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Rarticulating Audience Engagement

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Abstract

This introduction to the special issue on social media and television audience engagement sketches the key dimensions that affect how audiences are transformed through the development of social platforms. Building on the five contributions to the special issue, we identify three dimensions that deserve further attention: (1) the character of national media cultures, (2) whether social platforms are employed by public or commercial broadcasters, and (3) the specific techno-commercial strategies of television producers and social media companies. By exploring these three dimensions, the article presents a basic analytical model to systematically compare and contextualize empirical findings on the relationship between social media and audience engagement.

Keywords

audience engagement, social media, television, media cultures, public service broadcasting, commercial broadcasting

Making audiences engage with content has always been a holy grail for anyone with a stake or interest in media. Advertisers and commercial broadcasters wanted to know more about the consumers they reached, which is why audience ratings were an integral part of broadcasting from its very beginning (e.g., Bjur 2009). Public broadcasters, for their part, adhered to their public service mission by optimizing output through audience research since the mid-twentieth century (e.g., Van den Bulck 2009). And for

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media scholars, the interest in how people use, relate to, and participate in media constitutes a rich and long research tradition, spanning a broad spectrum of methods and approaches. Audience engagement, in short, has long been at the center of professional and scholarly attention. The rapid development of social media platforms has only heightened this interest, as they are all about participation and sharing. Not surprisingly, the integration of these media in television production, distribution, and reception has forced all media professionals and scholars to reconsider how they understand, stimulate, and measure audience engagement.

The rise of social media appears to be fundamentally changing the television landscape: we are moving from the development of “second screen” applications to integrated systems of watching. This special issue presents five case studies from five different countries. It illustrates how conventional notions of audience engagement are shifting in mass media’s cycle of production, distribution, and reception, in which social media play an increasingly central role. Audience engagement obviously means something different for public service broadcasters than it means for commercial producers. Moreover, given the differences between national media cultures, the meaning of audience engagement also varies across countries. Each of the five contributions explores the integration of social media and television through particular lenses. The articles cover various national and comparative perspectives: (1) the strategic potential and problems with integrating social media in American commercial television program production (Van Es), (2) the institutional challenges in developing new services at a Swedish public television broadcaster (Andersson Schwarz), (3) and (4) the integration of social media use in political talk show consumption in Australia and Italy (Pond; Selva), and (5) the ways in which genre matters for social media use by television audiences in the United Kingdom (Wilson). In addition to exploring specific national perspectives, each article also addresses the more general question of audience engagement against a backdrop of technological and institutional changes in the broadcast industry and the ecosystem of social platforms.

The aim of the special issue, then, is to rearticulate audience engagement in a changing socio-technological landscape. In this introduction, we briefly sketch the background for such an endeavor, and suggest an agenda for further research.

Questioning Audience Engagement

Studying the ongoing integration of television and social media platforms, we have chosen to steer clear from two rather opposite perspectives, which have so far dominated the debate on this development. The first starts from the assumption that the use of social media necessarily entails a form of audience emancipation. Earlier studies in this tradition have suggested that social media facilitate the transformation of audiences into active participants or “prosumers” (Benkler 2006; Bruns 2008; Jenkins 2006; Shirky 2008). Jenkins (2006) is probably the most quoted and criticized representative of such a stand (e.g., Hay and Couldry 2011). Indeed, in the early years of Facebook and Twitter, social media appeared to yield to a more engaged and active “user,” who was inclined to generate and share content online. The problem with

overly optimistic reconceptualizations of the audience as “users” or “producers” was that many professionals as well as scholars ignored the role of technologies, business models, and governance structures in the construction of social media platforms (van Dijck 2013). User engagement, in other words, did not just evolve spontaneously, but turned out to be the result of mediated interaction in a growingly complex ecosystem of connective media.

At the other end of the spectrum, we find a position that does not necessarily help either to ameliorate our understanding of the complex relationship between mass media, social media, and audience engagement. Various political economic theorists start from the assumption that the integration of social media in the television landscape brings about a further commodification of the audience (e.g., Fuchs 2011). Although this contrasting perspective alerts us to the ways in which audience engagement is entangled with evolving business models and commercial strategies of social media platforms, it, too, leaves something wanting: “The meanings and experiences people produce as a result of their contextualized encounters with media products,” to quote Schröder’s (2015) take on the merits of reception analysis. The intricate ways in which social media technologies and creative user/audience practices articulate each other are not captured by political economic research.

How social platforms facilitate and shape audience engagement is still very much an open question. Answering this question requires critical systematic research, informed by the different perspectives sketched above, but committed to testing their assumptions in the face of empirical data. Pursuing such research, we suggest it is important to consider a range of dimensions that affect how audiences are transformed in particular contexts. We identify three dimensions that deserve more attention: (1) national media cultures, (2) public versus commercial television, and (3) evolving techno-commercial strategies. We now turn to elaborate on each of these dimensions.

National Cultural Differences

To state that culture matters for the ways in which television engages audiences, and that the national represents a useful (but not the only) container for such a culture, might seem banal. Still, conceptualizing and empirically exploring audience engagement, we need to be attentive to insights from diverse cultural settings. As television studies have demonstrated over the past decades, comparative research is vital to theorize both the *general* and the *national-specific* in evolving media cultures. Comparing meaningful phenomena across historically and geographically defined systems, and interpreting them with reference to micro-, meso-, and macro-social dimensions, makes us “notice things we did not notice and therefore had not conceptualized,” and forces us “to clarify the scope and applicability of the concepts we do employ” (Hallin and Mancini 2004, 2–3). To achieve such aims, case-based analysis of comparable phenomena helps us sharpen analytical relationships as well as differentiate cross-national commonalities and differences.

The five articles in this special issue immediately make clear that differences in political cultures, social media penetration rates, and even geography affect

how audience engagement is articulated through social platforms. Andersson Schwarz's article, for example, shows how Swedish public institutions and policy making are a main driving force behind the integration of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in public broadcasting. Consequently, the traditional public service broadcasters in Sweden also play a central role in defining the expectations and norms pertaining to television audience engagement through social platforms.

National comparisons highlight variations not only in institutional involvement but also in how deeply social media have been integrated in audience viewing practices. The basis for our understanding of such practices has to be an acknowledgment of the paradox of a traditional "lean back" mode of television use and the "lean forward" mode of social media use. Wilson illustrates this paradox in her article focused on U.K. audiences. She shows how social media, for her informants, simultaneously function as means to connect with a world outside, engage in conversations, and dive deeper into the television text. Such a nuanced perspective on different uses brings us closer to a deeper understanding of audience practices, which, according to Wilson, are strongly affected by the variation between television program genres.

The political talk show genre is the focal point of two articles in this issue. Pond's study on Twitter communication in relation to the Australian political debating program *Q&A* reveals a relatively mature social media debating culture. In fact, the program's hashtag, #QandA, has become a frequently employed hashtag for ongoing political debate in social media, which sometimes is only loosely connected to the television program itself. By contrast, in Italy, social media have not yet become default channels of television audience engagement, as the research by Selva suggests. Although political talk shows are very popular, Italian television producers seldom incorporate tweets or other social media posts in the actual broadcast.

Another striking observation, which can be derived from comparing the five case studies, is how geography can become a key factor. Whereas most countries are situated in a single time zone, a few large countries, such as Australia and the United States, span multiple time zones. This greatly complicates television audience engagement in general, and particularly through social platforms. In her study on the reality singing competition *The Voice*, Van Es points out that the circulation of spoilers on social platforms strains the relationship between audiences from different parts of the United States. Similarly, the political debates triggered by Australia's *Q&A* are complicated by the country's three time zones, which means that the talk show is broadcast at three different moments.

Although these are highly preliminary comparisons and observations, they do indicate the potential of national comparative research on how social media are adopted and employed by television producers and audiences around the world. While providers such as Twitter and Facebook operate globally, it varies from country to country how these media become part of television audience cultures. To understand how social media reshape the meaning and dynamics of audience engagement, we need to develop a systematic understanding of these differences.

Public versus Commercial

Another ever-present dimension, central to the diametrically opposed positions outlined at the beginning of this article, is the public versus the commercial dichotomy. One pitfall of critical political economy is the tendency to regard commercial broadcasters as *a priori* “anti-democratic simply by virtue of the fact that they are commercial ventures” (Christensen 2003, 91). Research on the societal role of public service broadcasting has often applied a division between publicly and commercially funded television, and between public and private ownership. According to critics, that opposition “misrepresents the fact that various forms of television often display more similarities than differences” (Syvertsen 2003, 156). However, empirical research—from Williams’s (1975) seminal study of television as a cultural form and onward—has repeatedly shown that differences exist between television in its commercial advertising-funded and public forms (e.g., in Moe 2009).

The question is how the public versus commercial character of broadcasters affects the ways in which social media are employed to engage audiences. One problem *public* broadcasters encounter when including social media platforms in their daily work or making them part of television content is that social media platforms are with very few exceptions owned and operated by commercial firms, often situated far beyond the reach of national public authorities. Due to the overwhelmingly commercial nature of this ecosystem, social media networks cannot be seen as technologically or economically “neutral.” Users do not simply “generate” their own content but their interactivity and engagement is intricately, if subtly, steered by algorithms and business models. When public broadcasters incorporate social media in their professional practices and programming content, they have to deal with the intrinsic commercial nature of platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook, platforms with governance or business models that explicitly interfere with the broadcasters’ public mission (e.g., Moe 2013). Over the past five years, regulators of public broadcasters in various countries have struggled with the techno-commercial directives built into social media platforms, up to the point where the basic concept of “publicness” needs to be recalibrated (van Dijck and Poell 2015). Again, the call for critical systematic research, situated in different contexts, is apparent.

Two articles in this issue illustrate how public service and commercial broadcasters approach social media differently. Andersson Schwarz shows how a strikingly heterogeneous institution such as a public service broadcaster finds itself torn between the need to appear in tune with the affordances of social technologies (e.g., personalization) and the need to adhere to the basic remit of addressing a majority of the citizens. His findings resonate with Wilson’s discussion of industry discourse around social television, which simultaneously positions audiences as traditional viewers and atomized individuals. Andersson Schwarz demonstrates the importance for those producing public television to distance themselves from the commercial sector, when justifying the use of new technologies. This does, however, not mean that marketing is irrelevant. Rather, the kind of “brand” the public service broadcaster is keen to build—as innovative, able to reach young users, but also bound by tradition, and capable of

bringing together the general public in a cost-efficient way—illustrates the complexity of public institutions' meetings with social media.

For the commercial broadcaster, the relationship to social media might seem more straightforward. In Van Es's analysis of how social media were adopted by NBC's *The Voice*, we find a case that speaks directly to those early, optimistic hopes for user control. Van Es documents how, in earlier seasons of the show, the producers found user engagement to be too strong, in fact challenging the tightly structured narrative needed to get audiences and keep them. As a consequence, producers took back control and scaled back on viewers' potential for intervening in the program. The latter of these studies, then, shows a more pragmatic—cynical even—approach, concerned with the payoff of audience engagement, compared with the hesitancy of the public service broadcaster.

Techno-commercial Strategies

One thing we learn from these five articles is that all social platforms have built-in affordances that steer online communication in relation to television, linking content with the larger commercial infrastructures in which they become embedded. Both public and commercial broadcasters make conscious decisions about what affordances to adopt and which to ignore, but their choices are limited by platform structures. In her contribution, Van Es identifies four “applications of social media in reality television competitions”: “promotional,” “affective,” “functional,” and “phatic.” All four features could probably be found in a public service broadcasting as well. This raises the question to what extent public service broadcasters are comfortable to adopt the (intrinsic) techno-commercial features of social media platforms. Public service broadcasters also do all they can to keep viewers (the affective and phatic), they use voting systems in shows (the functional), and they use social media for promotion (the promotional), but arguably, in doing so, they take a different approach than commercial broadcasters. Public service broadcasters' use of these mechanisms definitely raises the question of what qualifies the intricate intertwining of social media platforms and television content.

Although the techno-commercial affordances of social media platforms have much in common, one platform stands out in the articles of this special issue: Twitter. Probably due to the ease of data collection, the platform is a favorite with social media researchers. But even taking this bias into account, it seems safe to say that Twitter is also television's favorite in terms of social media engagement. Twitter's technical ability to produce real-time streams of unfiltered tweets about a specific topic pulled together by a hashtag forms a surprising fit with the dynamics of live television. The potency of this blend proves especially successful in formats relying on viewers' responses to specific content, such as political election debates, talent shows, and fan-based contests. In these kinds of formats, the microblogging tool can be uniquely deployed to trigger viewers' instant reactions in real time (Elmer 2012). Evidently, Twitter's propensity for popularity boosting and response triggering is inimically connected to its ability to monitor viewers' opinions. The view that Twitter could be regarded as a “microphone for the masses,” however, is very controversial, as the

tool's demographics and user behavior is anything but representative of a general population (Murthy 2011; Hargittai and Litt 2012). The by now commonplace hashtag linked to any television show signifies the importance of Twitter for researching audience engagement today.

Twitter triggers varied forms of audience participation. In the study of why users engage in Italian political talk shows through Twitter, Selva extends existing studies of motivations for second screen use (e.g., Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2015) and finds motivations ranging from the informative to the entertaining and even ironic and ridiculing. Such practices are not unfamiliar for audience researchers. As such, Twitter can be seen as another outlet for well-known ways of engaging with television, albeit an outlet that turns the once private outbursts or discussions in the living room into instantly public utterances. Yet, there is more to how Twitter channels audience engagement.

On one level, offering a hashtag and perhaps showing some tweets on-screen is an easy way to mimic audience participation, or disguise promotion. Still, a television program-related hashtag can also trigger the formation of long-standing communities. Pond's study of *Q&A* in Australia seems to exemplify this, with the hashtag #QandA developing into a marker for continuous political communication. But even in an entertainment show, Twitter use can create participation beyond the television program itself. Van Es argues that staging user participation on social media can be a strategy for producers to keep control of the televised content, but still allow for audience engagement. Producer control does have its limits, though, as Wilson illustrates in her interviews with U.K. audience members. We should be careful not to automatically go from audience availability to use when assessing the arrangements of social television. For instance, practical issues, such as the time required to install an app on a smartphone and get it to work, are obstacles to engagement, according to Wilson.

Obviously, such developments complicate our notion of the audience in the sense that it expands into social media communities. Searching, tracking, and networking functions are increasingly integrated in a frictionless infrastructure where audience research shows significant patterns of overlapping public attention (Webster and Ksiazek 2012). It is important to understand how "audiencing"—channeling audiences toward issues and topics—works technically as well as socioeconomically. In addition, we need to understand how the infrastructure of social media is gradually defining audience ratings in television, illustrating the dominance of the former. In 2013, a new partnership between Twitter and Nielsen, the biggest American ratings company, was announced; Nielsen Twitter TV Rating became the first major integrated measuring system of television program popularity. Pitched as a syndicated industry standard, the new metric is based entirely on Twitter data, even though the company still also uses data culled from Nielsen boxes placed in a scattering of U.S. households (see also Kosterich and Napoli 2015).

Audience Engagement in Case Study Contexts

Although we desperately need detailed case studies on how television viewer and social media user practices become entangled, it is equally important that such case

studies take the particular “contexts” in which these practices unfold into account. As the five articles in this special issue demonstrate, the dynamic of audience engagement is strongly affected by: (1) the character of national media cultures, (2) whether social platforms are employed by public or commercial broadcasters, and (3) the specific techno-commercial strategies of television producers and social media companies. By exploring these three dimensions and showing how they play a role in our five case studies, we have sketched a basic analytical model to systematically compare and contextualize empirical findings on the relationship between social media and audience engagement. As social platforms are becoming increasingly central to the television audience experience, it is crucial to thoroughly interrogate how audience participation takes shape in different cultural and techno-commercial configurations.

We hope this preliminary exploration will inspire further research on the various cultural, institutional, and techno-commercial settings in which new forms of television audience engagement are instigated through social platforms. It is through such research that we gain insight into the multiple ways in which television audiences are transformed in the digital era, as well as in the potential alternatives for triggering and stimulating audience participation in public communication.

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