

The concept of ‘engagement’: A cautious manifesto

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Abstract:

This essay approaches the idea of ‘engagement’ at an angle, beginning from the problem all audience research faces: the essential *invisibility* of audience responses to researchers. Overcoming this has required the building of theoretical models, which sketch in what we are like as human beings, what drives us, and what methods of research can best access those invisible responses. Three broad traditions for thinking about this model-making are reviewed: theorizing about ‘human nature’; Thomas Kuhn’s conceptualization of ‘paradigms’; and recent work on ‘empirical ontologies’. With these as tools, five contrasting approaches to audiences are then compared: the linear ‘effects’ tradition; the ‘uses and gratifications’ tradition; the ‘encoding and decoding’ tradition; the ‘psychosocial’ tradition; and the emergent ‘engagement’ tradition. A summary Table of their differences is offered. The essay ends by exploring the distinctiveness of ‘engagement’ as an approach, outlining its extraordinarily rapid emergence in a wide range of fields across the humanities and social sciences, and identifying (and illustrating from empirical researches) some of its most important features.

Keywords: the problem of invisibility; models of human responses; empirical ontologies; ‘engagement’ as emergent paradigm.

‘If thou be’st born to strange sights, / Things invisible to see ...’
(John Donne, *Go And Catch A Falling Star* [1633])

In a 2016 blog, a Spanish business guru Didina González lauded the TV show *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-19) as a model for how business leaders should carry out their roles.¹ *Game of Thrones* was a model to follow for the ways it used new technologies to ‘engage’ its audiences. ‘Technology’, she begins, ‘means audiences have never before had such power and influence’. But that means that *producers* – and therefore other kinds of leaders – can

turn that power round: they can ‘connect with employees on a new level’, by tapping into their uses of technologies. There has been ‘a distinct shift in audience expectations towards a more participatory experience. Audiences are no longer happy to merely sit and peaceably consume content – a point that many modern business learning initiatives fail to address.’ The goal: more and more ‘engagement’ in order to align us all with the goals and ambitions of our employers. Gotcha!

The emergence of ‘engagement’ as a common term to characterise media/audience relations generates many questions. The concept (as Liz Evans in particular has shown² – see below in this essay for a discussion of her work) has taken hold at around the same time (the millennium, or thereafter) in a range of fields, including political theory³; public relations⁴; educational theory⁵; marketing theory⁶; arts policy⁷; human/computer interface studies⁸; and even some crossovers between them⁹. What these mainly have in common is a confidence that engagement is a ‘good thing’, coupled with an interest in what *benefits* might flow from it, whether these be improving people’s willingness to use technologies, building customer loyalty, strengthening brand images, or generally easing participation. Arts policy might seem different, given the insistence there on the *intrinsic value* of arts participation – but even here there has been a search for ways of measuring those intrinsic benefits, in order to increase the political clout of arts funders and marketers (see for instance Radbourne et al.¹⁰).

Coming in from the opposite direction, the explosive growth of fan studies has generated a plethora of studies of the intense ways fans ‘engage’ with their favoured materials. Here, the emphasis has been more descriptive and celebratory – even work on ‘anti-fans’ is primarily fascinated in them as phenomena in and for themselves (and of course the associated debates about the position in all such research of the ‘acafan’ is one of the signals of this fascination).¹¹

Currently most powerfully associated with the rise of social media and transmedia production, and still with strong marketing associations (how can ‘we’ get people to engage in ways that are beneficial to our brand/company’s aims?), it isn’t yet clear what kind of a new theoretical term ‘engagement’ might be, and how it might relate to existing theories of media/audience relations. It’s also not clear what might have *preceded* ‘social media engagement’¹² – how far is that a new phenomenon, or simply a modified version of older, different modes of involvement? Plus, it leaves dangling the awkward question of how to think about *non-engagers* – are they resisters, failures, problems, or just not bothered (and therefore maybe not to be bothered with)?

In this sort-of-manifesto, I argue that ‘engagement’ is opening the door to a new overall conceptualisation of relations between audiences, and media and culture. At present it is largely being used as a combination of *congratulation/ambition*: look how involved people are, how ‘active’ their ways of watching/listening/reading – now, how can we encourage/extract even more of the same? How can we step beyond measurements of *amount* of engagement, to explore *varieties, histories, and outcomes* ...?

Theories, Paradigms, Ontologies

The problem for audience researchers has always been that almost everything we want to study involves mental – and therefore non-visible – processes. What mental resources do people have as they encounter media/cultural materials? What goes on in their heads as they read/listen/view? What kinds of response (bodily, emotions, story-worlds, understanding, puzzlement, etc.) do they garner? What residues of changed perceptions, emotions, memories remain afterwards, for how long, and in what kinds of interaction with other things? To broach these hidden processes, to make them ‘visible’, researchers must have recourse to two interrelated things: *concepts*, which tell them the sorts of things to look for (what will count as evidence for what?); and *methods*, tuned to making people *put on display* what the concepts indicate.¹³ Combined, these two are meant to enable meaningful evidence to emerge, for examination and analysis. The concepts, of course, gain traction when they are part of broader theories and approaches, which seek to map the overall process of media audiencing, and thereby generate explanations, predictions, and – sometimes – evaluations and judgements. These constitute the fundamental *models* of the field.

There are, it seems to me, three broad traditions which have particularly attended to these ‘moments’ of theory-building, each emphasising different aspects of them. Theories of human nature have traditionally offered broad portraits of what a human being is, what fundamental qualities they contain, how these work within social contexts – and therefore in particular what is the *best* that can be achieved (what social and political arrangement is best attuned to what we are; how can ‘evil’ (harm, conflict, etc.) be accounted for but avoided; and what potentials for a ‘good life’ and ‘good society’ are there in us?). Theories of human nature of course arise in many non-research contexts: philosophical and religious systems particularly. Their number and prevalence rise and fall, in different periods. The period after the late 1960s saw a flourishing of interest in such models, usefully summarised in Leslie Stevenson’s (1973) *Seven Theories of Human Nature*. Interestingly, by the millennium, Stevenson had expanded his seven to thirteen in his revised edition.¹⁴

Theories of human nature were particularly apt for thinking about *human potentials*: what unlockable capacities might our nature contain? This played a vital part in, for instance, the debates about Marx and human nature (‘species being’) which flourished from the late 1960s, ‘culminating’ in Norman Geras’ important (1983) book.¹⁵ It has to be noted, though, that generally such potentials were modelled as *positive*: what is the *best* that can be hoped for? When thought in relation to media and culture, often the opposite has arisen: how might *harm* be done through cultural impacts? what is the *worst* that might be occasioned? Where not pessimistic, then, approaches could be posed as *relief from pessimism* (active, resistant audiences, etc.).

Working at very high levels of abstraction, such theories of human nature need to be operationalised to become meaningful guides to empirical research (and it is pertinent to note that Stevenson sets alongside each other such different kinds of ‘system’ as Plato’s epistemology, psychological behaviourism and Christianity) – what links them is their

interest in *moral universals*, much more than any epistemological guidance. For this, a very different tradition of thinking – originating in the work of historian of science Thomas Kuhn – helps greatly.¹⁶ Kuhn argued powerfully against a *cumulative* view of science as the successive achievement and stacking of empirical findings. Rather, he argued, the natural sciences (his focus) work by developing *paradigms*: working models of what a particular layer or aspect of the world looks like, its key components; recognised/standardised methods for successfully investigating those elements and their workings; and shared procedures for checking whether new work is good enough to be accepted into the ‘corpus’. Without these, Kuhn argues, there simply is no ‘science’. To become a science is to develop and deploy a working paradigm. Along with these, he pointed to various other (institutional) things that help to maintain a paradigm’s position: established publication routes; recognised public spaces for sharing new work; research leaders – all of these training the next generation in how to ‘do science the right way’. Of course, crises will occur, when for instance aberrant findings – especially those revealed by people doing ‘normal’ science – just can’t be explained away. Then, new ‘leaders’ emerge, building their reputations by using the findings as a cornerstone for a new paradigm, and new ways of ‘doing science’.

Although Kuhn hardly applied his ideas to the human sciences (he was sceptical about giving that appellation to the humanities), his emphasis on the interconnectedness of concepts and methods in general theories, and his work on the institutions that maintain a science, remain particularly valuable in my view – providing his account is amenable to the addition of one element: that particular paradigms may have roots in and be sustained by broader social and political interests. If we take as a crude example the history of eugenics – the proposition that intelligence, and success, may be biologically heritable, and unevenly distributed racially, there can be no doubt that – as an attachment to its claims to be a ‘science’ – this whole view of the world was buoyed by its tidy fit with the demands of slavery, imperialism, colonialism and racism. Kuhn’s approach needs at least some modification, to be able to address the way models of human behaviour and relations have risen and fallen.

Kuhn’s work has been the subject of many debates, but for the purposes of this essay perhaps the most important are those coming out of development in Science and Technology Studies (STS), which have emphasised two points: Kuhn’s ‘perspectivalism’ – his focus on how people see the world via paradigms, as against what they *do* (their practices); and – associated with the first – his tendency to see paradigms as *incommensurable*. Recent work in STS has shown that in many real contexts scientists and doctors find ways of ‘calibrating’ different paradigmatic approaches against each other, in order to come to clinical decisions. A good example of this is Graham’s work on approaches to pain (a striking analogy for audience research, given that pain is also essentially invisible to researchers).¹⁷

This takes me to an important third approach. This is an interest in *ontology*. In classical philosophy, ontology was the postulation of the most basic categories of existence

and their interrelations. What *kinds* of entities and processes make up the world? Thence, basic conflicts between ‘materialist’ and ‘idealist’ ontologies, for example. But over time this foundational approach shifted. Ontologies change, it was realised, in important ways and with practical consequences. The historical shift from thinking of bodies as governed by the (im)balance of four ‘humours’ to more modern views of the nature of health and disease is one obvious example. A more complex example would be the clash between those wishing to speak of power in society in terms of *ruling classes*, versus *elites*; or, the wide disagreements about the meaning of the term ‘alienation’ as a concept for grasping and critiquing contemporary society. The ‘things’ are not visible, but differing conceptions of those ‘things’ govern how people go about thinking, reasoning and behaving. In classical anthropology, without necessarily using the word ‘ontology’, researchers have argued over the way members of traditional societies categorise the elements of their world. Famously, following Evans-Prichard’s classic research among the Nuer people of Sudan, debates have erupted over the status of their claims that ‘twins are birds’ – is this metaphorical, near-poetic speech, or does it indicate a different ontological construction of the world (see Evens, 2012¹⁸, for a recent contribution to this debate)?¹⁹

In some writing about this, science is exempted from involvement in ontologies. For example, De Cruz and De Smedt (2007) distinguish and compare scientific and non-scientific approaches to evolution, dubbing the latter ‘intuitive ontologies’ – implying that the former are differently constructed.²⁰ (They acknowledge that ‘because scientists are subject to the same cognitive limitations as other people, it is possible that intuitive ontologies still influence their understanding’ (p. 364), but this clearly marks off the scientific approach as not just more complex, but *differently constructed*.) But in other domains, and in particular in STS, theorists have gone a stage further, arguing for the analysis of ‘empirical ontologies’.²¹ Perhaps most powerfully Annemarie Mol, in a much-cited study²², undertook a detailed ethnographic study in a Dutch hospital of the understandings of atherosclerosis (a condition of the arteries in the lower limbs) to argue that the different medical foci (eg., clinical, pharmaceutical, pathological, and patients’ own) differently *enact* (that is, bring into being) distinctive versions of the condition, ‘different objects’ (p. 46). Going beyond earlier approaches which understood this as a matter of different *perspectives*, Mol insists that what may have a common name is in fact a series of *distinct entities*.²³ Mol calls her work an exercise in ‘empirical philosophy’. It isn’t entirely clear what implications this has, beyond being a new and fascinating way of describing the works of medical specialists. It doesn’t for instance seem to generate any new critical apparatus, for debating the value of the enacting frameworks (although as Jensen and Winthereik point out in a (2005) review of her book, Mol does loosely append a preference for patient-centred enactments).²⁴ That surely has to be because, for all the operational challenges of agreeing best therapies, there is a shared commitment to identifying and alleviating something agreed to be harmful. That of course is by no means the case with the fundamental models for thinking about media and culture.

The issue becomes clearest when we consider how Mol thinks the implications of her work: the problem of coordination. At some point and in various meetings, decisions must be made about treatments, at which the various disciplines with their distinct ‘objects’ must encounter each other. But this very challenge reveals a substantial limitation to her study. In the case of atherosclerosis, while there are professional hierarchies and issues of authority, no one questions the legitimacy of any of the enacting disciplines being heard in clinical decision-making processes. This is not always the case, even in the medical field. Homeopathy has over time become a virtual ‘outlaw’ discipline. For a long time various treatments such as osteopathy and chiropractic struggled for acceptance, for a range of conditions. In the treatment of mental conditions, a pendulum has swung back and forth on the legitimacy of electro-convulsive therapy. And so on. To this extent, therefore, it must be said that, however fugitive it might be, pathologists, clinicians, biochemists and others agree on there being a ‘common object’ called atherosclerosis.²⁵

This is simply not the case in relation to cultural/media investigations. Researchers in the various traditions see their ‘object’ in (sometimes fiercely) irreconcilable ways, as we will see. In this essay I demarcate five distinct traditions, each (I will try to show) with its own driving ontological commitments. These are: the linear or ‘effects’ tradition; the uses and gratifications approach; encoding/decoding; psychosocial; and ‘engagement’. I am perfectly content if others propose to expand the number, or press for significant subdivisions. As a way in to seeing what is at stake in the comparisons among the five, I offer the summary **Table** (below):

My aim in each case is to sketch an account which brings into view the signs of their working theories of human nature, their paradigmatic structures, and the ontological claims each makes: what ‘things invisible’ are they claiming to see, and how?

The linear ‘effects’ model

The linear ‘effects’ model is without question the oldest and most persistent, with strong roots in moralistic distrust of popular entertainment, and suspicions about the gullibility of ordinary people. In its pre-theoretical forms it veered, as Richard Butsch has brilliantly shown, between fears of ‘arousal’ and activation, and fears of passivity and submission.²⁶ But with its epicentre firmly in America, it took on a more theorised form from the 1930s onwards – borrowing and combining bits of popular psychology and psychiatry, to evolve concepts such as ‘identification’ to warrant its claims – which were heavily used in major moral interventions such as the 1930s Payne Fund Studies, and the anti-comics campaigns of the 1950s. Heavily critiqued from the 1960s in particular, its recrudescence in a focus on ‘violence’ in cinemas, television and videogames produced one important variant, in the (1970s) rise of ‘cultivation theory’ – an approach which saw the dangers of television, in particular, not in encouraging imitative behaviour, but in developing a ‘mean world’ syndrome.

But underlying the entire linear tradition, I want to stress, there is a streak of ontological continuity, in two persistent claims. Two in particular need to be noted:

Table1: Schedule of Ontological Claims and Commitments

	LinearComm	UsesGrats	EncDecode	PsychoSocial	Engagement
Presumed entities and components	Basic pre-rational drives, at risk of activation	Deep-seated needs / desires	Powerful discourses, able to appear to be 'commonsense'	"Unconscious", built around unresolved problems	Evolving interpretive communities
Mode of 'influence'	Cumulative, bypassing / overwhelming 'reason'	Meeting / matching 'desires' or 'needs'	Absorption of / in dominant meanings	Reawakening of stored-up anxieties / traumas	Situational, shaped by 'local' circumstances
Sources of 'failure'	'Noise', interfering/ protective influences.	Non-satisfaction of 'needs'	Having cultural resources for negotiation / resistance	Depth / unresolvability of anxieties / traumas	Detachment, lack of interest, refusal
Nature of powerful media components	'Messages' (visible to 'experts') conveyed by 'vehicles'	Socially constructed needs / desires	Persuasive semiotic / discursive components	Surprise unpredictable embedded re-awakeners	'Moments' responded to by evolving communities
Typical research methods	Experimental procedures, convenience samples	Standardised surveys	For dominant, imputed from textual analysis. For resistant, qualitative	One-to-one depth, therapy-style interviews	Any capable of capturing signs of discursive communities
"Active" / "passive"?	Passive, perhaps leading to risky activities	Active, perhaps resulting in passive absorptions	Passive, if dominant. Active, if resistant	Active, but triggered by hard to control drivers	Active/passive at all times present, and interwoven
Primary public location and uses of claims	Normative, control-culture	Psychological measurements	Post-Marxist political	Therapeutic	Production / reception dialectic
Dominant concepts	Exposure, contagion	Neediness, satisfaction	Imbrication, persuasion	Anxiety, conflictedness	'Mattering' encounters

1. The first is a strategic move to generate a split in the materials seen to be potentially harmful, between 'messages' they are perceived to be generating, and their persuasive vehicles. Materials such as films, television shows, cartoons, comics, and games must contain elements of both, to be effective. A 'message' is presumed to be some kind of stimulus which can root itself in audiences' heads, depositing traces. But the transmission of such stimuli is assisted by other, separable elements which – a bit like a hypodermic needle (hence one old name for the approach) – penetrate people's outer layers, enabling the implanting of those messages. How can we distinguish the two elements? That is, as we shall see, seen as a matter for expert analysts, who know how to spot a 'message'. That is not a simple process, as the audiences who are 'affected' can't see this for themselves – indeed, there is often a claim that they are *blinded* by the very things that they are being affected by, so cannot be direct sources of evidence.

The second aspect, those separable components which play on people's weaknesses, have been variously described and theorised. From simple claims of 'immature' brains being 'filled up' with wrong messages, to more sophisticated claims of induced psychological links, these for a long time took the form of claims that audiences were induced to 'identify' with figures within the materials they encountered. Falling out of favour for a time from the 1980s, the concept of 'identification' has reinvented itself recently under the twin names of 'empathy' and 'transportation'. Both variants point to an ontological claim that an invisible process takes place via which audiences are persuaded to take on as their own certain 'messages' (attitudes, values, even (in extremis) behaviours) portrayed to them.

2. Alongside these claims comes another, equally important to the approach, that these processes work *cumulatively*: the more one encounters such message/vehicle combinations, the more persuasive they are. Again, this has both moralising and theorised versions. In commonplace accounts, two metaphors predominate. First, there is often talk of 'exposure' to risky materials, as though watching television for instance was similar to encounters with infections.²⁷ Alternatively, there is talk of media 'diets': risky ingestions of bad cultural food. What the metaphors have in common is an emphasis on *amount*.

The work of Anthony Gierzynski provides a fair example of contemporary work in this tradition. In two recent books²⁸, in particular, he has presented research into the possible 'influence' of a series of fictional series, including *Harry Potter*, *The Hobbit*, *Game of Thrones*, and *House of Cards*. Gierzynski explicitly roots his work within the frames offered by current media psychology. Key ones are 'transportation' (that we get carried away as we watch/read, and thus lose a bit of our rational personhood); 'identification' (that we strongly associate with particular characters and may absorb their ways of thinking as 'our own'); and cumulative 'cultivation' of effects (encountering something repeatedly increases its influence over us) – all of which combine to aid the transmission of 'messages', and associated 'values'. How does he locate the latter? Here, he is a bit atypical. Most commonly, his kind of communications researcher would conduct some kind of content analysis, to generate frequency counts. This has variously been done with 'violence', smoking, body-shape and -size, 'bad language', suicide, and so on. Using a more informal approach (in tune with the slightly folksy character of his books), Gierzynski 'uncover[s]' some organising principles in the series he examines. So, *Harry Potter* offers 'lessons' on things as varied as the benefits of diversity, the dangers of authoritarianism, and the wrongness of violence and torture (all positive, welcomed features).²⁹ *Game of Thrones* meanwhile generates a 'lesson' about the impossibility of a 'Just World' (not welcomed).

The operation of the ontological split is nicely captured in one sentence in the second book: '... a body of research has demonstrated the power of narrative transportation and identification to encourage the internalization of story messages, adopt values, encourage belief change, and even accept false facts' (2018, p. 29). And 'it is a process that most people are unaware of, which makes it ... even more powerful' (ibid). 'Messages' +

hidden psychological ‘devices’ + repetition = effects. These are ontological claims, passing as scientific discoveries.

Uses and Gratifications

The origins and early history of the U&G model, as it is widely known, are sufficiently well-known to have generated their own Wikipedia page³⁰, so do not need much retelling here. Slowly emerging in the 1940s, U&G research was a reaction to two things: the dubious moralising of, among other things, the Payne Fund studies which claimed – but failed – to show substantial ‘harm’ to young people from going to the cinema³¹; and the results of some major studies which indicated that people were not simply ‘persuaded’ by media materials (see in particular Lazarsfeld et al.’s famous (1944) *People’s Choice* study of the role of the media in the 1940 American Presidential election, and Robert Merton’s (1946) study of the influence of a war bond drive fronted by then-star Kate Smith).³² Like a lot of other research at that time, the Payne Fund studies were largely built around that ‘transmission’ model of influence (immature, ‘incomplete’ audiences being filled up with dubious materials). U&G instead insisted on asking: *why* did people watch, read, or listen to the mass media? Finding out why people engaged with different media coupled with a realisation that this would affect what kinds of interest and attention they gave, and therefore what sorts of impact they might have (pleasures, meanings, responses). To this extent U&G was not entirely divorced from ‘effects’ thinking, but it did introduce the trope of ‘audience activity’, in selecting and attending according to their ‘needs’.

And ‘needs’ provided the key concept. As one quite recent ‘rediscovery’ of the approach baldly puts it: ‘The basic premise of uses and gratifications theory is that individuals seek out media that fulfill their needs and leads to ultimate gratification’.³³ When U&G research was codified in the early 1970s, these were formulated into a typology, with five main strands: information about the world; entertainment; personal identity; social interaction; and escapism. Even allowing for overlaps and interactions, each strand points to a separable underlying ‘need’ in people which the media (among other things) can help satisfy. But what kinds of things are ‘needs’? The U&G literature remains pretty quiet on this whole issue (apart from the series of questions posed by Katz et al. in the early 1970s³⁴, along with a gesture towards the possibilities posed by Abraham Maslow’s hierarchical account (from lowest food and drink, to a pinnacle of ‘self-actualisation’ for a select few)).³⁵ It means that it is hard to find even hints of answers to a whole series of questions like the following: which ‘needs’ are essentially hydraulic (used up over time, needing regular replenishment – but how often and how much)? Do people know when they have ‘had enough’ and should stop (with the possible implication that not stopping is a sign of excessive/compulsive behaviour)? Can needs be retroactively discovered, and then developed – through, say, an experience taken on out of curiosity, then found to be richly rewarding? Are pleasures proportionate to the intensity of ‘needs’? Apart from exceptional circumstances (eg, the famous case of newspapers becoming absent due to a strike³⁶), what about *un*-gratifying experiences – for instance, stories chosen for ‘escape’ that turn out to

be challenging? Doesn't that imply the operation of some highly localised criteria for what can gratify? These kinds of questions can easily be multiplied – but answers are few.

Which leaves U&G work vaguely disappointing, a Band-Aid theory³⁷ stuck lightly over a larger problem. Some interesting information, some clever standardised techniques, but beyond that not much more than lists of differences in general motivation. Interestingly, among recent U&G-inspired work can be found examples of researchers claiming to have found 'new' motives (and associated needs?) – including 'engagement' as a driver. So, Pittman and Sheehan conclude that richer modes of participation in binge-watched shows constitute a new form of gratification, indicated by closer involvement with characters, story arcs and the like:

For binge-watching, the idea of engagement as a different factor than entertainment as conceptualized by other researchers including Papacharissi and Mendelson (2007). In this study, the engagement factor included statements which indicated a much more active involvement in the viewing activity, such as 'binge-watching is more interesting than other ways of watching' and 'binge-watching is exciting.' Additionally, individuals are highly engaged in the characters and the story lines when they binge watch.³⁸

Beyond helpfully pointing to an emergent difference, it's not clear how U&G is contributing much to theorising a phenomenon such as this. Certainly it is hard to see what 'need' is being satisfied. In any case, the ontological claims about 'needs' remain a central issue to the whole approach.

The Encoding/Decoding Model

The 'encoding/decoding' model (henceforth EDM) has of course very specific origins, in the ideas of Stuart Hall articulated in and through the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, which he headed for a good while. In 1973 Hall gave a keynote address to an international television studies audience, where he laid out the theory in some detail.³⁹ And the approach took concrete form when two of the Centre's graduates, Charlotte Brunson and David Morley, deployed it in a pair of studies of the early evening BBC television show *Nationwide*.⁴⁰

EDM argues that media makers select and assemble from among available cultural ideas, to generate and 'encode' formats, structures, narratives, genres. These can be analysed via a variety of semiotic and discursive methods, to display a hegemonic meaning-proposal. So, Brunson and Morley carried out careful analyses of the ways *Nationwide* talks to its audiences about 'Englishness', 'regional differences', 'English eccentricity', and the 'problems' created by bureaucrats. These 'encoded' meanings do not transfer automatically into their audiences; rather, they have to be 'decoded' by viewers inhabiting a wide range of social and cultural positions. Drawing on the work of British sociologist Frank Parkin, three broad decoding patterns were outlined: a 'dominant' reading, where viewers

don't just accept the hegemonic proposal, but see it as 'obvious', 'commonsense'; a 'negotiated' reading, where people broadly accept the force and direction of the dominant account, but look to wangle an exception for themselves; and a 'resistant' reading, where the dominant account is recognised and identified as a *point of view*, and challenged as such.

It is interesting to re-read *Everyday Television* after a gap of many years, both to see again the quality of their analysis, but also to realise the extent to which it is structured around a theoretical vocabulary laden with postulates about power and persuasion, audience involvement and imbrication. The authors write that 'the audience is constantly implicated ...' (p.18), the relations between team and viewers 'constantly mystified' (p.19), creating a 'naturalism ... that repositions "us" into – inside – the programme' (p.22). They write of a 'dominant tendency', which can be resisted but is still privileged, and its work as such is 'repressed or occluded' (p.62).

EDM has been widely influential, becoming one of the standardly named accounts in introductions to audience research (although probably generating fewer actual empirical studies, and – after CCCS's decline – not finding embodiment in any research centres). The model got caught up in the debates about the virtues or triviality of 'active audience theory', and notably the issue of the 'limits of polysemy': is there any reason to suppose that, outside nonsensical responses which make no meaningful reference to the materials, there really are constraints on the range and kinds of 'reading' that people can make? Celeste Condit's much cited 1989 essay 'The rhetorical limits to polysemy' points to a core issue: how does a 'dominant' reading establish its status as such?⁴¹

The key in here is to ask how 'dominance' or 'hegemony' is secured. Brunsdon and Morley speak of the 'power of the *Nationwide* representation' (p.84), holding an 'imaginary coherence' (p.86) – all of which is then grounded in a reference to Louis Althusser's (then widely referenced, now much more controversial) approach. And in an upwards spiral, the very specific example of *Nationwide* eventually becomes an illustration of a general claim of Marx about a 'religion of everyday life'. It is as if the programme simultaneously embodies and enacts a much larger process: the creation of a myth of nationhood. I am not here critiquing this amalgam of claims, rather, simply noting its role in attaching a weight of significance to the descriptive and analytic parts of the book. These terms are an index of an operative theory of the nature of society and ideology, warranting otherwise arguable conclusions.

Hall did refine his account of the model in later years, nowhere more so perhaps than in an interview published in Cruz & Lewis (1994).⁴² There, Hall clarifies the complex motives driving his original talk, and emphasises that the three 'reading' responses were ideal-typical – positions that individuals or groups might move into an out of. But it is in his answers to Justin Lewis' questioning about the status and identification of the 'dominant' meaning and reading that some key points emerge. 'Dominant meaning' arises when the potentially infinite semiosis is interrupted by 'structural power' and its 'ideology', where there is no gap between meaning and reading. Then '[t]ransparency between the encoding

and decoding moments is what I would call the moment of hegemony' (Hall in Cruz & Lewis, pp.261-2). How to know what it is? Some form of 'textual analysis' (p.266) will get us as near to it as is possible.

So what kind of an 'entity' is hegemony? It is at its core an invisible relationship of power, coming into operation at particular conjunctures, or 'moments', but only observable through its effects – the classic symptoms of an ontological claim. It can be *inferred* perhaps in several ways. One of the signs of its operation is that those taking up *negotiated* or *oppositional* readings acknowledge it as their opposite – although that could of course be true of highly controversial stances as well. Another indicator might be that its proponents assert its 'commonsense', 'obvious' status – although again assertions of commonsensicality can be highly argumentative, and defensive. Perhaps the most crucial indicator is the presence of what I might call *buffering* arguments: arguments that defend the 'necessity' of the position, and the invalidity of any opposition. We will see one example of that in a moment. But what is crucial is that a particular piece of, for example, media materials cannot be its own proof of hegemonic force, however careful and sophisticated the mode of 'textual' analysis might be.

One other small point needs to be made. In passing Hall hints that if and when a dominant reading is discovered, it will be an indicator of 'total passivity' (p. 262) on the part of the audience. This seems to me a clear residue/hangover from the older linear model. If we take possible cases of hegemonic power – the successful emergence of National Socialist ideology in 1930s Germany for example – the last thing that could be said is that their adherents were *passive*. They were terribly, horribly active in a hundred ways.

In more recent uses of EDM this issue is parlayed in different ways. For example, an essay by Lia Friesam looks at the way critical, 'resistant' debates within Israel over references to the Holocaust have played out over Twitter.⁴³ The key to her argument can be found in this sentence: 'Israeli society maintains a powerful and living collective memory of the Holocaust [...], expanding its meanings and applications, and utilizing all national and institutional mechanisms to preserve and transmit the trauma to future generations' (p.85). Friesam is interested in the ways oppositionists within Israel deploy Tweets (sharply distinguished from Facebook in this regard) 'as part of the battle against the canonic memory agents' (p. 86), which were 'primarily in the hands of state agents' (p.87). They turn on challenges to the *uniqueness* of the Holocaust – that it is effectively forbidden ever to compare it with other genocides. Under the implicitly subversive hashtag #MustNotCompare, 'this societal taboo is rapidly being eroded in the vernacular discourse' (p. 92). What is different here is that the *dominance* or 'hegemony' of a particular mode is a matter of separate validation, and 'resistance' generates results which are empirically measurable.

Compare this with another recent use of EDM: Bill Yousman's consideration of ex-prisoners' responses to televisual representations of incarceration.⁴⁴ His starting point is recognition of the fact that, for most people, their *only* or at least *main* likely source of images and understandings of prisons is fictional representations – because prisons are so

shut off. The main people of whom this should be untrue are those who have actually experienced incarceration. And yet Yousman also found strange tensions in ex-prisoners' responses to televisual representations of prisons as sites of extreme and uncontrolled violence (as suggested by TV series such as *Oz* (HBO, 1997-2003). Despite acknowledging that prison was rarely as homogeneously violent as depicted, the series was accorded a certain kind of 'reality' by a number of ex-prisoners. 'Even when commenting on how unlikely it was for someone to have the means to build a bomb while incarcerated, for example, the respondents still embraced other images of extreme and unchecked chaos and violence as an accurate representation of prison life' (p. 214). As a result, film and television images 'may at times trump non-mediated "real" experiences' (ibid).

These two case studies suggest strongly that in very particular circumstances it is possible for media materials to attain dominance. But it is in both cases the attention to those 'special circumstances – not simply the 'textual analysis' – that can warrant a claim to hegemonic status. And 'hegemony' is a classic case of an *invisible* entity.

Psychoanalytic approaches

There is a long tradition of attempts to apply psychoanalytic concepts to the media – especially cinema. Indeed some commentators made much of their virtual historical simultaneity (both emerging at the very end of the 19th century) to suggest a common impulse behind them. Among the earliest was surrealist André Breton, who saw cinema as a potential vehicle for disruptive surrealist action and propaganda. But those early attempts were overtaken by the rise, in the 1970s, of 'gaze' theory: the idea that cinema (encouraged by darkness and a feeling of 'returning to the womb') pushes audiences to stare at its constructed displays, and in particular at women's bodies, with desire. This sort of work largely declined empirical work on audiences, instead happy to impute responses (a partial exception being work on women's responses to Hollywood's construction of the 'male gaze'⁴⁵), or simply to construct elaborate 'readings' of particular films as 'phantasies'.

One rare – and therefore much discussed – exception was Valerie Walkerdine's essay 'Video replay', which explored one man's attachment to and regular revisiting of the film *Rocky II*.⁴⁶ As Yates⁴⁷ nicely summarises her, 'Walkerdine's sympathetic analysis of male identification challenges Mulvey's (1975) critical feminist stance regarding the all-powerful male-gaze of cinematic texts of such mainstream Hollywood films as *Rocky II*. Instead, Walkerdine provides a highly nuanced discussion of the ways in which fantasies of class transformation, and the experience of masculinity as a fragile construct, become interwoven in everyday life through engagement with popular culture' (p. 405). Interesting, of course, that even such a tiny audience study as this was seen as challenging to text-centric approaches. But recently, there have been a small number of other attempts to use psychoanalytic concepts and methods to look at actual audiences. One very interesting case, I would argue, is Jo Whitehouse-Hart's close study of six interviewees, and the workings and significance of their attachment to various 'favourite' films and TV programmes.⁴⁸ Situating her work within the emergent body of 'psychosocial'

investigations, Whitehouse-Hart is interested in the dynamics that drive people to revisit materials that make them sad, or uncomfortable – and struggle to put their reasons into words ('I don't know why but it gets me every time', or 'I can't quite say why I do this', and variants thereon). All of them interestingly are people who have undergone difficult shifts from their childhood class location.

Whitehouse-Hart uses a Free Association Narrative Interview approach which seeks to carry over the non-directive quality of therapeutic interviews to a research context, to bring into view shifting directions in conversations, parapraxes, and moments of hesitation (and contains intense ethical reflections on her relations with her interviewees, notably 'Bill', an older man with whom she had a challenging relationship). Her book is replete with provocative insights and thoughtful interpretations. And she is very careful about avoiding easy generalisations. But her account poses some revealing issues. First, she is keen to stress how distinctive psychoanalytic accounts are, as being effectively the only approach which takes account of the emotional aspects of audiencing. At one point, for instance, she writes of 'positivist' approaches to audiences that they 'assume a cognitive, rational individual, conscious of their actions and whose responses are reliable and under the control of the subject' (p. 55).⁴⁹ This is highly problematic. Given that most accounts of audience research traditions identify the 'effects' tradition as 'positivist', it is surely seriously wrong. Traditional effects approaches insistently refer to the risks of things such as films arousing basic emotions – and their methods deliberately exclude as too unreliable audiences' own explanations of their choices.⁵⁰ The reason for stressing this is not to pick holes, but to emphasise that it is the *very particular conceptualisation* of emotions deployed by psychoanalysis that is at stake for Whitehouse-Hart. This conceptualisation is captured in one recurrent claim: that audience research has to acknowledge the existence of 'a dynamic unconscious that has its own effects' (p. 166). Emotions are to be understood as the operative residues of conflicts laid down in childhood, now seeking 'objects' through which they can be replayed and – if you are lucky – resolved. The 'unconscious' constitutes a domain within every individual, subject to its own internal rules, and spilling out in uncontrolled ways into daily life. Anything less than this ontological commitment doesn't pass muster as 'dealing with the emotional aspect' – which in turn becomes synonymous with unresolved 'traumas' and resultant 'anxieties'.

It is this which warrants Whitehouse-Hart on numerous occasions to offer interpretations of her interviewees' responses. These bridge from accounts which are apparently qualified ('perhaps', 'it is possible that ...', 'it seems likely that ...') to strong conclusions which summon up specific components of the psychoanalytic ontological array: 'identification', 'phantasy', 'introjection', 'repetition compulsion', and 'aleatory interpellation', among others. My point here is not to take sides in an inevitably ongoing debate, but to emphasise that these are *ontological commitments* which drive and enable her conclusions.⁵¹

Engagement

So, in the light of – and in comparison with – these others, what can we say about the concept of ‘engagement’? What ontological claims underlie and animate it, and how do these paradigmatically guide the way research is done? It’s clear that its use as a dominant term to capture audience relations with media/culture is pretty recent. Ben Walmsley, in his book on engagement and the performing arts, maps the rise across the period 1987-2016 of a ‘growing dominance of the semantics of engagement over marketing’ (p. 154). He charts the explosive rise of the term in the titles of essays, particularly after the millennium. This period also sees the growth and sedimentation of fan studies, from its celebratory reclaiming around 1992 (see for instance Lisa Lewis’ *The Adoring Audience*). And of course this period sees the emergence and flourishing of digital social media, with MySpace the first such to reach 1 million active users in 2004, soon to be joined – and overtaken – by Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Whatsapp, and Tik Tok (among other not so successful bidders). These remarkable achievements were almost as quickly accompanied by the development of data-mining enterprises, with wide debates about the use (and abuse) of social media sites as the basis for marketing (and manipulative) strategies. In the course of this growth, the very term ‘engagement’ acquired new layers of meaning. But the speed with which it has emerged has meant that it is more *used* than *analysed* – hence, of course, the call for this Journal Section. What I say here is therefore part-summary description and part-proposal about how we should think about and use the concept. Hence, calling this a ‘cautious manifesto’.

The word ‘engage’ itself does have a long and revealing history. In this essay I cannot do a proper job of even sketching that, but a few things are noteworthy. The word first begins to be used in English in the early 17th century. Its emergence coincides with a whole series of developments which are increasing the need to speak *contractually*, and its origins are in the French word for ‘making a pledge’, or ‘binding by oath’. This was the period in which the long shockwave of the aftermath of the Black Death had depopulated Europe, fatally undermining manorial/serfdom systems, and increasing ‘free’ labour. Towns were growing, and mercantile capitalism was resulting in new loci of wealth and property needing to be managed for transfer and inheritance purposes. To ‘engage’ someone meant to employ them. To become ‘engaged’ was to enter into a pledge of marriage, within an increasingly formalised institution of marriage, with its inheritance implications. Side-uses multiplied across the century, generating for example military ‘engagements’ by the 1660s (with its implications of serious, staged manoeuvres). Declensions of the term (‘engage’, ‘engaging’, ‘engagingly’, etc.) multiplied also – but became more dominant as the institutional uses declined. ‘Engaged to be married’ became less of a binding guarantee of coming matrimony, gradually shrinking to ‘becoming engaged’, little more than a public declaration of an intended long relationship. The term by and large marginalised its contractual uses, in favour of ones emphasising appeal, attraction, and pleasure.

But the key linguistic move seems to occur only very recently, when the word ‘engage’ has coupled with one preposition. To ‘engage *with*’ something implies a long-term,

active, serious, and complex relationship with a phenomenon beyond oneself. A striking indicator can be seen in the results of a WorldCat search for uses of the phrase in all English-language publications, from 1950 to now:

Table 2: Mentions of ‘engage with’ in all English language publications (source: WorldCat):

1950-9	1960-9	1970-9	1980-9	1990-9	2000-9	2010-9
3	19	21	88	657	8122	40623

The staggering rise over the last two decades hints at the centrality of the term as a new and widespread discursive marker.⁵² Also revealing was a quick scan of the first ten listings for the last decade, the topics of which included: the need to engage politically with terrorists/enemies; helping students engage with their learning; engaging with landscapes through design; nation states engaging with private sector partners; and theologians’ challenges in engaging with papal pronouncements. All relate to addressing complex challenges, and explore the possibilities of positive outcomes. All of them also entail *two-sided* encounters – a point I return to shortly.

It is within this broader discursive context that we need to consider the workings of the concept of ‘engagement’ in relation to media/culture. We are of course not alone in watching and wondering about this explosive emergence. For example, Brodie et al. document its rise in the field of ‘customer engagement’ (citing an increase in the use of the term in research articles’ titles from 9 in 2005, to 65 in 2010). Evan Resnick (documenting its growth in the field of international relations) finds a resulting ‘conceptual fog’, while Robert Talbert (from the field of educational learning theory) describes the concept as ‘so poorly defined as to be nearly meaningless’.⁵³ What is clear, and needs thinking about, is that *everyone involved appears to agree that ‘engagement’ is to be seen as a ‘good thing’, to be encouraged* – even if there is no agreement as to what exactly it is. There is a powerful normative strand in all the fields where it has emerged, which may be contributing to the ‘fog’.

Consider the following clips lifted from quick searches using Google and Google Scholar, selecting in each case the first four *uses* (beyond simple definitions) of the expression ‘engage with’. Read them with an eye to what they each suppose ‘engaging with’ to be and to involve:

“Your Facebook audience is not looking for a sales pitch, and they’re certainly not going to engage with one. They want to engage with content that will make them smile, make them think, or improve their lives in some way.”	https://blog.hootsuite.com/increase-facebook-engagement/
“ENGAGE WITH US: Engaging with us means developing longer-term relationships that benefit everyone involved. By working with us, you can achieve success as we help to	https://www.gla.ac.uk/colleges/arts/knowledge-exchange/engagewithus/

develop your products and processes.”	
“The Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Institute for Government have been working in partnership for six years on the <i>Engaging with Government</i> programme... This programme helps academics develop the knowledge and skills they need to engage effectively with government and parliamentary bodies at all levels, along with the other organisations involved in the policy-making process.”	https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/how-engage-policy-makers
“Using your research to engage with ...: There are lots of resources across the University to help you use your research to interact with organisations or individuals outside academia.”	https://www.ox.ac.uk/research/support-researchers/using-research-engage#
J. Child & S. B. Rodrigues, ‘How Organisations Engage with External Complexity: A Political Action Perspective’	A. Davila et al. (eds.), <i>Understanding Organisations in Complex, Emergent and Uncertain Environments</i> , 2012, pp. 13-44.
Bethan Marshall & Mary Jane Drummond, ‘How teachers engage with Assessment for Learning: lessons from the classroom’	<i>Research Papers in Education</i> , 21:2, 2006, pp. 133-49.
Pablo D’Este & Markus Perkmann, ‘Why do academics engage with industry? The entrepreneurial university and individual motivations’	<i>Journal of Technology Transfer</i> , 36, 2011, pp. 316–339.
Tom Clark, ‘On “being researched”: why do people engage with qualitative research?’	<i>Qualitative Research</i> , 10:4, 2010, pp. 1-21.

Collectively, what do these fragments suggest about the idea of ‘engaging with’? I would suggest the following: that it is *complex*, with many components needing uncovering. It is *strategic*, governed by rules of effectiveness. It is a ‘good thing’, worthy of encouragement. It is *two-sided*, and the interests and motivations of the ‘other side’ have to be examined and learnt from in order for it to work. Achieving ‘engagement’ is a *challenge in its own right*, needing thought, effort and a structured intervention.

Intriguingly, all eight of these are in different ways working from the perspective of those wishing to *promote* engagement, either hoping to sharpen their approaches to ‘customers’, or trying to understand them better for the advancement of their goals. Examination of those being willed into engagement is rarer. One exceptional piece of research comes from Liz Evans.

Evans’ book *Understanding Engagement in Transmedia Culture* is a fine example of critical qualitative research into the lived meanings of a concept, one which has become ‘a

defining aim of the screen industries' (p. 172), centred in the steady and systematic rise of transmedia forms and practices. Based on interviews and focus groups with transmedia practitioners on the one hand, and with audiences and users on the other, the book homes in on a series of differences in the ways 'engagement' is understood by the two sides. For instance, while practitioners tend to be medium-specific in their focus, seeing their role as making best use of the particular features of the medium they work in, audiences look beyond the particular media in which they encounter materials, latching on instead to what they contribute to an overall experience. Practitioners, unsurprisingly, measure engagement in terms of audiences relating to *official* products and services, while audiences see no need to draw a line between official and unofficial resources. While practitioners measure their success by their ability to involve audiences in *conversations* (talking, responding, debating, etc.), audiences measure their engagement in terms of *captivation* (becoming caught up in the experience). And while both sides agree that emotion is a key part of engagement, a distinction emerges between producers' 'feeling an *affect from* content' and audiences' '*feeling affection* for content' (p. 81, emphases in original). Practitioners meanwhile, Evans found, saw engagement pretty much ending at the boundaries of the 'text' to which they were contributing, while audiences were happy to talk about the ways their engagement rolled on into their continuing lives. Evans speaks about this process as one of 'co-creation', 'but that does not prevent each group having very different perspectives on what it means' (p. 175). The book closes with a series of sharp questions about how her conclusions might or might not work in other contexts – for example in relation to theatre, where audiences have less control over the viewing circumstances, or in relation to overtly political materials, where there are different kinds of costs and values in play.

To me, perhaps the most important thing suggested by Evans' book is that this is more than just different understandings of the same phenomenon – the two 'sides' are *playing the same game but by different rules* – which sometimes coincide, sometimes overlap, but may also conflict. This is what I mean by calling 'engagement' bipolar: there are two differently oriented understandings of the rules and purposes of cultural encounters. And although her book is focused entirely in and through the lens of transmedia, Evans is clear that 'it's certainly possible to be engaged through non-transmedia experiences' – it is just that the media and cultural industries are currently engrossed by the possible benefits of transmedia, and this provided the focus for her research.⁵⁴

'Engagement' is an inherently *two-sided* affair: with the histories and motives of cultural makers working on assumptions and with goals markedly different from their 'customers'. But what is not directly considered in her work is *how this might matter*.

"Mattering" matters

Why do we watch/listen/read? According to Linear approaches, this only matters in as much as it might help or hinder 'effects' which are separately driven. According to the U&G approach, for whom this is central, it is a matter of 'needs' seeking satisfaction. According

to the Encoding approach, this is the possible source of negotiations or resistance. According to Psychosocial approaches, this has to do with unresolved traumas and anxieties. But on Engagement approaches, it seems to me, the answer is quite different. Everything turns on how, and how much, the 'encounter' *matters* to audiences. 'Mattering' cannot be disentangled from the particular histories (personal, familial, local, wider) that every person finds him/herself living within. Some (most?) encounters matter very little indeed – witness the number of simply forgotten experiences in everybody's lives. Some (a regular few) are sparked by curiosity, by time-filling, by keeping up with developments. Some (a smaller number) have very complicated drivers, and the more they matter, the more complicated the drivers.

In many ways these are terribly ordinary and unsurprising things to say. But they have implications that are less thought through. We are 'audiences' to thousands of cultural moments every day of our lives, from signs, headlines, adverts, multiple forms of talk, self-presentations by hair, facial expressions, clothes, and so on, and natural items that have become endowed with meanings. This continuous wash of potential experiences goes mainly unacknowledged, if not simply ignored. Once in a while, either one stands out on its own, because it resonates (well or badly) with something in us, or else one is sought out, prepared for, chased down. These are the ones that *matter* to us. What separates the mattering from the unimportant?

I want to draw on two pieces of research – from opposite ends of my audience research career – to introduce and illustrate some ontological components in emergent theories of 'engagement'. In the first substantial audience project I was involved in (conducted and co-authored in 1997 with Kate Brooks⁵⁵), we explored audience engagements with the film adaptation of the comicbook-sourced character *Judge Dredd* (controversially played by Sylvester Stallone) – except we did not at that time use the word 'engagement'. Instead, we experimented with various terms for what we sensed was a needed new vocabulary. A key component in this arose from a reversal of the assumption within cultivation: that the more an audience encounters a phenomenon, the more likely they are to be 'influenced' by it in ways that researchers can predict through their 'expert' judgements on 'messages'. In place of this, what we identified from our interviews and focus groups with more than 100 film-goers were a number of distinct *orientations* to the film, each associated with quite different criteria of evaluation and ways of participating in the experience (where, when, how and with whom the film should ideally be viewed). Briefly, the orientations we located were as follows. An Action-Adventure orientation judged the film in ways similar to fairground attractions, for its stimuli, shocks, pace and drama (and was to be viewed on the biggest screen possible, with mates who would join in loudly with you). A Spectacle orientation judged the film in particular by the novelty and believability of its 'effects', as cinematic achievement (to be viewed again on the biggest screen possible but hopefully in awed silence). A Dredd's Dues orientation evaluated the film against its origins – how well did the film sustain the character and tone of its source ('Dredd' as a multi-dimensional construct from the two-dimensional comicbook source)? –

tensions) between the chosen orientation and other orientations. (Barker & Brooks, p. 236)

A language change from 'investment' to 'engagement' need not alter the substantial points claimed in the remainder. This is the exact obverse of cultivation theory's claims of cumulative influence. It is instead the increasing creation and use of evaluative systems to sort and measure new experiences.

With *Judge Dredd* we were dealing overwhelmingly either with people with well-established criteria and orientations, locating the film within recognisable generic structures; or with very casual, largely *disengaged* viewers for whom the film was a passing experience with little or no aftermath. There were (we noted at the time) hardly any signs of *surprise* responses, or of *discoveries*. But in a forthcoming essay, I have been able to explore a very particular case of *life-altering* encounters, in a study of very young audiences' responses to the *Lord of the Rings* and *Hobbit* film trilogies.⁵⁶

Based on a chance discovery in the two projects' databases, I realised that one expression encapsulated for its users an *experienced moment of transcendence*: 'amazing/amazed'. But the really startling further discovery was that these were intensely age-localised. While in our overall databases these terms were typically used by between 3-5% of all respondents, the figure among the under-16s topped 15%. And because of the way we gathered information about ages with *The Hobbit* – we asked for year of birth – I was able to localise this even further, and found that among 13-14 year olds the figure rose to over 20%. These references to 'amazement' were located within their open answers to how and why they had rated the films, so I had substantial contextual talk to examine. As one clear example, consider the following:

The most amazing trilogy of films that will ever be made. I believe they did a great job casting the actors and with the special effects. It is just fantastic! It has made my whole life seem different, like I live in a new world. There is so much to say and it also has a meaning to the films. There is something that will be left behind. And I think that is all the loyalty that the fans will have over the years to come. There will be more fans as the years pass. No one will ever forget Middle Earth. Just the sense that there is more to this world than there is in our actual life. People would love to live the life of Middle Earth. It brings this strange feeling to all the fans, and it will stay with them, forever. I love it and I always think of it EVERYDAY of my life ever since I watched the films. Is it bad that I dream of it? Well, either way, all the fans are crazy in love with *The Hobbit*. For anyone who has not watched *The Hobbit* and/or *The Lord of the Rings*, then I feel bad for them because they have no idea what on Middle Earth they are missing. My life would be incomplete if it were not for *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. And yes, I mean it. [#10091 (*Hobbit* database) age 14]

There is of course no way of knowing how long this girl will have held on to this exceptional response, but that doesn't matter. The sense of a life for a while felt to be transformed, enlarged, is undeniable. And the awareness that she is not alone in this becomes important to her experience. Another response – also female – localises the experience a little more:

My response to the film was very emotional. I felt a great connection with the Hobbits and the friendship theme that ran throughout the film. The film was amazing and I cried throughout it as well as for the last 20 minutes straight (approx.). This film means the world to me at the moment and it's helped me to figure out a lot in my life. I will always remember it and how it's helped me.
[#12798 LOTR, under-16]

Responses such as these, set alongside the more genre-driven reactions to *Judge Dredd*, make clear that we need to be dealing with a series of *dimensions*: between formative moments and sedimented expectations; and between disappointed ideals and achieved expansions. In each case, they are the result of a 'momentary' encounter, when the outcomes of the work of culture-makers rub up against differently formed audiences – two histories meeting, and (if the encounter works and 'matters') *resonating*.

Resonance

As this essay nears its end, I want to look briefly at this idea of resonance, drawing on Burland and Pitts' excellent edited collection *Coughing and Clapping*, which brings together a range of close examinations of live music experiences, under the rubric of seeing audience engagements as 'provid[ing] audiences with ways of assimilating a musical life narrative from the fragmentary nature of being an audience member' (pp. 3-4).⁵⁷ One essay in particular captures the dynamics of this. Sidsel Karlsen⁵⁸ analyses participants' responses to attending a 2006 festival, in the North Bothnia region of Sweden, drawing on the work of Alf Gabrielsson. Gabrielsson broke new ground with his study of 'strong experiences of music', identifying a series of contributory factors to people gaining, valuing and recalling powerful responses to different kinds of music.⁵⁹ These covered personal (eg, emotional state, knowledge, and maturity), situational (eg, the occasion, the listening environment), and musical (eg, the music's structure, performance quality) elements. Karlsen documents the way the festival coalesces around a powerful sense of regional identity, drawing together 'emotional, memory and identity work' (p. 123), in particular through one local band reuniting after more than a decade. The *particular* is fascinating, but the broader sense of something *generative, emergent* out of the resonance is also important.

This is the risky proposition to which I have been heading: that the more that a cultural encounter *matters* to its participants, the greater its tendency to be felt to be unified, an expressive totality – whether by achievement, or by measurement of failure to achieve its potential.

‘Status’

Being so essentially two-sided has an important consequence. A great deal turns on the perception and understanding that each side has of the other, what we can call ‘figures of the audience’, and ‘figures of the producer’. A good deal of useful work has been done on the first of these – although with particular emphasis on the ‘figures’ deployed by critics and censors, as part of their culture-control efforts (who are the ‘possible audiences’ and how might they be influenced?). Other pieces of research have explored how particular producers conceive their audiences, and design and tailor their productions (and distribution practices) according to the likely responses of buyers and users.⁶⁰ But – unless I have missed it – much less work has been done on the ways in which different audiences conceive the intentions and ‘trustworthiness’ of producers, and the various ways this feeds into their responses to what is produced.⁶¹

Conclusion

In sum, then, I am arguing that as a concept ‘engagement’ distinguishes itself from other approaches to the relations of culture/media to audiences in a number of potential (as yet incomplete, inconsistent) ways:

- within an explosive growth in the last 25 years, it has particularly found grammatical form in the expression ‘engaging *with*’, suggesting complex, multi-layered activities over time – unpacking all the implications of this remains a task, and especially rescuing it from over-focus on transmedia;
- it works through the notion of *encounters*, where the outcomes of the different histories of makers and receivers/users rub up against each other – but the boundaries of an ‘encounter’ are highly variable;
- it works through the crucial dimension of *mattering*, with high levels of engagement generating *productive resonances* – and mapping the different ways that audiences *care about* their media/culture remains largely to be done;
- within those resonances, conceptions of each other (‘figures’ of the makers, ‘figures’ of the audience) play an important role – tackling these has only been begun on.

The outcome of all these is the realisation of the *generative power* of resonant media/culture, emerging in the form of unified and potentially universalisable experiences and propositions: *expressive potentialities*. ‘Engagements that matter’ are not directly visible processes – but not simply because they (or at least part of them) take place within individuals’ private consciousness. It is also, I’ve argued, because they inhabit points of intersection between personal, local, and communal histories. A significant cultural experience *emerges from* the encounter. It is ontologically real at least in as much as it contains energies, and has consequences and implications. Whether it is best to think of this as an entity or a force or a structure is a matter of debate. For here, thinking about

‘engagement’ inexorably meets up with and interacts with a history of debates about other powerful but ‘invisible’ things: cultural climates, structures of feeling, world-views, world-visions, discursive structures, hegemony, ideology. Here, once again, the fundamental nature of human potentials, paradigms and the means of knowing the signs of these, and claims about the ‘nature of things’ coalesce and challenge us anew.

Biographical note:

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Notes:

¹ See Didina González, ‘Audience engagement: what *Game of Thrones* can teach L&D’. Found at: <https://www.personneltoday.com/hr/audience-engagement-game-thrones-can-teach-ld/>. Accessed 23 March 2021.

² Elizabeth Evans, *Understanding Engagement in Transmedia Culture*, London: Routledge, 2020 – see especially Chapter 1.

³ See for instance Richard P. Adler & Judy Goggin, ‘What do we mean by “civic education”?’ , *Journal of Transformative Education*, 3:3, 2005, pp. 236-53.

⁴ See for instance R. Edelman. *Public engagement: The evolution of public relations*. Paper presented at the First Annual Grunig Lecture, University of Maryland, October 2008; and Kim Johnston, ‘Public relations and engagement: Theoretical imperatives of a multidimensional concept’, *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 26:5, 2014, pp.381-383.

⁵ See for instance Greg Kearsley and Ben Shneiderman, ‘Engagement Theory: A Framework for Technology-Based Teaching and Learning’, *Educational Technology*, 1998, 38:5, pp.20-23.

⁶ See for instance Advertising Research Foundation (2006) *Engagement: Definitions and Anatomy*, White Paper, available online at www.arf.org; and Rossella C. Gambetti & Guendalina Graffigna, ‘The concept of engagement: A systematic analysis of the ongoing marketing debate’, *International Journal of Market Research*, 2010, 52:6, pp.801-26.

⁷ See for instance Laura Zakaras & Julia Lowell, *Cultivating Demand for the Arts: Arts Learning, Arts Engagement, and State Arts Policy*, RAND 2008.

- ⁸ See for instance Christopher Peters, Ginevra Castellano & Sara de Freitas, 'An Exploration of User Engagement in HCI', *AFFINE '09: Proceedings of the International Workshop on Affective-Aware Virtual Agents and Social Robots*, November 2009, No. 9, pp.1–3.
- ⁹ See for instance Phoebe Sengers & Chris Csikszentmihályi, 'HCI and the Arts: A Conflicted Convergence?', *CHI 2003*, April 5–10, 2003, pp. 876-7.
- ¹⁰ Jennifer Radbourne, Hilary Glow & Katya Johansen, 'Measuring the intrinsic benefits of arts attendance', *Cultural Trends*, 19:4, pp. 307-24.
- ¹¹ See especially the *Journal of Fandom Studies* (2012-), and *Transformative Works and Cultures* (2008-). And see an intriguing exploration of a particular case of *refusal* to become 'acafans': Matt Hills, 'Shared trajectories and "figures of the fan audience" in comics studies and fan studies: Arrested development ... or transmedial developments?', *Participations*, 17:2, 2020, pp. 161-84.
- ¹² Indicatively, the phrase 'social media engagement' summons up nigh on 4 million hits on a Google search, while an alternative wording, 'public media engagement', generates a mere 14,000.
- ¹³ Sue Turnbull, commenting on my essay, emphasised that different approaches perceive this relationship differently, with 'engagement' theories giving the greatest weight to allowing gathered evidence to drive the development of theories (as against looking for evidence to confirm or disconfirm already 'established' concepts and theories). I agree, strongly, with this estimation.
- ¹⁴ Leslie Stevenson, *Thirteen Theories of Human Nature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- ¹⁵ Norman Geras, *Marx and Human Nature: Refutation of a Legend*, London: Verso, 1983.
- ¹⁶ Kuhn, Thomas, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1962.
- ¹⁷ See S. Scott Graham, *The Politics of Pain Medicine: A Rhetorical-Ontological Inquiry*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015.
- ¹⁸ T. M. S. Evens, 'Twins are Birds and a Whale is a Fish, a Mammal, a Submarine: Revisiting "Primitive Mentality" as a Question of Ontology', *Social Analysis*, 56:3, 2012, pp. 1-11.
- ¹⁹ 'A longitudinal review of the anthropological literature will show that usage of the concept of "ontology" has increased dramatically: Drawing on Google Scholar one can see that between 1960 and 1990 there were only eight articles published which had anthropology and ontology related words in the title, while between 1990 and 2016 the number was approximately 90. ... [O]ur impression is that these 90 merely comprise the tip of the proverbial iceberg.' Bjørn Enge Bertelsen & Synnøve Bendixsen, *Critical Anthropological Engagements in Human Alterity and Difference*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2016, p. 1.
- ²⁰ Helen De Cruz & Johan De Smedt, 'The role of intuitive ontologies in scientific understanding – the case of human evolution', *Biology and Philosophy*, 22, 2007, pp. 351-68.
- ²¹ Anne M. Kakaliouras, 'An Anthropology of Repatriation: Contemporary Physical Anthropological and Native American Ontologies of Practice', *Current Anthropology*, 53: Supplement 5. It is worth noting that occasionally these issues have been raised within media/cultural studies: see for instance Birgitta Höijer, 'Ontological Assumptions and Generalisations in Qualitative (Audience) Research', *European Journal of Communication*, 23:3, 2008: pp. 275–294.
- ²² Annemarie Mol, *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002.
- ²³ 'My informants do not use this word as insistently as I do. They have various local alternatives (claudication, stenosis, vascular disease, plaque formation, macrovascular complications). But "atherosclerosis" is the word they use when they want to talk to one another.' (p. 117)

²⁴ Torben Elgaard Jensen & Brit Ross Winthereik, 'Review of *The Body Multiple*', *Acta Sociologica*, 2005, pp. 266-8.

²⁵ One other recent development needs at least a brief mention: the emergence of the notion of 'computational ontologies'. Arising in the areas of information systems and artificial intelligence, this developed very much in response to the need to handle and integrate increasingly large and complex bodies of data from different sources. Sharply differentiating itself from the traditional philosophical concerns with the singular 'nature of reality', computational ontologies are determinedly multiple, embracing the possibility of building them for many bounded 'domains of discourse'. In an early 'tutorial' on their possibilities, Rajiv Kishore & Raj Sharman ('Computational Ontologies and Information Systems I: Foundations', *Communications of the Association for Information Systems*: Vol. 14, 2004, Article 8) note their rise is 'chemistry, enterprise management, geography, linguistics, mathematics, medicine, and sociology'.

We can see how this works in one application to the field of audience research: the very recent Glasgow-led 'Beyond The Multiplex' project, a study of the availability of non-mainstream cinemas and films across the regions of the UK, which sought to code and interrelate evidence from expert interviews, policy documents, audience focus groups and surveys. See Matthew Hanchard et al., 'Being part of an audience: Patterns of contemporary film audience experience', *Participations* 17.2, 2020, pp. 115-32. For an exposition of the methods involved, see Peter Merrington et al., 'Using mixed-methods, a data model and a computational ontology in film audience research', *Cultural Trends*, 28:2-3, 2019, pp. 118-131.)

²⁶ Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750-1990*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

²⁷ On 'exposure' as a concept, see my 'Audiences Я Us', in Roger Dickinson, Olga Linné & Ramaswami Harindranath (eds.), *Approaches to Audiences*, London: Arnold 1998, pp.184-91.

²⁸ Anthony Gierzynski (with Kathryn Eddy), *Harry Potter and the Millennials: Research Methods and the Politics of the Muggle Generation*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013; Anthony Gierzynski, *The Political Effects of Entertainment Media: How Fictional Worlds Affect Real World Political Perspectives*, Lanham, NJ: Lexington Books, 2018.

²⁹ Mind you, as is noted at greater length in Barker et al., *Watching Game of Thrones* (Manchester University Press 2021), Gierzynski is inconsistent in this. In the later book, a different 'analysis' groups Voldemort within a canon of all-out-evil villains, for whom 'exposure to villains who were portrayed as pure evil ... would elicit harsher, more punitive attitudes' (p.111). This surely demonstrates the weakness of singular analyses capturing universal 'values'.

³⁰ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uses_and_gratifications_theory.

³¹ See Garth Jowett et al., *Children and the Movies: Media Influence and the Payne Fund Controversy*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

³² Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson & Hazel Gaudet, *The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes up his Mind in a Presidential Campaign*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1944; Robert Merton, *Mass Persuasion: the Social Psychology of a War Bond Drive*, Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1946.

³³ Anita Whiting & David Williams, 'Why people use social media: a uses and gratifications approach', *Qualitative Market Research*, 16:4, 2013. Found at: <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/QMR-06-2013-0041/full/html>.

- ³⁴ For the key text in this period, see Jay Blumler & Elihu Katz, *The Uses of Mass Communication: Current Perspectives on Gratification Research*, Beverly Hills: Sage, 1974.
- ³⁵ For an interesting overview of U&G work (which usefully covers its recent re-emergence in relation to digital media), see Weiyan Liu, 'A Historical Overview of Uses and Gratifications Theory', *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 11:9, 2015, pp. 71-78. Found at: <http://www.cscanada.org/index.php/ccc/article/view/7415>.
- ³⁶ See Bernard Berelson, 'What "missing the newspaper" means', in P. F. Lazarsfeld & F. Stanton, *Communications Research, 1948-1949*, New York: Harper, 1949; and William R Elliott & William L. Rosenberg, 'The 1985 Philadelphia Newspaper Strike: A Uses and Gratifications Study', *Journalism Quarterly*, 64:4, pp. 679-87.
- ³⁷ I borrow this telling expression from Ernest Mathijs.
- ³⁸ Matthew Pittman & Kim Sheehan, 'Sprinting a media marathon: Uses and gratifications of binge-watching through Netflix', *First Monday*, 20:10, 2015. Found at: <https://journals.uic.edu/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/6138>.
- ³⁹ Stuart Hall, 'Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse', Paper for the Council of Europe Colloquy on 'Training in the Critical Reading of Televisual Language', Leicester, September 1973. The essay has been reprinted many times, but almost always in an edited form which loses a good deal of the flavour of Hall's argument. The original can be found at: <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/81670115.pdf>. Hall's full speech makes clear how strongly his approach was conceived as a challenge to the 'effects tradition'. In particular he was among the first to draw attention to the way that approach operates on an assumption of a *split* in media materials, between persuasive 'vehicles' which use basic psychological appeals to 'open' viewers to influence; and 'messages' which accumulate and leave residues in them. Hall illustrates his argument with the example of 'violence' in Westerns to show the difference between an 'effects' and a critical/semiotic approach.
- ⁴⁰ Charlotte Brunson & David Morley, *Everyday Television: Nationwide*, London: British Film Institute, 1978; David Morley, *The Nationwide Audience: Structure and Decoding*, London: British Film Institute, 1980.
- ⁴¹ Celeste Condit, 'The Rhetorical Limits to Polysemy', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 6:2, 1989, pp. 103-22.
- ⁴² 'Reflections upon the Encoding/Decoding Model: An Interview with Stuart Hall', in John Cruz & Justin Lewis (eds.), *Viewing, Reading, Listening: Audiences and Cultural Reception*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994, pp. 253-74.
- ⁴³ Lia Friesem, 'Holocaust Tweets as an Act of Resistance', *Israel Studies Review*, 33:2, 2018, pp. 85-104.
- ⁴⁴ Bill Yousman, 'Revisiting Hall's "Encoding/Decoding" Model: Ex-Prisoners Respond to Television Representations of Incarceration', *Review of Education, Pedagogy and Cultural Studies*, 35:3, 2013, pp. 197-216.
- ⁴⁵ See for instance Lorraine Gamman & Margaret Marshment (eds.), *The Female Gaze*, London: The Women's Press, 1988.
- ⁴⁶ Valerie Walkerdine, 'Video replay: families, films, and fantasy', in Victor Burgin et al. (eds.), *Formations of Fantasy*, London: Routledge 1986, pp. 167-99. See also the section of *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* (15:4, 2010) devoted to the debates it engendered.

⁴⁷ Candida Yates, “‘Video Replay: Families, films and fantasy’ as a transformational text: Commentary on Valerie Walkerdine’s ‘Video Replay’”, *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* 15:4, 2010, pp. 404-411.

⁴⁸ Jo Whitehouse-Hart, *Psychosocial Explorations of Film and Television Viewing: Ordinary Audience*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014.

⁴⁹ I have to note a wider problem in her account of the main traditions of audience research. Aside from a long discussion of Ellen Seiter’s (1980) ‘troubling interview’ essay, there are surprisingly few references to examples of audience research in the cultural studies tradition. Yet Whitehouse-Hart feels able to claim that ‘it is presumed that what the subject tells the researcher is largely truthful, transparent and coherent’ (p. 55). I honestly cannot think of a piece of discursively-oriented research of which this would be a reasonable description.

⁵⁰ For a simple contemporary example of this, see the very recent claims of the American Psychological Association about ‘violent video games’: <https://www.apa.org/about/policy/violent-video-games>.

⁵¹ Ernest Mathijs has suggested another set of linkages to me. In recent debates about the discomfort experienced by LGBTQ+ audiences at watching negative images of queer sexualities, an emergent model of near-trauma – only to be known autobiographically – appears to be at work. I am intrigued by this linkage but not able to explore it here. See for example Red Broadwell, ‘The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: Leatherface and Gender’, Editorial, *Gayly Dreadful*, 8 February 2021 (found at: <https://www.gaylydreadful.com/blog/editorial-the-texas-chain-saw-massacre-leatherface-and-gender>). And see Dan Vona’s presentation about teaching *Dressed To Kill* at the 2021 SCMS Conference.

⁵² These figures are indicative only. It needs to be borne in mind that the datasets upon which WorldCat draws increase steadily across this period. Even so, the massive rise from around the millennium is astonishing.

⁵³ Roderick J. Brodie et al., ‘Customer Engagement: Conceptual Domain, Fundamental Propositions, and Implications for Research’, *Journal of Service Research*, 14:3, 2011, pp. 252-271; Evan Resnick, ‘Defining Engagement,’ *Journal of International Affairs*, 54:2, 2001, pp. 551-566; Robert Talbert, ‘Engaging with the concept of engagement’, found at <http://rtalbert.org/engaging-with-engagement/>. An interesting precursor to recent theorisations of ‘engagement’ comes out of work on the benefits of new learning technologies, which were enthusiastically promoted by many in the years to the millennium. In 1998 for instance Kearsley and Schneiderman outlined a ‘theory of engagement’ relating to ‘distance learning’ environments for students (‘Engagement Theory: A Framework for Technology-Based Teaching and Learning’, *Educational Technology*, 38:5, 1998, pp. 20-23). They sketch in three components for effectiveness: collaborative learning (‘Relate’); purposeful activities (‘Create’); and the genuine usefulness of the contribution (‘Donate’).

It is the pursuit of an *enriched* and *multifaceted* mode here that interestingly prefigures the normative thrust of contemporary theories of media/culture engagement. But it should remind us that phenomena such as this rarely have single origins or fixed starting points.

⁵⁴ Liz Evans, Email to author, 6 July 2020.

⁵⁵ Martin Barker & Kate Brooks, *Knowing Audiences: Judge Dredd, its Friends, Fans and Foes*, Luton: University of Luton Press, 1997.

⁵⁶ Martin Barker, 'An Empirical Report on Young People's Responses to Adult Fantasy Films', in Noel Brown (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Children's Film*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, *forthcoming 2022*.

⁵⁷ Karen Burland & Stephanie Pitts (eds.), *Coughing and Clapping: Investigating Audience Experience*, London: Routledge, 2014.

⁵⁸ Sidsen Karlsen, 'Context, Cohesion and Community: Characteristics of Festival Audience Members' Strong Experiences with Music', in Burland & Pitts (eds.), pp. 115-26.

⁵⁹ Alf Gabrielsson, *Strong Experiences with Music*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

⁶⁰ This necessarily requires access to producers' intentions, whether through documentation or methods such as interviews. On one occasion I was able to achieve this, in relation to a planned UK comic, *Alternity*, when I was granted access to its planning processes, prototypes, and audience testing. See Martin Barker, 'Very nearly in front of the children: the story of *Alternity*', in Cary Bazalgette & David Buckingham (eds.), *In Front of the Children: Screen Entertainment and Young Audiences*, London: BFI 1995, pp. 201-16.

⁶¹ One partial exception has to be work on the ambitions and achievements of 'co-creation' in theatre. See for instance Ben Walmsley. 'Co-creating theatre: Authentic engagement or inter-legitimation?', *Cultural Trends*, 22:2, 2013, pp. 108-18.