Call for Proposals: The concept of 'engagement'

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As a journal, we have become fascinated by the emergence of the word 'engagement' as a key term designed to capture the relations of audiences to contemporary media and culture. This has happened quite recently and is no doubt at least partially connected to the rise of digital modes of communication and participation. But it may be much more than that. Some of the markers of its rise that we have identified are these:

1. In 2007 the American Advertising Research Foundation issued a Report on the concept of 'engagement', drawing on three large tranches of research. Its development was in response to a rising recognition that product and brand 'exposure' or 'awareness' was no longer an adequate goal. They needed to capture *involvement*. The culmination of the Report was a proposed new definition of the term 'engagement', as follows: 'Turning on a prospect to a brand idea enhanced by the surrounding context'. This bizarre and almost incomprehensible definition still disclosed a recognition that something new and deeper needed addressing. This move to redescribe 'engagement' as a subtle form of entrapment in brand-promotion cannot be ignored. It must also be set within the context of the counter, utopian claims of advertisers' *loss of control* – as famously expressed in Jack Rosen's op-ed 'The people previously known as the audience, which included this remark: 'The users are deciding what the point of their engagement will be — what application, what device, what time, what place'. 'Engagement' is becoming marked as a *contestation*.

2. The concepts of 'user engagement' and 'customer engagement' have become front-runners in marketing and human-computer interaction research. Many hundreds of essays are now being published under their rubrics – with the *goal* of raised 'engagement' as the new ambition. These essays are typically marked by a will to standardised measurement instruments, scales, big data, and algorithms, with the ambition of identifying and grooming *high engagers*. (Anyone unsure about this might try the following exercise: type 'user engagement pyramid' or 'customer engagement pyramid' into Google Images, and look at the resultant diagrams.)

3. The ongoing concentration and conglomeration of digital media industries has embraced the variant expression 'audience engagement' as a key driver. This includes Xperi, a

company that puts the term at the front of its self-presentation. Xperi also copies TV listings and owns what were once TiVO, Rovi, IMAX, and Gracenote. And then there is TMDB, the 'cooler' audience- and user-generated movie database as well as the citizen-review site Letterboxd. All of these now-linked companies offer some kind of re-conceptualization of 'audience activity' and 'audience labour'. In somewhat related ways, the rise of new producer/distributors, competing very effectively with old established TV companies, has given a particular slant to the concept of 'engagement'. HBO for a long time was known for its logo 'It's not TV, it's HBO' – promising unusual, 'edgy' programming. Overtaken by Netflix (binge-worthy series – 'portion control is for suckers'), HBO sought to rebrand itself as a producer promising 'passionate engagement' (see Morgan Parmett).

4. At least five recent books about audiences (by Rhiannon Bury, Lynne Conner, Elizabeth Evans, Annette Hill and Ben Walmsley), have featured the term in their titles, and sought to address the idea in action – with particular connections to 'transmedia'. One of these (Walmsley, pp. 154-5) reports a content analysis of published essays on performing arts audiences, finding an 'exponential rise' in the proportion using the term 'engagement' in their abstracts, post-2006.

5. The *Media Industries* Journal (2017) recently carried a special section on the concept, topped off by a thoughtful 'Afterword' by John Corner. In it, he neatly summarises the issue as arising from a shift between 'living with', and 'living within' the media. This makes explicit what others have also argued, that 'engagement' marks a historical 'break', a new term for a new paradigmatic context.

All these, and others, pinpoint 'engagement' as a term requiring careful examination.

Etymologically, the word is complex in English. With one or two outrider uses which appear disconnected (why do we talk of toilet cubicles as 'engaged', and why is it we hear an 'engaged' tone on a telephone?), in its main uses the term 'engage' (and related parts of speech 'engaged', 'engaging', and 'engagement') carry complex semantic loadings. To 'engage in combat' hints at structure and tactics. To 'engage in commerce' suggests a sustained effort. To 'become [romantically] engaged' *used* to carry strong contractual implications (until the 19th century it was possible to sue for breach of contract if one party defaulted). Now, 'becoming engaged' mainly indicates a serious relationship, intended to last. The term 'engaging' (as in 'engaging smile' or 'engaging manner') points in another direction to something attractive and captivating. 'Engagement' in a media/cultural context has many possibilities as a new metaphor. At least some of those working with the concept today are keen to draw upon the stored-up resonances of the term. Consider the following online definition of 'social media engagement':

> Social media engagement is essentially like a long-term relationship. You can imagine a committed and lengthy relationship takes dedication, readiness to

adapt, the ability to think about the future and ensure the other party involved is happy for years to come. (York)

We are of course well aware of the danger of generalising from one language. Sonia Livingstone and Richard Butsch have shown very clearly (in *Audiences and Publics*, and *Meanings of Audiences*) that even foundational words such as 'audience', 'mass(es)', 'people', 'public', 'community', 'listener' etc. translate awkwardly and vary considerably in their uses and implications across different languages. But as Kim Schrøder has commented, English is very much the lingua franca of a great deal of audience research, so what happens there is of relevance beyond its borders.

We think something important, perhaps fundamental, may be going on. Is 'engagement' a marker of a paradigm shift in our ways of thinking about 'audiencing'? What array of characteristics is being gathered, half-noticed, under its banner? What implications are perhaps smuggled in under its umbrella? Are certain forms of response being favoured and privileged? We propose to dedicate a Section to the topic in May 2021, with an 'overspill' Section in the November 2021, if and as necessary. Without in any way limiting the kinds of proposed contributions, we offer the following as possible angles:

- etymological origins and residues: how has the use of 'engage' changed, and in what ways does this mark contemporary uses?
- what are the comparable terms and ideas in other languages than English?
- its emergence as a concept used in audience research: where and how? Self-reports welcome!
- its role and implications in particular sub-fields (eg live performance studies, fan studies, social media studies)
- its 'ownership': who might gain or lose from its deployment?
- its dimensions as a concept: how does it differ from other paradigmatic terms in audience studies?
- its relations with other currently popular terms: 'subjectivity'; 'performativity'; 'identities'; 'affect', etc.
- 'user' and 'customer engagement' research: is this a special field? What should we know about it? What is its relation with other uses of the term?
- relations with production/policy fields, such as brand management, games design, arts marketing and the like
- what about 'non-engagers', the 'disengaged'? How are they different, and are they being marginalised? How does this relate to the concept of the 'anti-fan'?
- critical case studies of the use of 'engagement' in particular pieces of research
- case studies of the use of 'engagement' by particular producers or fans/followers, or in other distinct sectors
- … and of course critiques and challenges …

We welcome shorter reports, reviews, think-pieces, self-reflections, and audience portraits as well as standard essays.

To discuss this further, and/or to put forward proposals, please contact Martin Barker at mib@aber.ac.uk or Sue Turnbull at sturnbul@uow.edu.au. Initial proposals should reach us by 30 July 2020.

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