

The concept of ‘engagement’: Part II

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In our May 2021 edition we published seven essays which explored, in some strikingly different ways, the ways in which the concept of ‘engagement’ has emerged as a key term for thinking about contemporary audiences – but also its under-theorisation. In this edition we continue this exploration, hoping to contribute both new research and new insights into what will almost inevitably be a ‘hot topic’ for a long time to come. Eight further essays from very different directions flesh out a lot of the topics which were begun in the last edition, and add to our understanding of how ‘engagement’ works in some very particular contexts. Very briefly I summarise them here.

Anna Blagrove, with an eye to the threats to the survival of non-mainstream cinemas, reports on her research into the reasons young people do and don’t engage with these cinemas’ typical fare. She distinguishes three different levels of engagement: with individual films (and with the requisite skills to do so); with alternative film culture; and with a broader taste culture which embraces independent film and cinema. Her argument is the value of all three, but the especial importance of the wider involvements if such cinemas are to prosper.

Meredith Burckholder and her Australian colleagues offer a case study of the rise of short-form web series, to explore the different levels at which audiences can engage with their production and reception. Taking the series *Cancelled* as their exemplar, they develop an argument for people having ‘an affective encounter with content that reflected the viewers’ own lived reality of the Covid experience’.

Coming in from the opposite direction, Jennifer Hessler explores the powerful tendencies to commodification of television experiences, through the evolving processes of viewer measurement. She uses the example of the rise of Talkwalker, one of the more recent consumer insight ‘social analytics’ companies, ‘to demonstrate the ways that social engagement around television is being articulated through quantitative data’.

Heidi Liedke articulates and tries out the notion of the ‘pull’ which is being fashioned by cultural producers – in her case in particular NT Live, and NT At Home (its Covid lockdown-friendly format) – to ‘train’ home viewers of their broadcasts on the ways in which they can and should participate. Using a livecast of *A Midsummer’s Night Dream* as her case-study, she argues that the result of the ‘pull’ is ‘an affectively charged act of trust on the part of spectators’: a voluntary submission, if you will, to the cultural call.

Ernest Mathijs and Annette Hill use a case study of the Amazon series *Utopia* to explore the intersections between ideas of engagement, and older debates about ‘cult’. Their argument is that cult engagements with the series reveal an *excess* and a refusal to be contained within the frameworks of standard measurable responses – especially in the face of its sudden cancellation in 2020. As they conclude, ‘Fuelled by paranoia and unpredictability, fugitive receptions are a necessary check on the application of “audience engagement” as predictive and manageable.’

Daniela Schlütz and her colleagues present some of the findings of their major research project into the reception of *Game of Thrones* in Germany. Drawing on the responses of more than 1,000 viewers to a complex questionnaire, they show that – contrary to many standard assumptions – audience engagement, and appreciation, of the series are not necessarily closely tied in with participation in transmedia opportunities. This discovery, they argue, reasserts the centrality of the core narrative qualities, rather than necessarily their extensions.

Michelle Thomason and Steve Connolly unravel the complexities of ‘engagement’ in the very particular context of (UK A-Level) media studies classes. Drawing on questionnaires completed by media teachers and their students, they unpick the conflicting layers of engagement with the *texts presented* (which often come from outside students’ vernacular experience), with the *critical/academic issues* their courses demand. They distinguish three kinds of ‘engagement’ asked of media students: educational (in the classroom); viewer (having personal responses); and academic (deploying critical concepts and methods to think how ‘the audience’ might be addressed).

Agnieszka Wlazel develops a complex argument about the different trajectories of the terms ‘audience engagement’, and ‘audience development’ in the arts sector. She traces the sources of the two distinct ideas, and explores how they have been understood and used. Arguing for an openness to both quantitative (neuroscientific) and qualitative (interviews etc) methods of research, Wlazel ends with a hope for greater resultant use of academic research within the practices of artists and arts organisations.

Collectively, these essays, alongside the earlier ones, constitute a substantial contribution, I believe – and well warrant the space we’ve given them. What do they achieve, in sum? First and most importantly that the concept is not simple, or uniform. Second that the primary focus of much existing work may be missing the point: social media and transmedia are important phenomena in their own right, but for our purposes may be trivial. It is clear from many sources that the rise of social media has drawn particular attention to ‘engagement’ – but that this is in various ways misleading (crude Google searches show the near-synonymic relations of ‘social media’ and ‘engagement’). To click ‘Like’ as a response to a Tweet, or to feed back that a consumer experience has been ‘Good’ or ‘Poor’, amounts to very little – however much producers may want and encourage us to do these things. What our essays here collectively demonstrate is the complexities and contextual variation of its workings.

We can perhaps gain some valuable insights from a near-parallel journey undertaken by Christopher Kelty, in his dense and intriguing book (2019) *The Participant*. Kelty sets out to tell the story of the shaping – but also potentials – of the idea of ‘participation’, as a key concept in modern processes and thinkings about governance. Although the idea is clearly in use earlier, he identifies a crucial turning point with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who saw the need for, but struggled to lay down a secure foundation for the notion of a ‘general will’: something which authorizes actions and institutions claiming to act on everyone’s behalf. Kelty tells his story through four case-studies, or ‘assemblages’ (p. 41) – each of which shows the idea of participation at work, but in each case with counterfeit elements which undercut its possibilities. (In each case, the assemblage includes and provides an opportunity for exploring a powerful mode of thinking contemporary with the events described.) The four case-studies are: (1) the story of a colonial administrator in the 1880s keen to acquire an object of ritual significance to the local people, whose ‘agreement’ (participation) has to be gained to warrant the theft; a 1950s US garment factory where the women workers were encouraged to feed in ideas for making their work more productive, partly by becoming more interesting to undertake – who found their ideas taken over and turned against them; a short-lived 1960s experiment in some US cities at involving local people directly in making decisions on urban planning, where official ‘expertise’ eventually override attempts at direct involvement; and elements within various 1960s Aid programmes designed to get members of small, mainly rural communities (South America, Africa, etc) to see that they might become implements of change for themselves, but need to change certain habits of thinking if they are to benefit their health, sanitation, or etc.

In each case, Kelty sets out to show the powerful combination of the *appeal* to ‘participation’, and at the same time the *constraints* imposed on it. The ethical ideal remains operative, but is subverted. In this Kelty reminds me of Jürgen Habermas’ notion of an ‘ideal speech situation’, his argument that – while only sometimes, maybe rarely, achieved – human speech is underpinned by an unstated moral commitment to open, shared communication. This is for Kelty ‘prior to democracy’. And although it shares some of the same elements, it is not the same as ‘engagement’. He identifies six terms which about Participation – Democratisation; Engagement; Collaboration; Cooperation; Inclusion; and Involvement = but insists on their non-equivalence. With ‘engagement’, he argues that it ‘signals a quite different semantic domain’ (p. 31), involving pledges, duties and responsibilities. Right or wrong about this, his case is an intriguing one, that contemporary society funnels much of its energy into creating what we might call *necessary illusions* of participation – and engagement. I find it insightful to look at the essays we publish here as ‘assemblages’ in Kelty’s sense: moments or situations where local forces and modes of thinking and acting combine to generate demands, stresses and opportunities – but always with an imperative element. But it is in their *localization* – as against the search for general rules or laws that has characterized so much media and cultural theorization and research – that the future of ‘engagement thinking’ may most prove its value.

Reference:

Kelty, Christopher M., *The Participant: A Century of Participation in Four Stories*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019.