiences' socio-demographics. There is also still a need to continue building a model of engagement that encompasses all modes identified, with reference to both text and context.

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