~~Mind~~ Mend the Gap: Engagement with Digital Television

Rhiannon Bury,

Athabasca University, Canada

Abstract:

This paper explores engagement with digital television in the context of the 2020 US Presidential election. The concept of 'engagement', redeployed from the dominant marketing paradigm, serves to highlight the connections between viewing, participation, fandom, and everyday life. Based on my analysis of a series of posts made to the Reddit forum, r/politics, I argue that over a three and a half day period, Trump anti-fans around the world engaged in highly anticipatory viewing of CNN even though there were very few results to report and analyse. This fannish viewing led to disruptions in daily routines and schedules. Moreover, as the "election night" text became more producerly and polysemic over time, particularly in the overnight periods, it enabled participation in fan and community-making practices more typically associated with serial television.

Keywords: Digital television; Engagement; Fandom; Reddit; US politics

As outlined in the call for papers for this special issue of *Participation*s, the notion of engagement has strong associations with corporate/consumer relations. Once a year, I am asked by my university to complete an Employee Engagement survey, administered by a consulting agency: feedback is solicited, aggregated and reported: levels of engagement are correlated to levels of satisfaction with administrative initiatives and practices. Annual performance assessment conducted between the faculty member and the Department Chair is no longer enough. Similarly, that it is no longer enough for commercial television broadcasters to sell eyeballs to advertisers (Evans, 2020). Digital and mobile technologies along with social media platforms have not only cast the limits of traditional audience rating systems into relief but provided opportunities for more intense forms of audience datafication and by extension monetization (Livingstone, 2018). According to Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013), 'engagement-based models see the audience as a collective of active agents whose labor may generate alternative forms of market value' (116). These forms can

range from liking a series and/or sharing a trailer on Facebook to producing industry-sanctioned creative work for license and purchase (see Jenkins, 2006). The Disney Corporation, for example, permits vetted fan artists to use their copyrighted images to produce work for sale at select theme parks (see https://globalnews.ca/news/7671073/saskatoon-artist-disney-art/).

This industry-oriented invocation may have risen to the top, but this need not, and indeed, should not, be the case. In *Television 2.0: Viewer and Fan Engagement with Digital TV* (Bury, 2017b), I chose to redeploy the concept. As the book title suggests, and as I will discuss in some detail below, 'engagement' can function as a *bridgeword* (as opposed to a *buzzword*), forging connections between audience studies and fan studies, and helping us rethink the relationship between viewing and participation vis a vis the assemblage that we call digital television. At its broadest, this paper highlights a few of the ways in which engagement is bound up with both affective and domestic relations. The data I will present comes of out Reddit discussion of a highly anticipated but unexpected extended global viewing/participatory event: the 2020 US general election.

Engaging with Engagement

Television has always fostered domestic and participatory cultures, but the connections between them have not always been apparent because for the most part they have been studied separately. Early reception studies research conceptualizes television as a domestic technology (see Livingstone, 1992; Lull, 1990; Silverstone, 1994). It pays attention to the relations engendered among household members but not to emotional investments in television texts and their *overflow* (Brooker, 2001) into spaces of participatory culture. As such the viewers discussed in this research cannot be constructed as fans. For its part, fan studies that follows in the tradition of Henry Jenkins (1992) pays little attention to the context of viewing, or indeed the practice of viewing itself, although it is understood that anticipatory and attentive viewing is rooted in an emotional commitment to the text and is the foundation for all participatory practice.

Moreover, participation has been filtered through a lens of collectivity and community. The category of fan is imbricated with *fandom*: the undertaking of textual interpretation, creative production and/or or activism with other fans in a variety of 'real-life' and virtual spaces. The difference between the fan and so called 'bystander' is seen as one of opportunity (Jenkins, 1992; 2006). The internet and now social media provide multiple entry points into fandom and once these bystanders encounter fan discussion forums or fan videos, they will be motivated to get involved. That said, little if any attention is paid to such 'fans in waiting' in the fan studies literature (Bury, 2017b).

My TV 2.0 research attempted to mend the gap between audience studies and fan studies and address the participatory/non-participatory binary within fan studies at this critical moment of digital reassemblage. To this end, I conceptualized both viewing and participation as two separate but interrelated continuum (Bury, 2017b). Viewing thus

encompasses all modes of reception from distracted to attentive, from viewing that is background for other activities to viewing that is highly anticipated. Any of these modes can be considered fannish provided that one has an emotional investment in the text, regardless of involvement in participatory culture. For example, I had research participants who played repeat episodes of a favourite series while doing household chores. Their distraction did not signal a lack of interest but rather familiarity with the text. My TV 2.0 study did not demonstrate any correlation between levels of emotional investment in a series and involvement in fandom. Similarly, I placed some fan practices such seeking information on a series or reading online reviews on one end of the participatory continuum. Such practices do not require any involvement in fandom. On the other end of the scale is the production of creative works (e.g., fiction, video), which are meant to be shared with other members of a creative community. Posting comments to a discussion forum is a practice closer to the middle of the scale: such participation clearly involves interacting with other fans but it may or may not create a sense of community.

I am not the only scholar to have attempted to navigate the relationship between viewing, participation and fandom. Perks (2014), for example, examines the emerging practice (at the time) of 'media marathoning':

> The intensity and immersiveness of marathoning can, indeed, be a gateway to fandom, but marathoning does not predetermine fan identification or behaviors. Marathoners temporarily adopt fan practices and behaviors – frequently discussing, researching, and thinking about the story with which they are engaged. (8)

Perks is correct not to assume that all marathoners are fans. I had several TV 2.0 participants, for example, tell me that they collected episodes of a series in which they had weak investments and then watched them all in one sitting when they had a block of free time. That said, I contend that the marathoners interviewed by Perks were indeed fans. All fan practices are by default temporary – one is never only or always a fan.

I have chosen the term engagement to signal this reconceptualization of viewing and participation without collapsing meaningful distinctions between viewers and fans. In addition, I am using the term to insert a discussion about the domestic context: despite the proliferation of mobile devices, the home remains the primary site of reception (Bury, 2017b). Engagement with digital TV is done as a member of a household (even if one is the only member) regardless of whether viewing is fannish or participation is bound up with fandom. In a recent study, I focused on fans who binge-watched Netflix original series and posted on Reddit. I demonstrate that this practice both disrupted and was disrupted by daily routines (Bury, forthcoming). Perks' (2019) study on binge-watching when recuperating at home from an illness also demonstrates how the practice is tied up with everyday life.

In sum, critically engaging with engagement disturbs the limiting marketing paradigm. To be sure the use of the term is not novel in reception and fan studies

scholarship. It tends to appear as an adjective ('an engaged viewer') or verb ('engaging with others') to describe a mode of viewing that is more than casual and/or to evoke a degree of involvement in participatory culture. In her new book, Evans (2020) has taken up the term in a way that 'maintains the flexibility of this ambiguity whilst also creating a framework that allows for greater precision' (3). Similarly, I am deploying engagement to do a specific type of work as outlined above. The aim of this new study to which I now turn is, in part, to create space for the emergence of novel objects and subjects of study.

Election Fever

The term 'fan/ is typically reserved for those who have affective relationships with entertainment media or sport, although recent work has been done on political fandom (see Hinck & Davisson, 2020). Those who avidly follow politics and engage closely with news about current events are generally referred to as 'news junkies'. While they may consume large amounts of media news content, they do not have an affective relationship with news texts per se. I never had any interest in studying this sub-group of fans until the 2020 US presidential election. Major elections are generally anticipatory and evoke high levels of participation on social media platforms such as Twitter. There is no question that this particular one was even more so given that it was taking place during the second wave of the Covid pandemic, and that millions of ballots had been cast in advance and returned by mail. The divisive political climate meant that the stakes were at an all-time high for Trump fans and anti-fans alike.

Election night coverage on Canadian and American networks typically follows a predictable narrative even if the outcome is not: the polls close, the results are reported and discussed by an on-air team and a winner is projected by the network's decision desk. As such it fits into the category of a closed and bounded televisional event, akin to an awards special or a sporting event, designed to be viewed live at the time of viewing.   Such events are the opposite of serial TV, which Fiske (1987) categorizes as *producerly* and therefore open to speculation, interpretation and resignification not necessarily in line with the intended meanings on offer. On the evening of November 3, 2020, like many others horrified at the thought of a second Trump term, I was glued to CBC TV news in Canada; millions of others were no doubt livestreaming election night coverage on laptops or mobile devices. Many were simultaneously scrolling through Twitter to create a second-screen experience. Once it became apparent that 'election night' was turning into a multi-day anticipatory affair, I spent a considerable amount of time 'doomscolling' and then cautiously 'hopescrolling' on the Reddit forum, r/politics. The subreddit is dominated by those in the US who have liberal politics and are supporters of the Democratic Party. As of November 2020, it had 6.9 million subscribers (in comparison r/news had 22 million and r/conservative 603, 000). The majority of posts on r/politics are news stories that can be commented on by anyone with a Reddit account. For major US political events, the moderators set up stand-alone discussion threads. Depending on the popularity of the topic, multiple threads can be added to avoid the platform glitching as a result of a high thread traffic. The first discussion

thread for General Election 2020 was set up on the day of the election as Part 1: Polls Open. There were 5 threads in total. A new series of threads began with the title Polls Closing. The thread was then retitled 'Results Continued' but not renumbered. This 'megathread' ended up with a record number of 76 parts.

In spending time on the forum, it became clear that the 'unbounding' of the electoral event was having some interesting effects on engagement (viewing, participation and everyday life). To collect data to further explore these effects, I reviewed thousands of comments from Parts 55- 57 (the evening of Thursday November 7 through early Friday morning in North America, and then the final threads, Parts 75-76 early to late morning Saturday November 7). Based on the analysis, three themes/patterns emerged: the reworking of the 'breaking news' format, disrupted routines, and community making.

Keeping Me Waiting

Unlike the regular networks, the American 24-hour cable news networks continued their election coverage format until Biden was declared the winner. That CNN and MSNBC were the news networks of choice for the megathread participants was not surprising given the ideological orientation of the subreddit. By the second evening, with only sporadic small batches of mail-in and absentee ballots from key swing state counties to report on, the pace of the broadcast had been significantly altered. This Redditor sums up the viewing experience:

> At this point I am sort of resigned to the fact that this will never end. CNN will keep broadcasting the same non-info 24/7 for all eternity. They will rotate map boys, map men, map daddy's and anchors for generations upon generations.

Despite the dearth of 'newsworthy' content, the political stakes were so high that many continued to watch the live coverage (broadcast or streamed)

> I've literally not watched a single second of anything else on TV since 6pm on Tuesday lol it's been nonstop CNN and MSNBC all day everyday.

> I've watched more CNN in the past 3 days than I have in the past 3 years.

One Redditor joked, 'I'm watching Georgia like it's a new episode of Breaking Bad', thus underscoring the contrast between the intensity of viewing and the slow pace of the broadcast. Furthermore, the unbounding of the narrative opened it up to popular culture intertextuality. The next set of samples draw on *Lord of the Rings*:

> The beacons are lit! Joe Biden calls for aid!

> And Pennsylvania will answer! Muster the Philadelphians.

> PA feels like the Battle of Helms Deep. On the third day, look to the east. At first dawn.

Others mobilized popular cultural knowledge to poke fun at the slow pace of counting:

> George RR Martin will drop Winds of Winter before [Nevada] and [North Carolina] finish counting the votes.
> [Spoiler alert: he did not]

The unbounding of the text also resulted in close attention being paid to details that were normally in the background:

> I swear I close my eyes and see blue squares and red squares on a map. 3 days of non-stop election minutiae and refreshing 538 and NYT and WaPo [Washington Post] and watching MSNBC. I will probably dream about blue squares and red squares when I fall asleep.

> I see that fucking map on the inside of my eyelids.

Interestingly, the map presenters received the lion's share of comments, reversing the lead/supporting binary of cast relations:

> This guy on CNN that's using the big touchscreen is awesome. Don't know his name, never watch CNN normally, but he's really informative and I like his little jabs at Trump.

Others singled out the presenters by name:

> John King [CNN] is a master election night improviser. Truly the best of the best. Can we give this man a Pulitzer?

> Feeling kinda emotional here. Glad I've got John King's steady presence to help guide me through the next few hours.

> Any time John King isn't on the screen, I imagine him in the back spitting in a cup and getting patched up like Rocky Balboa between rounds.

Similar expressions of admiration were made about Steve Kornacki on MSNBC:

> Kornacki is a math map wizard.

> MSNBC just needs to leave the camera on Kronacki the entire time and let him geek out on maps and numbers

Other comments were closer to what is known in fandom as 'squee'. One poster, for example, typed out 'John King' multiple times to fill up the post. Another described Kornacki as their new 'celebrity crush'. The CNN overnight team of Chris Cuomo (anchor) and Phil Mattingly (map presenter) were singled out to be the subjects of a m/m pairing or 'ship'. A number of Redditors who were live viewing created snippets of 'real person slash' that ranged from mildly suggestive to sexually explicit:

> I bet Trump wishes Melania looked at him the way Map Boy looks at Cuomo

> What do you think Cuomo and map boy are doing during commercial breaks?

> The attention Map Boy gives Cuomo. Gives me major sub/dom vibes.

> Honey you know Phil isn't tight, not after Cuomo is through with him.

Others played with the on-screen dialogue between the two.

> 'Map boy, 1,700 votes separates Biden and Trump.
> But nothing is standing between us.' – cumo

> 'I'm about to come heavy, but here it comes.' – Cuomo
> Get ready, Map Boi.

Some posts contained what are best described as *ficlets*. The sample included below played with the open-endedness of the electoral event:

> By the time cuomo is able to go home to his wife and kids it'll be like cast away. She thought he was dead so grieved and moved on, another man sleeps in his bed, his kids call him dad now. He runs to the only place he knows for comfort. Map boy.

I did not come across any 'R-rated' fic that included graphic descriptions of homosex. However, the following comments are suggestive that such fic was shared on the threads:

> Daytime threads: I hope Biden remains on pace to win Arizona

> Night time threads: who do you think should be the power bottom in the Cuomo/mapboi CNN fanfiction I wrote?

> Reading this thread I'm half convinced there's a porno going on at cnn

Some of the longer pieces were posted to or crossposted to r/mapboy, a subreddit set up for Cuomo/Mattingly slash. A few participants responded negatively to encountering this type of fanfiction on the threads: 'I knew you sickos would fucking ship these two before the election was over...'. Others defended the creative efforts and hinted at the pleasures of these fan texts and exchanges:

> ITT: people complaining about the map boy/man horniness who don't know what they signed up for by being on this thread past midnight. Did the past two nights not teach you anything?

> These threads are like crack. This is the third night in a row that I've been in bed before 1 but haven't fallen asleep until after 4 bc I need all the map boy horniness in my life.

In sum, as time and circumstances stretched the news text beyond its traditional bounded format, it became more polysemic, taking on the producerly properties of popular serial television. Anxious new junkies/political fans seized the opportunity to collectively rework the election results narrative in the classic fan tradition of textual poaching (Jenkins, 1992), including slashing the 'characters' as has been done from *Star Trek* to *Sherlock*.

Election and Everyday Life

This highly anticipatory, anxiety-induced viewing was having a disruptive effect on the participants' routines. In my binge-watching study, Redditors regularly commented that they had stayed up too late to finish a series or, conversely, had to cut a binge short due to their work schedule. The following posts capture a similar dynamic and effort to balance routines and viewing/participation, especially in the overnight periods.

> I'm signing off folks, got an early shift tomorrow. Gonna dream about a blue Georgia and/or PA

> Alright boys I'm tapping out, I have to be at work in 8 hours. Wake me up when Biden wins please.

Others talked about the temptation to keep scrolling/posting despite other commitments:

> Well guys I'm calling it I'm gonna get some sleep. *Goes to bed and opens up*

fucking Reddit anyway.

> Should I make coffee and stay up until 4am and then wake up at 7am and realize nothing happened yet? I want to go to sleep but I just know the second I put my phone down, Pennsylvania will flip or some shit.

> European here. I'm literally refreshing results every minute instead of working.

These comments suggest/state the use of a mobile phone and its importance in contexts where watching cable news on a television screen is not an option. Others made the decision to forego sleep:

> I guess I'm up all night boys and girls. I'm not missing when these states actually turn blue. I've waited 4 years for this and a lot of you have too.

Others mentioned the disruption to regular meals and diet:

> 4:00 AM. Time for leftover pizza.

> Fuck! Did I even eat today?!

> I'm basically living off coffee and doritos this week.

A few posters hinted at a disruption of domestic relations, albeit tongue in cheek:

> Wife: Honey, you've been up for 72 hours you need to get some sleep.
> Me: Just waiting on Cuomo and map boy to call it.
> Wife: Vigerous eyerolls

> My wife almost just walked in on me watching Cuomo and Mapboy. Luckily I had the remote ready and switched the TV to ESPN.

The degree of disruption to daily life over such an extended period is summed up by this participant:

> Its incredible that for 3 days i have done nothing but watch the news, sit on the couch, eat chipotle, drink, shitpost in these threads, and literally nothing else. I would never find myself doing this in any other situation lol

The last post conjures up the image of the mass media dupe, eyes glued to the 'boob tube' (albeit with a second screen in hand). While this myth has long been dispelled by reception

and fan studies scholars – no one skips meals, showers, and work to watch TV days on end except under extraordinary circumstances – engagement with digital TV cannot be understood in isolation from everyday life.

The Watch that Ends the Night

While daily life was being disrupted, a sense of community among some of the participants was being developed:

> I have been in these threads for so long, y'all are basically family at this point lol 🖤

> I love these threads though, honestly guys. The pandemic had been so lonely and I really enjoy seeing all the interactions ❤️ I hope we get to sleep a little soon.

Most fan communities are founded on episodic television or film franchises, genres which unfold over time, allowing relationships and friendships to develop through extended interaction on mailing lists, discussion forums and LiveJournal. Elsewhere I have argued the social media platforms do not enable and can even disable community making because of their architecture (Bury, 2017a). Although sometimes referred to as a social media platform, Reddit is more accurately described as Usenet with Web 2.0 content-sharing capacity. As such it allows for extended turn-taking and longer exchanges among participants. In my analysis of the subreddits dedicated to Netflix original series, however, I saw no evidence of interaction that could be considered community engagement. In the election megathread, comments were being added so quickly that there was little opportunity for anything beyond one level of reply. Thus, the feelings of connection expressed above were more likely to come out of an *ambient affiliation* (Zappavigna, cited in Page, 2012) created by continuously scrolling through the threads rather than extended conversation or political debate.

The next sample highlights a desire to share the burden of what I describe as 'keeping watch':

> Stayed up till about 2cst [Central Standard Time] the last 3 nights. Don't think I can do it tonight. I'll see you guys in part 95 in the morning.

>> Good call, we won't get any states called until at least 6am.

>> Should we plan to wake you?

This team effort crossed borders and timezones:

New Zealander signing on watch, get some rest America.

Its beer clock time in Melbourne Australia. Y'all get some rest now we got this

UK here, taking over for you guys... get some sleep ;)

Another poster humorously described the groups within the community operating as if taking part in a long distance relay:

One archetypal group shuffles in for the morning news. The primetime group picks up the baton in the early afternoon. The apparent thirst traps settle in for self reflection in the late evening and wait to be relieved. Rinse and repeat until President Elect Joe Biden.

I did find indications of community making that fit with the 'sharing and caring' of an established fan community. One involved giving advice to others about self care, albeit with a sense of humour.

don't make my mistake and drink away the headache. Stay hydrated people!

Do some self care guys. Shower, drink some water. Eat a vegetable. Text your mom to say you love her.

It's after midnight and my mom would kill me.

I also found a couple of examples of asking the community for support on a personal matter:

I have two job interviews tomorrow. Everyone send me their good vibes

(And indeed this Redditor received a number of replies wishing them luck). Another example involved collective participation in another leisure activity while viewing:

Almost want to set up Jackbox games on twitch for everyone as something to do while we wait for more dumps lol

Quiplash!

Come play! I'm putting up the info

Sweeet. Dude.... that's fun shit

While the end of a series run does not necessarily spell the end to the community that formed around the primary text, in this case the declaration that Biden had won the election did spell the end of the megathread; the moderators opened a new megathread for discussion of the Biden victory. While the participants were overjoyed with the result, they also expressed sadness that their communal watch was over:

> Guys…. Can we all stay friends after this? BBQ at my house? BBQ, beer, freedom, and friends.

> It's been an honor serving with you folks. Let this forever be known to future Redditors as the 76 Threads of 2020

> I just wanted to say thanks to all of you specifically in these threads. We've all been keeping each other updated and in the loop even when we work, or are busy. You've given us plenty of laughs especially the folks that stay up late to watch Cuomo and Map Boy.

While these Redditors were unlikely to have had the opportunity to get to know each other very well given the heavy thread traffic, the above samples make it clear that their connection, even if ambient, was meaningful.

Conclusion

In this paper I set out to demonstrate how the concept of engagement can be redeployed to explore the imbrication of affective and domestic relations and to better understand what it means to be a viewer, a fan, and a member of a household in the age of digital television. The Redditors who participated in the multi-part November 3-7 megathread may or may not have been Biden fans but they all came to r/politics to connect with other Trump 'anti-fans'. Many were part of a global live viewing event. Their viewing of CNN or MSNBC, however, was not traditional live viewing; rather, it was multi-modal and involved more than one screen. As time passed, the 'election night' text developed polysemic gaps and fissures that made it both 'nothing-to-see' and 'must-see' TV. Participation on the megathread, particularly in the overnight periods in the North American time zones, was unquestionably fannish. While many stuck to commenting on the results, a minority took up textual poaching – reinterpreting the news through a lens of popular culture and writing snippets of slash fiction for the pleasure of others. There was also evidence of community making that extended beyond the primary text to involve the sharing of personal details, primarily pertaining to the disruption of work, leisure and meal schedules. While fan communities that emerge around serial TV provide opportunities for connection long after the release of new episodes, this was not the case here. Yet traces of the community that had formed resurfaced in the megathread set up for the Georgia Senate runoff election on January 5,

2021. Although this event was concluded by the next morning and CNN did not reunite the on-air Cuomo/Matterly team, I found a few nostalgic posts:

> You guys remember election night threads? I started to get delirious around Thread 55. What a ride.

> I felt like that was a right [sic] of passage. It was an honor to have shitposted with you all [in] those threads.

> Reminds me of the late nights with Cuomo and map boy.

> It'll be awhile before we get that duo again.

>> I know. It makes me so sad.

While this study is based on a political and televisual event that is unlikely to be repeated, the complexities of engagement that it illustrates most certainly will. If we limit ourselves to only studying viewers or fans, or to studying affective relations in isolation from domestic relations, we as scholars will at the very least be missing out.

Biographical note:

Rhiannon Bury is Professor of Women's and Gender Studies at Athabasca University. Her current research interests include the imbrication of binge-watching with every life and online pornographic self-representation and masculinity. Contact: rbury@athabascau.ca.

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