

What is engagement in communication research? Circulation of meanings and consequences for audience studies

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Abstract:

The aim of this article is to analyse the meanings of 'engagement' deployed in media and communication journals over the last five years (2016-2020), in 502 articles found through the Web of Science. Through the analysis of their abstracts, supported by Iramuteq software, this research has identified four categories: a) media effects and proximity to behavioural science; b) participation and citizenship perspectives, with links to science studies; c) structures and uses of social media; d) organisational communication. The circulation of engagement, as a concept, presents a multiplicity of meanings involving other theoretical traditions, not always in congruence with audience studies traditions, but which may even revisit certain 'media effects' frameworks, for example. Thus, the analysis of this concept in a specific time frame and broader theoretical context helps to understand the struggles around the concept and its different theoretical affiliations. The results highlight the polysemy of the concept, and that there is no preponderance of social media engagement. From the presentation of the results, we discuss their blind-spots and consequences for audience studies.

Keywords: communication research, engagement, audience studies

Introduction

The word ‘engagement’ has its etymological origins in French and means commitment or involvement with something or someone. Commitment denotes an alignment to a certain perspective. Engagement means a range of different affections and emotions, not always in agreement. In this sense, the history of engagement, as a word and concept, already presents multiple meanings. The same thing happens in the academic field. Some critical researchers, for example, tend to understand engagement as synonymous with political commitment (Freire 2000). In organisational and psychological studies, the term is synonymous with alignment, especially to managerial prescriptions (Bakker, Albrecht & Leiter 2011). In game studies, meanwhile, there is an interactive and positive view of engagement from psychological and physiological perspectives (Boyle et al 2012).

This means that the term presents multiple theoretical and epistemological meanings and can delineate distinct research perspectives. ‘Engagement’ is not the same everywhere. The circulation of words in the social world is neither neutral nor free of values. In fact, they are places of disputes, tensions and struggles (Hall 1991 [1973]). Thus, expressions in the academic field present a circulation of meanings (Silverstone 1999). Here we emphasize that this circulation of symbols does not take place only in the traditional understanding of ‘media’, but also the scientific field (Bourdieu 1975) is a central place for understanding the uses of a concept. After all, science is not an institution isolated from society.

The special issue of the *Media Industries* journal about ‘engagement’ is an indication of this multiplicity of meanings around this notion in communication research. The editors of the special issue, Annette Hill and Jeanette Steemers (2017), state that, for the media industries, engagement is understood from the point of view of ratings and of something to be ‘captured’ by the media industries, while there are other visions that prioritize civic and citizen issues. This is ‘a complex semantics of engagement as a concept that captures different interests, feelings, and involvements – from love, hate to indifference’ (Hill & Steemers 2017, p. 3). According to the authors, this semantics transforms meanings in media work, in people’s relations with media content, and in the sector policies.

The interest of media and communication research in issues of engagement in the last decade appears in the context of digital media and platforms and the changes in the roles of audience and fandom (Livingstone 2019). This is exemplified by the emergence of special issues such as those of Hill & Steemers (2017). The growing popularity of the term ‘engagement’ also relates to expressions such as social media engagement, from instructions and metrics on how to increase popularity and visibility in social media. Thus, this perspective may tend to replicate functionalist views of communication, and the consumer or audience is understood as a target audience for measurement strategies. Thus, this article addresses the following research question: how has the concept of engagement been understood in the communication research?

How does this relate to audience research? How is the understanding of engagement prevailing in the area related to social media? This means considering which theoretical

approaches, objects and epistemological reflections predominate around the notion of engagement.

On the one hand, as we will explain below, ‘engagement’ is not a new word in communication studies, especially in cultural and audience studies. On the other hand, the current context has presented different circulations of meaning for the concept, including related to social media, metrics, measurements and digital traces. The research on engagement still shows it to be a very broad term without in-depth discussions about its consequences (Brodie et al 2011, Corner 2017). This article analyses the meanings of ‘engagement’ in journals of communication and media research in the last five years (2016-2020), drawing on 502 articles present in the Web of Science. Through the analysis of the abstracts, supported by Iramuteq software, this research has identified four distinct categories: a) media effects and proximity to behavioural science; b) participation and citizenship perspectives, with links to science studies; c) structures and uses of social media; d) organisational communication. The results highlight the polysemy of the concept and that there is no preponderance of social media engagement. From the presentation of the results, we discuss its consequences for audience studies.

Engagement in Audience Studies

‘Engagement’ is not a new word in media research and communication, especially in audience studies. The term appears in articles by Sonia Livingstone (1994; 1998) in the 1990s to mean the relationships between media and people in everyday life, i.e. what provides people’s connections and linkages to the media depending on social contexts, e.g. Class and gender issues: ‘the audience’s engagement with media is complexly context-dependent’ (Livingstone 1998, p. 9). This issue also appears in Silverstone (1999), for whom the relations between media and everyday life involve producers and consumers in more or less continuous activities of engagement and disengagement.

However, media engagement is, for Livingstone (2007), not only an issue for audience studies, but also for media literacy. With this, it underlines the critical capacity of media engagement in relation to civic potentialities. Thus, engagement is not synonymous with metrics and measurement, but with the capacity to engage, through the media, in debates in the public sphere and to carry out media critique. Similarly, researches such as those by Norris (2001), Rheingold (2008) and Dahlgren (2009) relate communication and democracy to terms such as ‘political engagement’ and ‘civic engagement’. Rheingold (2008), for example, shows how participatory media (such as Wikipedia in his study) can foster civic engagement, especially by younger people. In the same direction, Dahlgren (2009) puts engagement as synonymous with participation, always in a political sense. This vision is also shared by authors such as Couldry, Livingstone and Markham (2007), and Fotopoulou and Couldry (2015) as relationships between public engagement and media practices.

Thus, a broad perspective that can help us understand in which ways media engagement provides reflections on culture and society (Staiger 2005). Livingstone and Das

(2013) underline that engagement takes place with the media, but also with people through the media. And this happens in different dimensions. Therefore, we need ‘to understand how people engage not only in terms of motivation, choice, or habit but also in semiotic terms, whether accepting, creative, or critical, with media texts old and news’ (Livingstone & Das 2013, p. 13). So, on the one hand, it is not only sociological dimensions that affect engagement, but also discursive and intertextual issues, interdiscursivity and meanings. In another dimension, there is the critical question of engagement. To paraphrase Fuchs (2017) from his criticism of the notion of ‘participation’, engaging with the media does not always mean something to be celebrated uncritically by researchers, and he cites the example of fans of Nazism. This means linking media engagement also to social and political positions that subjects occupy in society.

There is also another perspective which aims to relate engagement, in a stronger and more specific way, to media practices, especially works and their relations with fandom (Hills 2002, Sandvoss, 2005, Bird 2011). Gray (2003), for example, relates engagement to ‘close readings’ (Gray 2003, p. 69) with a view to analysing the level of engagement in relation to television (in this case mainly anti-fans and non-fans) and how this relationship also relates to media textualities. According to Hills (2002), the engagement of fans refers to imaginative and emotional issues with subjective significance – that is, to the production of meaning for the subjects in the face of the works with which it relates.

La Pastina (2005), in turn, accounts for engagement in relation to the totality of the media experience, from a reading about the show to the act of watching it and remembering it from three processes: reading, interpretation and change. In this research, we identify a more restricted focus on people’s relationships with the media and their different dimensions of involvement and connection from these relationships. This vision is shared by Corner (2017), for whom ‘around each media product, a variety of levels of engagement/involvement will be generated across audiences who bother to attend at all’ (Corner 2017, p. 2).

That is, there is a broader vision that relates media engagement to political, public and citizen engagement, and another, more restricted, that focuses on engaging with the media and people’s experiences as fans from engagement with products. Certainly, the second option may also involve political issues, but it is not the focus of the theorization on engagement. The two perspectives can also relate engagement to media materialities - i.e. the specifics of the subjects’ engagement with the media depending on what those means are. However, these perspectives – close to the audience and reception studies related to cultural studies – are not the only ones present in communication research. This means that the circulation of the concept of engagement may present a multiplicity of meanings involving other theoretical traditions, not always in congruence with cultural studies traditions, but which may even revisit certain perspectives on media effects, for example. In this way, the analysis of this concept in a specific time frame and broader theoretical context helps to understand the struggles around the concept and its different theoretical affiliations.

Method

We initially selected 502 articles with the word ‘engagement’ (in English) in the title, within communication research, according to the Web of Science Database categorization. We restricted our analysis to articles published in peer-reviewed journals between the years 2016 and 2020. The sample consisted of 89 articles published in 2016, 97 in 2017, 117 in 2018, 108 in 2019, and 58 in 2020. The articles were selected from 133 journals that publish articles in English from 50 different cities in Europe, Oceania, Africa, Asia, North and South America.

For the analysis of the text corpus, we used the *Interface de R pour les Analyses Multidimensionnelles de Textes et de Questionnaires (Iramuteq)*, created by Pierre Ratinaud. Iramuteq is developed in the Python language and uses functionalities provided by the statistical software R. Iramuteq provides various possibilities of qualitative data processing, since it allows different forms of statistical analysis of texts produced from interviews and documents, among others (Reinert, 1990; Chartier, 2011). For this article, we use primarily the Descending Hierarchical Classification Method (CHD), proposed by Reinert (1990), which classifies text segments and their vocabularies based on the frequency of words and matrices intersecting segments of texts in repeated qui-square tests. Through CHD based on Iramuteq for processing qualitative data it is possible to identify classes and a connection between them, which further allowed for secure and credible data analysis (Chartier, 2011). This analysis makes it possible to organise classes of text segments that have similar vocabulary to each other and different vocabulary from the segments of the other classes. Graphically, from the lexical analysis and Class organisation, the software organises the data analysis in a dendrogram (see **Figure 1**, below) of the CHD, illustrating the classes, their relationships and semantic contexts.

Results

After identifying the lexical classes using the IRAMUTEQ software, from the text corpus composed of the 502 abstracts, we classify the most cited articles according to the four classes presented by the software. Then, we conducted an exploratory study based on selection of five articles from each of the classes.

From the dendrogram, we argue that there is a polysemy of the concept of engagement in communication research. Although the four classes are not isolated from each other (we have identified approximations and lexical overlaps between them), there are four fields of study with significant distinctions. The greater prevalence of Classes 1 and 2 shows that there is, for example, no prevalence of an approach related to social media engagement. The way of conceiving engagement primarily as user interactions with a post or profile, signifying likes, comments and sharing, comprised the least present Class in the analysed articles, with just 15.6%. Although a significant proportion of the articles do not show greater theoretical and epistemological efforts to conceptualise engagement, we can still identify four epistemic bases for the studies: media effects, uses and gratification,

participatory turn and organisational communication. And, even within Class 3, there are variations in this way of conceiving the concept. This means that we need to explore the various ways in which the concept is understood by communication research. Thus, we have selected 20 articles for in-depth reading, the most cited in each of the four classes, according to the CHD, in the years 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020.

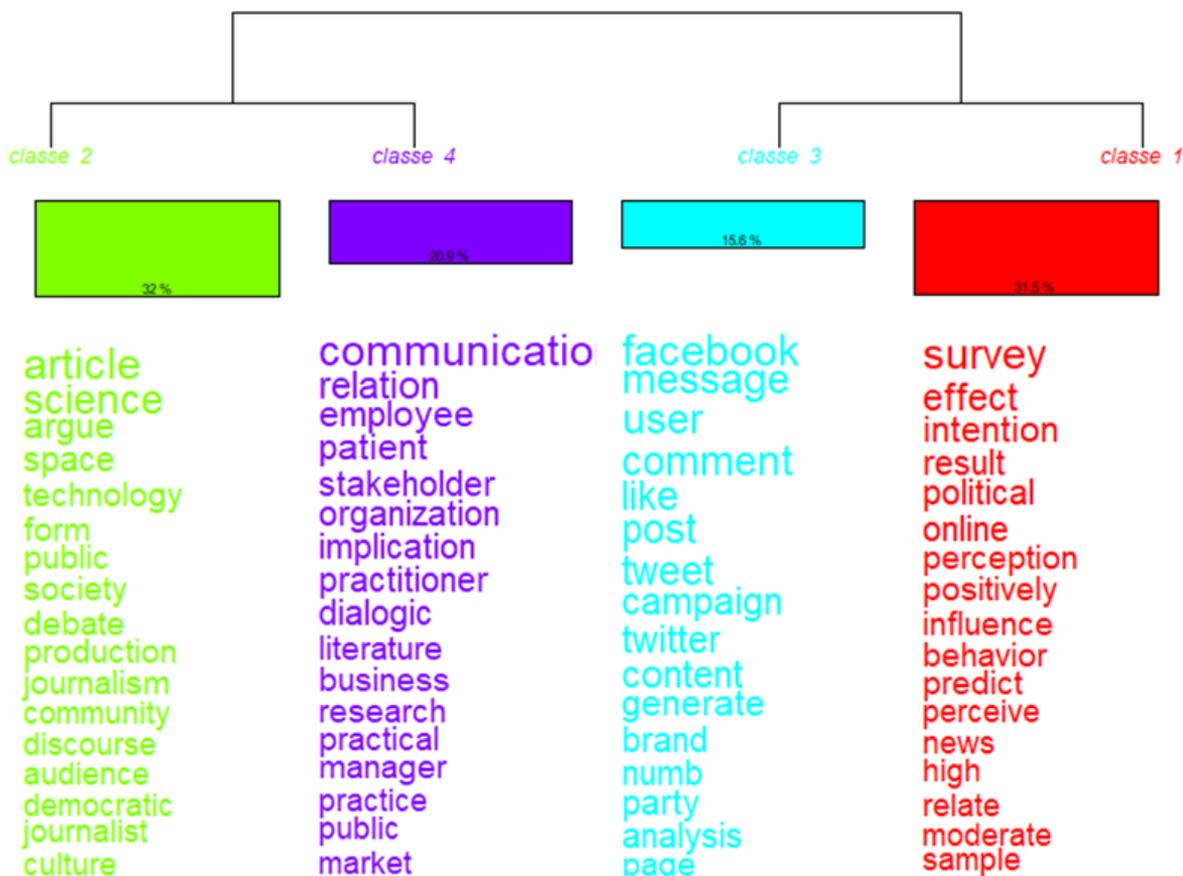


Figure 1: Dendrogram prepared with Iramuteq, based on 502 abstracts.

Class 1

Class 1 is the only one that presents two words related to methodological questions, ‘survey’ and ‘sample’. However, although we have verified in our sample of these studies that have used statistical techniques in order to understand the opinions, behaviours and attitudes of previously selected universes of the population – in Hong Kong (Chan, 2016), Örebro, Sweden (Kruikemeier; Shehata, 2016), the Midwestern United States (Ha et al, 2016) and Chile (Valenzuela et. al, 2019) – this is not exactly the main defining feature of the studies located in this Class. The words ‘effect’, ‘intention’ and ‘result’, on the other hand, signal the theoretical-epistemological matrix that fundamentally characterizes this field of studies: the paradigm of effects. The words ‘political’ and ‘online’ present two fundamental characteristics: the predominantly political perspective of engagement in this Class and online media as the main focus of analysis.

The analysis of effects has played an important role in the history and development of functionalist theory in communication research. However, as Livingstone (1996) argues, there are continuing problems in its predominance in audience research. Research on the concept of engagement also reinforces the persistence of the media effects approach in communication research. This theoretical affiliation with the pioneering studies of functionalist media sociology is explicit in Chan's (2016) article, which brings the reflections on opinion leaders of Katz and Lazarsfeld (1964) together with the work of friends of politicians, activists and influential organisations on Facebook, and of Kümpel (2020, p. 2), which uses Merton's (1968) 'Matthew Effect'¹ concept to analyse the use of social media news, suggesting that there is '(relative) enrichment among users already interested in news and (relative) impoverishment among those with little or no interest in current affairs information'.

Chan (2016) aims to relativise the understanding of previous studies that presented positive links between the use of social network sites (SNSs) and political engagement, because they did not take into account the various ways in which SNSs can influence political participation. Here, notions of political engagement and political participation are treated as equivalent. To understand the effects of Facebook on political engagement, Chan (2016) uses the O-S-R-O-R (Orientation - Stimulus - Reasoning - Orientation - Response) model of political communication effects. There are two elements to this model of the pioneering hypodermic needle proposal: Stimulus and Response. The author considered four characteristics of Facebook: 'network size, connections with public political actors, use for news, and use for opinion expression', based on recent theories on the media effects on political participation (Chan, 2016, p.3). For the author, in addition to the direct effects, the O-S-R-O-R model has made it possible to see the role of news and connections in social media promote more opportunities for expression, which can provide political effectiveness and engagement. Chan (2016) concludes that the size of the Facebook network and its connections with public actors have direct and indirect effects on political participation. Facebook news has shown indirect effects mainly through political expression. This research points out the direct and indirect effects of Facebook on 'democratic engagement' (Chan, 2016, p. 3), which relates to the perceptions of citizens about their ability to participate and influence politics.

The second article analysed, by Kruike-meier and Shehata (2016), analyses what they call 'reinforcing spirals' between the use of news media and two forms of manifestation of political engagement: political interest and the intention to participate. The authors conduct field research, using a three-wave panel study among adolescents in Örebro, Sweden, to test the Virtuous Circle Thesis² (VCT), proposed by Norris (2000), in an online and offline environment, distinguishing between selection effects and media effects. Kruike-meier and Shehata (2016) point out that although Norris' proposals are widely recognised and applied, there is a lack of empirical studies and use of longitudinal data to verify hypotheses. The authors suggest that there is a 'spiral reinforcing' between the use of media news and citizen engagement in politics. Thus, citizens more attentive to public affairs become more

engaged in civic life. The authors conclude that the relationship between adolescents' use of news media and political engagement resembles a virtuous circle, but only when the full range of news media use is considered, in their online and offline formats. In addition, online news appears to act in a way similar to that of traditional media in promoting political engagement among teens.

In the selected article³ from the year 2018, Ha et. al (2018) develop longitudinal analysis over four years in the mid-western United States on social media and mobile phone users. The authors differentiate between engagement with news content and engagement with the media. The study proposes four different levels of engagement with content and compares the effects of social media and mobile media on news content and media engagement among the general population and university students. About news engagement, from the lowest to the highest level, the authors propose the following gradation: News Consumption (exposure), Diverse News Platform Use, Sharing and Exchange of News and News Media Participation. Unlike the previous articles, which do not theorise the concept of engagement, this study performs this inflection through Mersery et al. (2010) and Livingstone and Markham (2008). The authors conclude that the use of social and mobile media cannot be held responsible for the decline in news engagement, since mobile phone usage time has positively predicted the amount of time news was consumed by college students. However, people who are users of social media and mobile phones have become less engaged with news content in print newspapers and television. News usage time has been transferred to other media.

Valenzuela et al. (2019) present an original approach on the intrinsic relationships between the effects of social media uses and the sharing of misinformation, from two-wave panel survey of online media users in Chile. For the authors, political engagement is an important consequence of the use of social media for news, as it precedes the sharing of misinformation. Valenzuela et. al (2019) mobilise different studies to explain the correlation between the use of news in social media and political engagement. In summary, they argue that by exposing oneself to the news and expressing oneself on social media there is an increase in awareness and knowledge of political issues, thus there is a greater propensity for debate with other users and greater political participation. There are no theoretical reflections on the concept of engagement, which is understood as equivalent to participation and commitment.

The study states from previous research (Flynn et al. 2017; Reedy et al. 2014) that politically engaged individuals are more likely to exhibit bias in information processing, which is even more evident in digital media. For the authors, this phenomenon is a corollary of the political participation of these individuals, which make politics, ideology, and partisanship the determining factors of their worldviews. Thus 'individuals who participate in politics are more likely to share information and misinformation, so long as they fit with their ideological molds' (Valenzuela et. al, 2019, p. 5). The study presents a curious paradox: just as the use of platforms such as Facebook or Twitter for information purposes motivates

the political engagement of individuals, this engagement is directly related to the increased dissemination of content, including misinformation.

The article that concludes Class 1 analyses the 'Matthew Effect' in the use of news in social media (Kümpel, 2020). For the author, research on incidental news exposure (INE) focuses on the positive effects of this phenomenon in obtaining information and political participation but neglects inequalities in exposure and engagement with the news. In the meantime, the author postulates that there is a form of 'Matthew Effect' in the relationship with news on social media, with relative enrichment on the part of users interested in news and relative impoverishment among those with little or no interest in information. In Merton's (1968) original formulation of 'Matthew Effect,' the author explains the process by which scientists who are better known and more prestigious tend to gain greater recognition and credit in their productions than those less well known. The author questions the understanding of 'accidental' exposure to the news in SNSs from the discussion of customisation algorithms. Thus, finding news depends on who the users follow and what kind of content they interact with. Likewise, news providers will not be interested in addressing in their advertising campaigns, for example, to users who avoid news.

The articles we selected to understand the perspective of engagement in this Class have two main axes: media effects with political participation (Chan, 2016; Valenzuela et al., 2019), and media effects, news engagement and political participation (Ha et al., 2018; Kruikemeier; Shehata, 2016; Kümpel, 2020). This perspective emphasizes the association of engagement with participation and political practices arising from media effects.

Class 2

As an alternative to functionalist models derived from media effects perspective, communication research has accompanied the development of discussions on governance, presenting the participation dimension as a central element of the debate in the area, through the emergence of rethinking the public sphere and its social dimensions related to communication. This participatory approach to communication research has been at the heart of decision-making processes in a variety of sectors of society and policy areas around the world (Bherer, 2016). Coming from a deliberative restructuring (Fonseca, 2012), this is a finding that has crossed different spheres, including the scientific field from the social sciences (Burger, 2015), on the urgency of ensuring the effective participation of the various parties involved, particularly civil society.

Although it grew during the 1990s in Europe, in a context of reorganisation between the order of science and the democratic order (Billaud, 2014), studies in Latin America have already been unfolding, bringing the dimension of popular participation – and of social movements – to the debates in communication studies since the 1960s. One example is Paulo Freire (2000) who, since the 1960s, had already presented a paradigm of development and social change as an order of participation and dialogue anchored in the studies of education and communication, influencing Latin American critical studies in the following decades (Suzina, Tufte, 2020). According to Suzina and Tufte (2020), two types of

participation theories can be distinguished. The first, derived from social sciences, highlights any process or practice that integrates different actors in the realization of something. The second comes from political science and discusses how to equalize power. It is in these epistemic fields that this Class unfolds, presenting the dimension of the redistribution of power and exercises of practice to the involvement of subjects in an inter-national process, which pervades science and journalism, words present in this Class.

Among the articles analysed, we highlight the role of science as the driving force behind this theoretical turning point from media effects to participatory models. In these cases, there is a focus on dialogue, reception and interaction. In the essay 'Tweeting as health communication: health organizations' use of Twitter for health promotion and public engagement', Park, Reber and Chon (2016) present the concept of public engagement to build relationships and encourage closer relationships to improve health actions. The authors analyse tweets from organizations such as the American Heart Association, the American Cancer Society, and the American Diabetes Association to understand how subjects relate to the type of content produced by these institutions. The dialogical dimension manifests itself through the responsiveness of these institutions and their commitment to creating continuous conversations with the public for mutual involvement.

'Does Engagement in Advocacy Hurt the Credibility of Scientists?' is an essay by Kotcher, Myers, Vraga, Stenhouse, and Maibach (2017) and presents discussions on public engagement through a national survey application in the United States to understand how the public perceives the engagement of scientists in advocacy. The authors assume that science and advocacy are incompatible because, while science is guided by objective observation to describe phenomena about the world, advocacy is inextricably linked to one's subjective values about how the world ought to be. This premise is explored in the authors' hypothesis that scientists' advocacy on science-related topics can affect public perception of scientists' credibility.

Public engagement with science and technology is also at the heart of the article 'Experiments in engagement: Designing public engagement with science and technology for capacity building' (Selin et al, 2016). Based on deliberative theory, in which the production of informed arguments is central to the multi-stakeholder engagement process, the authors develop fundamental principles for building engagement from models of collaborative governance. It is therefore a proposal to persuade the citizen into science-related decision-making, and thus to redistribute power over epistemic authority and its relationship of trust with the public. This participatory approach to the redistribution of epistemic authority is addressed by Golumbic, Baram-Tsabari and Koichu (2020) in research on citizen science projects. The authors point out that, although all the projects analysed have strong scientific objectives, they all have a strong additional emphasis on communication and social practices, providing a good experience for the citizen and generating motivation, confidence, and empowerment as they become agents of action in the process of producing scientific knowledge no longer restricted to the scientists themselves.

This relationship between engagement, trust, and epistemic institutions – that is, institutions capable of promoting or disseminating knowledge and information, such as science and journalism – is also addressed by Belair-Gagnon, Nelson, and Lewis (2019). The authors conducted research to examine what engagement means to the public media. The results show that journalists favour offline modes of engagement (e.g., listening sessions and partnerships with local organizations) in the hope of building trust and strengthening ties with their community, rather than digital modes of engagement that are more directly related to news publishing. Journalists recognize that under-representation of local audiences is something that affects relationships of trust and therefore seek to build engagement to sustain the local membership base in an ever-changing information landscape.

The above-mentioned articles point to changing media and scientific scenarios and show the urgency of thinking about strategies for redistribution of power and building more lasting relationships with stakeholders. However, there are many limits to the redistribution of authority from epistemic institutions. Often, the limitations are not only embedded in technological or infrastructure issues, but are part of the actors themselves who hold epistemic power in wanting to give up their domain so that the citizen also participates in decision-making processes. This discussion is part of the article by Lawrence, Radcliffe and Schmidt (2017) based on interviews with editors and senior journalists in news agencies in the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, Switzerland and Austria. The authors identified that the understanding of engagement, in the view of the interviewees, had less to do with user involvement in the news production process than with encouraging back-end participation and reaction interaction and in response to the newspaper's content, turning readers into recurring visitors (and, for certain business models, turning them into potential subscribers or donors) rather than empowering them through a more substantive relational effort to get the public to decide how the story should be told.

Class 3

The studies grouped in Class 3 are characterised by the greater emphasis given to user engagement with the SNS, especially Facebook, a word that opens this semantic field. The first 10 words of this classification indicate the multiple possibilities of user interaction with an SNS, as well as two words, the seventh and ninth, that name another privileged SNS in these studies: 'tweet' and 'twitter'. The other words are 'message', 'user', 'comment', 'like', 'post', 'campaign' and 'content'. The central understanding of engagement in this Class involves the notion created by the SNSs themselves, which treats the phenomenon as performance of pages and posts, analysed through the metrics of the buttons and their possibilities of interactions, such as enjoying, commenting and sharing. We highlight two other words: 'brand' and 'party'. In this Class, there are studies that address consumer engagement with a brand. There are also researches that approach political communication and engagement with political parties, their pages and contents.

In a slightly different way to Class 1 studies, this Class understand less the effects than the uses people make of the different media. This, however, is not understood from a reception and cultural studies approach, but from the uses and gratifications framework and even media materialities (Voorveld et al., 2018).

The article by Schivinski, Christodoulides, and Dabrowski (2016) proposed as a central objective the development of a scale to measure consumer engagement with brand-related social media content, based on three dimensions established in 'Consumer's Online Brand-Related Activities' (Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit, 2011). The study conducted quantitative research and qualitative techniques with 2,252 consumers across Poland, with data collected in two phases to calibrate and validate the scale, measuring consumer engagement with almost 300 brands from different sectors. To overcome gaps in previous studies, the authors proposed to measure engagement with social media content related to the brand rather than the brand itself. The authors define and measure 'engagement' as a 'behavioural construct rather than an affective/cognitive and behavioural one' (Schivinski, Christodoulides and Dabrowski, 2016, p. 65). They address three main forms of consumer engagement with the brand in social media: consuming, participating and producing brand-related media. Thus, the authors define engagement as follows: 'a set of brand-related online activities on the part of the consumer that varies in the degree to which the consumer interacts with social media and engages in the consumption, contribution, and creation of media content' (Schivinski, Christodoulides & Dabrowski, 2016, p. 66). The creation dimension is the strongest level of engagement, which can stimulate greater consumption and collaboration from other users. From the proposed scale, 'Consumer's Engagement With Brand-Related Social-Media Content' (CEBSC), the authors understand that it provides subsidies for managers to analyse consumer behaviour on social media and their level of brand engagement.

The article by Fenoll and Cano-Orón (2017) is the first of two articles analysed in this class, whose theme has a political dimension. The authors aim to understand the characteristics of 'citizen engagement' from users' comments on Facebook pages of the main Spanish political parties during the 2015 general elections. A quantitative methodology was used in two phases: first, the distribution of 68,747 comments on the pages of the following political parties was analyzed: the conservative People's Party (PP), the social democrat (PSOE), which has alternated in power for the last 30 years, the progressive Podemos and the liberal, Ciudadanos, according to the level of engagement with each party.

They then conducted computerised content analysis of the comments to check: the most commonly used words, emotional content and language in user interaction. There are no theoretical reflections on engagement, which is associated in this study with the interactions and participation of users with the content of the political parties' pages. The authors identified the predominance of one-way use of communication by party page managers. There was greater user participation through comments on new parties compared to traditional ones, which had nothing to do with the volume of publications.

Podemos were the party with the highest percentage of reactions and comments and the second in number of publications.

The article by Voorveld et al. (2018) also presents brand engagement, but goes deeper into the relationship between user engagement with the social media platforms and the evaluation of advertising developed on these platforms. Based on a quantitative methodology, the authors map the social media user engagement experiences and their advertising evaluations on the following platforms: Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, Twitter, Google+, Instagram, Pinterest and Snapchat. The authors consider that the evaluation of advertising is directly related to the specific experiences that each platform provides and user engagement with social media. According to Voorveld et al. (2018), previous researches consider that the quantitative metrics of engagement with the brands' digital channels, through numbers of likes, shares, comments, openings, views, followers or clicks, is related to the creative performance of the ads. In this article, there is a section dedicated to conceptualizing engagement, which we did not see in most of the articles reviewed, a challenging task according to the assessment of Voorveld et al. (2018)

The authors approach engagement from the literature on media engagement, which they consider to be predictive of advertising effectiveness. The main reference cited by the authors is Calder, Isaac and Malthouse (2016), who define engagement as 'a multilevel, multidimensional construct that emerges from the thoughts and feelings about one or more rich experiences involved in reaching a personal goal' (Calder, Isaac & Malthouse 2016, p. 40). The central point, according to Voorveld et al., is that engagement manifests itself in many experiences, such as those that emphasize the user's qualitative experiences with the medium, specifically with the social media platform. The authors define the difference between brand engagement and product engagement, which they consider an emerging view in the literature. As an example, they refer to previous studies that show that engagement with a newspaper is predictive of the newspaper's consumption behaviour, through the number of readers for example, and that engagement with TV programs is predictive of advertising evaluations (Calder, Isaac and Malthouse 2016).

The article highlights that this approach differs from the understanding of engagement as the intensity of media use (e.g., readers, likes, sharing). From this approach, media consumption depends on qualitative experiences with the medium, which depends on the context, understood as the environment provided by the vehicle, specifically social media platforms. The study concludes that engagement with the platform is the most determining aspect of digital engagement, which demands the analysis of the specificities of each platform, their affordances and materialities, and the experiences provided to the user.

The article by Heiss, Schmuck and Matthes (2018) discusses a quantitative analysis of the content posted by the main national political actors in Austria on Facebook, with a multilevel approach, in a non-election period of six months. Although the article has a section called 'User engagement', as well as most of the analysed articles in this class, the notion of the concept used in the study is restricted to the quantification of comments,

tastes and sharing of users, seeking to understand what variables of political actors, their profiles and content affect positively or negatively the reactions of users. The study identifies three different forms of user engagement, according to the level of cognitive effort. Thus, enjoying involves less effort, followed by sharing and commenting, which exposes the user to interactions. The authors understand interaction when there is 'presence of responsiveness' (Heiss, Schmuck and Matthes, 2018, p. 2), considering the reactions of users by Facebook resources, and show that this degree of interaction increases when political actors respond to users. The study finds that these interactions can broaden political engagement and participation because they understand that users have potential to influence policy decisions through this direct communication.

The authors highlight the novelty of the approach in analysing the factors that lead political actors to react to user comments. Among the gaps in this area of research, they also highlight: the emphasis on election periods, particularly in the US; the limited size of samples; the failure to differentiate between the types of profiles investigated; and the lack of attention to what drives politicians to interact. As a result, the study shows that the number of followers, the use of an official profile, and the percentage of party votes negatively impacted the reaction of political actors to the comments. The official party profile was also less successful in engaging the user. Regarding the content of the posts, they observed that the reasoning, the size of the post and the reference to recognised political actors were successful in promoting engagement. Positive emotions provoked more engagement than negative ones and the use of humour in the content was more likely to engage, while suggestions for mobilization had negative effects.

The last article of this Class analysed, by Romney and Johnson (2020), focuses on a social media platform (SMP) not yet analysed in our sample: Instagram. The focus of the study is Sports Networks on Instagram and the authors seek to understand what types of images generate greater engagement in SMPs, differentiating between conceptual, narrative and meta-communicative images. With regard to metacommunicative images, the study highlights the use of text and image to tell a story, in addition to the primary message of the image. The authors explain the practical and administrative objective of the study: to provide a methodology for a better performance of organizations in engaging with their audiences in social media. The study conducted a content analysis of 2000 images from the four major sports networks (SNs): ESPN, FOX Sports Media Group, CBS Sports, and National Broadcasting Corporation Sports in their Instagram accounts. The notion of engagement in the study is limited to the quantification of likes and commentaries in the posts. Jenkins (2006) and Jenkins, Ford & Green (2013) are mentioned to argue about the expectations of online audiences for more interaction and the causal relationship between participation and sharing.

Beginning with Dunham (2014), the authors argue that by enjoying, sharing, or commenting on image content, users provide a way to measure their connection to the image. Thus, according to the study, understanding engagement provides mass communicators with more in-depth knowledge about how to interact on platforms. The

results show that narrative and meta-communicative images generate greater public engagement, with emphasis on meta-communicative images in likes and comments. Narrative images have had an increase in likes compared to conceptual images.

Class 4

The texts in this Class derive from research that is related to interpersonal communication and organisational communication, presenting mainly research on the impact of internal postures on companies and how public relations affect the way subjects interact with a brand or company. While Class 3 has relationships with the subjects' social uses and practices, Class 4 understands communication as an interpersonal social process, but from perspectives that aim to understand communicative processes as masspersonal communication⁴ (Lee, 2015; Wilhelm, Stehle, Detel, 2020), a combination of mass and interpersonal communication. It is in this sense that words such as employee, practitioner, stakeholder, business, among others, typical of an organisational culture, make up the semantic classification present in this Class, along with terms that imply a dialogical relationship between the parties involved.

Among the articles we highlight the work of Men and Tsai (2016) who analyze why the public relate to chief executive officers (CEOs) on social networking sites. Focusing on CEOs' studies of sociability in digital public spaces, the authors point to a reconfiguration of these public figures, moving away from the conventional role of spokesperson restricted to the corporate environment, and becoming actively involved in organizational social communication strategies and assuming the new role of 'chief engagement officer'. Through a web-based survey of 332 social media users, the results showed that audiences are primarily motivated by reasons of innovative leadership and task attraction when engaging with CEOs in SNSs. The results of the survey show that the CEO's accessibility has positively influenced public trust and satisfaction. In turn, the CEO's role on social networks has also directly influenced the quality of the organisation's public relations.

Social media were also taken into consideration to address the relationship with employees. Men, O'Neil and Ewing (2020) examined whether and how internal social media influence employee involvement. Through a quantitative online survey of 1,150 employees from various U.S. organisations that adopted internal social media, the authors found that employees' use of internal social media was positively associated with perceived organisational transparency and organizational identification, which in turn contributed to a higher level of employee engagement. For the authors, internal social media can improve perceptions of transparency and can inspire a sense of employee commitment and engagement with the organisation, 'both being important intangible assets for organisations', in the authors' words (Men, O'Neil and Ewing, 2020).

Employee engagement is the main driver of this Class, bringing together a set of articles that seek to show more effective ways for the company to communicate with its audience and more effective ways to ensure greater employee commitment, involvement and engagement with the company. Ruck, Welch and Menara (2017) consider employee

engagement with the company as a factor in achieving innovation and competitiveness. With an employee-centric approach, with 2066 participants in five UK-based organizations, the article investigates employee satisfaction with opportunities to exercise one's voice and assesses employees' views on the quality of senior management's receptiveness to the employee's voice. From a perspective that starts from a dialogical approach and a relational view of leadership in which it is understood not as a trait or behaviour, but as a phenomenon generated in the interactions between people acting in context, the authors argue that psychological security is one of the necessary conditions for the development of the employee's personal engagement in the company, in order to have his/her voice exercised and listened to.

In this Class, the dimension of the employees' perception is central to the surveys present in the sample. Duthler and Dhanesh (2018) examined the relationships between employees' perception of corporate social responsibility (CSR). The results of the survey, which had as its corpus 516 valid responses from employees in different sectors in the Arab Emirates, revealed that the internal communication of CSR, one-sided and two-way symmetrical, foresaw employees' perceptions of corporate social responsibility through bi- and one-way symmetrical models.

For Meng and Berger (2019), in order to foster employee engagement and commitment, it is necessary to build a supportive organisational culture that understands the value of public relations, shares decision-making power, practices two-way communication, and embraces diversity. The study confirmed that the strong leadership performance demonstrated by the organisation's key communications leader affects the engagement and trust of professionals. For the authors, the performance of the leaders in the communication unit drives the organisation to value the importance and contribution of public relations, resulting in increased professional confidence.

Through the analysis of these articles, we analyse that cognitive, affective and behavioural aspects are triggered for a better understanding of the employee's engagement, in a relationship from psychology approaches that transcend the behaviourist model on human behaviour.

Discussion

This research demonstrated that the concept of engagement circulates with polysemy in communication research. There are four main perspectives on engagement: a) media effects and proximity to behavioural science; b) participation and citizenship perspectives, with links to science studies; c) structures and uses of social media; and d) organisational communication. Thus, a perspective of engagement related to social media – and translated into engagement with metrics, measurement and platforms – was only one of the dimensions found. However, the perception of engagement as a phenomenon that manifests itself mainly in social media, with different theoretical, methodological, practical and social interactions contributions, is predominant. This also means arguing that, on the one hand, Classes 1 and 2 present empirical studies of engagement that include social

media, while, on the other hand, Class 3 demonstrates how social media engagement is different from other types of engagement. Thus, there is a distinct role of 'social media' and 'engagement' in these articles.

The first Class (media effects) is complementary to the uses of social media, in that the first – following the traditions of communication theory – presents 'what the media does with people' and the third, 'what people do with the media'. However, this complementarity also appears in the articles analysed: the studies of the first Class emphasize the effects of the media, but also address the uses of the subjects, just as the studies of the third Class prioritize uses, but also consider the dimension of effects. This reveals the plasticity of the concept of engagement, as a notion that can be reinterpreted in the light of various theoretical and methodological traditions. Despite presenting a perspective on uses and engagement, the third Class does not present a predominance of culturalist audience studies, but mainly the presence of the uses and gratifications approach, and some initial insights from the media materialities framework. Moreover, the studies of the first Class presents an emphasis on the political dimension of media effects, especially in relation to political participation, understood as synonymous for engagement.

Cultural studies approach appears most clearly in the second Class, which relates engagement to political participation and in public life, science and journalism. Thus, instead presenting a direct relationship of engagement with the media – in the same way that we present in the literature review – this research relates media engagement to everyday life in a broader way. Although there is the impression that this is a theoretical perspective widely adopted in audience studies, what this research on the concept of engagement reveals is that it is far from being the only one.

The second Class can be understood, in some dimension, as the opposite of the fourth. While the second values citizenship and even public challenge from engagement, the fourth demonstrates the alignment of engagement with management and business prescriptions, with the rationality of organisations, in a neoliberal sense, according to Dardot & Laval (2013). Engagement, here, means strictly how the employee can perform exactly what the company want. The importance of employee engagement for organizations can also be understood as increasing worker control – a perspective, for example, that could be present in the second Class, including people's resistance to organizational prescriptions.

We have identified functionalist characteristics of the most diverse orders (organizational and media, for example) in the research, but they are not the only meanings of engagement in circulation – and this reveals the richness of the concept for audience research. However, the concept of engagement is not always theorised, conceptualised or problematised. This means that the articles do not always show what they mean by engagement and what their theoretical and epistemological approaches are. This can be a finding of how research on engagement can develop in communication research – from conceptual reflections and differentiations between engagement and participation or interaction, for example.

From this, we argue that the epistemological dispute over the concept of engagement in research in communication is also a political struggle, given that scientific struggles are not separated from the social world (Bourdieu, 1975). Engagement and participation are crucial words for the continuity of neoliberal rationality (Dardot & Laval 2013), as well as its modes of justification (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2018) in a platformisation context (Poell, Nieborg & Van Dijck, 2019). This means that the circulation of the senses around engagement does not happen in a vacuum. On the one hand, the alignment with the neoliberal rationality is more evident in class 4, that is, in the studies of organisational communication. On the other hand, we did not identify in our sample of 502 articles, studies that propose a critical reflection on the notion of engagement with its own theoretical and epistemological foundations. Thus, the word engagement itself is naturalized as if it meant nothing but itself, without historicity. Even the articles analysed in Classes 1, 2 and 3, which relate engagement with the civic and political dimension of citizen participation the articles do not go beyond of a relationship between media and everyday life. This predominant axis of studies refers to the theoretical matrix of the earlier reflections on engagement in the Communication research (Livingstone, 1994, Silverstone, 1999).

This predominant notion of engagement is reflected in the research methodology that mainly aims, through empirical research, surveys and different statistical analyses, to understand how the subjects are impacted, consume, interact and get involved with the media in their practices. social, cultural, professional, marketing, consumer and political. This does not mean that the studies gathered in the four Classes that we identified with Iramuteq are not scientifically relevant, but that have weaknesses in common: the scarce foundation on the theoretical specificities of the concept and the absence or limitation of critical reflection on economic, social, political and infrastructural issues that mediate engagement, such as platformisation (Poell, Nieborg, & Van Dijck, 2019), for example. This means questioning the infrastructural bases of social media engagement, that is, that this engagement is central according to the existing platformisation process and its infrastructures (Plantin et al, 2018). This means, in the end, pointing to the absence of the political economy of communication to understand how engagement can relate to broader structures of power and technologies. We argue that this perspective can be complementary to the analysed Classes.

In order to formulate a critical and reflective conception of engagement, Bastos (2020) proposes the concept can be understood as 'the subject's social, affective and taste connection with a certain ideology', which situates engagement as 'a communicative and sensitive dimension active in the engendering of hegemony' (Bastos, 2020, p. 198). This understanding aims to contemplate the objective and subjective aspects that structure and mediate a critical and political notion of engagement. The class framework is central to this notion of engagement, entangled to ideology issues (Gramsci, 2011; Kellner, 1995). Class, although not in isolation, remains a central point for understanding contemporary communication, including from the notion of engagement (Murdock, 2009). What we are arguing is that class issues and their struggles are absent from the discussion on

engagement in communication research. This means that there are no links between media and everyday life, including engagement, without understanding class, gender, race and other social and cultural identities.

In general terms, these social and media connections are established in everyday sociability, in sociocultural practices and processes that mediate the construction and circulation of meanings. Thus, we argue there are more social and communication lives beyond social media filter bubbles, as Bruns (2019) states. That is, there are everyday sociabilities, social interactions among families, friends, churches, neighborhood, unions political parties, and social movements. These connections are central to understand other possibilities to engagement in communication research, even recovering the earlier cultural studies, such as Hoggart (1958). As proposed by Agnes Heller (1987), the immediate assimilation of means of social communication or exchange occurs through 'groups,' which mediate between 'the individual and the customs, rules and ethics of other major integrations' (Heller, 1987, p. 19). The affective connection is the dimension of the subject's objective and subjective involvement with a certain ideology, it involves the aesthetic and sensitive dimension that denotes the concreteness of a certain ideology in praxis. If the individual likes a certain organisation and the content developed by it, it is assumed that certain previous knowledge for the formation of this taste, the existence of economic, social and cultural determinations, the bond with a certain ideology, increasingly mediatized. Muniz Sodré (2002) understands the bond between subjects, in the struggle for political and economic hegemony or in the ethical commitment to rebalance community tensions, as the theoretical nucleus of communication. According to Sodré (2002, p. 223), bonding is 'the radicality of differentiation and approximation between human beings'. Bastos (2020) proposes a critical information and media literacy (Kellner, Share, 2005) and technoliteracy (Kahn; Kellner, 2005) as fruitful methods for building critical and reflective engagement. Questioning literacy as something static, Kahn and Kellner (2015) argue that literacy is constantly changing and evolving in response to 'social and cultural transformations, as well as the interests of the elites that control hegemonic institutions. In addition, it is a crucial part of the literacy process that people understand dominant codes as hegemonic codes' (p. 61). In this sense, for the concept of engagement to continue to be updated and appropriated by the communication research, consistent with the etymology of the word and its critical and political sense, it is essential to reflect on the relationship of the subjects with the media beyond their uses, interactions and effects, but building a multidisciplinary perspective that takes into account the economic, social, cultural and technopolitical aspects of this relationship.

Conclusions

The contribution of this article is to evidence the possibilities of understanding engagement in communication research. This involves a multiplicity of meanings and reveals different theoretical and methodological perspectives. In any case, the corpus we analysed presents some findings of themes or perspectives that may be present in a research agenda on

engagement around audience studies, in order to broaden its scope even further. Some examples are the media materialities, the role of infrastructures and platforms in the relationship of engagement, the relationship of data and algorithms with media uses, the role of bots and click-farm platforms to generate false engagement in digital platforms, among others. In addition, we argue in favor of critically rethinking the concept of engagement in communication research, including also the political economy of communication approach, questioning the infrastructural and ideological bases of engagement.

One of the limitations of this work is to have collected data only from the Web of Science database. Despite the relevance of the database, which is present in many bibliometric analyses (Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2015), including in the communication research (Delgado & Repiso Granada, 2013; López-Cózar & Caballero, 2013), numerous criticisms have been made to its coverage (Harzing & Alakangas, 2016), the English-speaking over-representation (Archambault & Gagné, 2004) and the low indexation of journals in the humanities (Van Leeuwen, 2013; Prins et al, 2016). One of the possible developments is to repeat the same methodological procedures on more robust bases or on a set of national bases in order to have a wider range of perspectives on the concept of engagement.

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Notes:

¹ According to Rigney (2010: 10–12), there are three scenarios that can lead to a widening gap between the 'rich' and 'poor' segments of society: (1) The rich get richer while the poor get poorer (the absolute Matthew Effect), (2) the rich get richer while the poor get richer at a slower rate (the relative Matthew Effect), and (3) the rich get poorer while the poor get poorer at a faster rate. In all scenarios, inequalities between disadvantaged and advantaged groups increase, with the 'rich' consistently being ahead of the 'poor' (Kümpel, 2020, p. 3).

² According to Norris (2000), the 'most politically knowledgeable, trusting, and participatory are most likely to tune in to public-affairs coverage. And those most attentive to coverage of public affairs become more engaged in civic life' (p. 317).

³ We understand that this article is located between Class 1, which comprises engagement based on 'media effects' and Class 3, whose studies comprise engagement based on 'uses of social media'. But we chose to keep it in Class 1 because the main objective of the article is to understand and compare 'how social media and mobile media differ in their effects on engagement'.

⁴ According to O'Sullivan & Carr (2018, p. 1161), masspersonal communication means 'the intersections of mass and interpersonal communication, with examples from older and newer communication technologies and practices', including perceived message accessibility and message personalisation.