

Engagement Themed Section: Part 1 – Introduction

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When we sent out a call for papers on the topic of ‘engagement’, we were hoping we might attract a modest response. To say we were somewhat taken aback by the tsunami of abstracts that arrived is therefore something of an understatement. We were, however, delighted with this enthusiastic response since clearly engagement was a topic that mattered a great deal to those of us who are concerned with the conduct of audience research across a very broad spectrum of interests. In order to manage the large number of papers we have received, which were too big for one issue, we therefore decided to publish them in two tranches. As co-theme editor Martin Barker has his own paper in this issue, he invited me to write the introduction to this first collection, while he will take the lead in the next issue in which I too will have a co-authored paper. By a happy accident of choosing to follow alphabetical order, it is Martin’s paper that initiates the exploration of engagement in the six papers that follow each of which tackles the theme of ‘engagement’ from their own engaged perspective.

After posing the question ‘Is engagement a new phenomenon?’, Martin seeks to address this by providing an invaluable summary of the main traditions that have dominated media audience research in the past. Reflecting on the etymology of engagement and what it might imply, as well as how it has figured in media audience research thus far, Barker thus arrives at the conclusion that engagement may indeed constitute a new paradigm in media audience research, and this would seem to be borne out by the papers that follow. After reflecting on his own research trajectory and the ways in which this has already revealed the ways in which audiences engage with media texts, Barker settles on the notion of engagement as *the encounters that matter* to an audience and presents us with the challenge of identifying how and why and in what contexts this might occur. As always, there’s an even bigger question hanging over the methodologies we might use to do so.

Ben Walmsley is also concerned with how engagement figures within the history of audience research, although with a specific focus on the live arts and museology building on his earlier study (Walmsley 2019). As Walmsley notes, audience research in the context of the arts and cultural experiences has had a rather different trajectory than that in media and cultural studies. Indeed, as Walmsley argues, audience research in the arts context has only recently started to take account of the affective turn. As he argues, there is therefore something of a gap in understanding exactly what might constitute audience engagement in this sector. This is the gap Walmsley sets out to bridge, arguing that the concept of engagement constitutes a *philosophy* underpinned by an audience-centric ethos that recognizes audiences as equal partners in the processes of artistic exchange and

understanding. Once again the challenge for audience research lies in identifying exactly what this might entail in practice and how this might be captured.

As Stephanie Pitts and Sarah Price somewhat ruefully acknowledge, in their recent book, *Understanding Engagement in the Contemporary Arts* (2021) they themselves used the term somewhat loosely when approaching their empirical research and in the discussion of their findings. Returning to their interviews with 187 attenders of contemporary arts events across four UK cities with issue of engagement now front and centre, Pitts and Price note that while their participants might have exhibited what are routinely understood as the usual signs of engagement (such as frequent attendance or active involvement in arts practice), the people they interviewed rarely talked about these activities in terms of 'engagement'. After thinking through what the limits to engagement might mean for those who feel somewhat guilty about their lack of involvement in cultural activities, Pitts and Price offer the suggestion that engagement in the arts might best be thought of as a constancy of attitude and an orientation to the arts rather than as a set of practices or a specific type of activity. This is an interesting proposition that will no doubt spark further debate.

Pablo Bastos, Rafael Grohmann and Thaiane Moreira de Oliveria take a rather different tack in attempting to come to grips with the concept of engagement. In this instance, they set out to analyse how the concept has been deployed in 502 articles over a five year period that they located through the Web of Science database. Not surprisingly, they discover that there is little consensus about what engagement might entail in these papers and that the concept is rarely explicated. What they also discover is that the concept of engagement is operationalized in four main categories of research. This included articles dealing with media effects, organizational communication, participation and citizenship, as well as the anticipated attention to the structures and uses of social media. Largely missing, they note, was any attention to the structural issues of class, gender, race or other social and cultural identity factors in these studies. Clearly an omission that needs to be addressed.

Jacob Ørmen adopts a similar strategy as Bastos *et al* in his exploration of the concept of engagement through the process of data-mining. While Web of Science is once again the database that is used, in this instance the mining of key phrases results in a network visualization of the co-occurrence of related terms. This visualization thus provides a fascinating glimpse of how engagement is operationalised across a number of different fields of research. But once again, there is a problem. Like Bastos *et al*, Ormen discovers that there is little agreement about what constitutes engagement in the extant literature which once again clusters around notions of public and civic engagement, media effects and the uses of social media as well as organizational communication. In other words, the concept of engagement has been put to use in a wide range of research contexts from audience studies to marketing research but is often understood differently. Given this polysemy and proliferation, Ørmen's conclusion is that if we are to advance the study of engagement, then we need to start with the reflexive capacities of individuals rather than focusing on instrumental interactions and societal participation.

And it is reflexive practice that is the starting point for Rhiannon Bury in an account of her own and others' engagement with television during the 2020 American election. Observing how people interacted and formed a community of interest on Reddit as they watched the election results unfold over three and a half days, Bury comes to the conclusion that those involved were enacting behaviours such as textual poaching and slashing that are

more usually associated with fandom. In identifying these forms of engagement, Bury reiterates her argument that the concept of engagement functions as a bridge between fan studies and audience studies while highlighting the ways in which engagement is inevitably bound up with the affective and domestic relations of audiences in the age of digital television.

CarrieLynn Reinhard also embarks on some reflexive practice while arguing that we need the concept of 'media engagings' in order to capture the situational nature of such practices. As evidence of this, Reinhard presents the findings of a study that explored how six different people engaged with three different superhero films in a viewing experience in which she asked them to pause the playback any time that they experienced a cognitive or affective reaction and to record this. Although this is clearly a rather artificial viewing situation, it is very revealing of the kinds of cues and kinds of reactions that were triggered as the viewers made sense of the films. What is particularly interesting about this study are the overlaps and the differences in the reactions and the sense making practices as each individual brought their own experience to bear on their interpretation of the films. As Reinhard concludes, in order to understand how people interact with a media product, we also need to understand how they interact with the other structures in their lives. A conclusion with which I heartily concur in the conclusion to my own recent publication that reflects on the history of media audience research (Turnbull 2020).

In our next issue, there will be more case studies of engagement from scholars who have sought to embrace this concept in undertaking their own empirical research. Taken together then, these two issues offer a fascinating glimpse into how the concept of engagement is being theorized and operationalized in very different contexts and applications. As Martin Barker has predicted, it would appear that we are indeed on the cusp of a new and highly productive paradigm in media audience research, and *Participations* is delighted to be right at the forefront of this.

References:

- Pitts, S.E., and S.M. Price (2021) *Understanding Audience Engagement in the Contemporary Arts*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Turnbull, S. (2020) *Media Audiences: Is Anybody Watching?*, London: Red Globe Press.
- Walmsley, B. (2019) *Audience Engagement in the Performing Arts: A Critical Analysis*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.