

Audience Engagement

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Audience engagement (also, user engagement) refers to the cognitive, emotional, or affective experiences that users have with media content or brands. Contrary to passive exposure to news content, engagement denotes an active and intentional orientation toward what users read, view, or hear. They “invest time, attention, and emotion” (Lehmann, Lalmas, Elad, & Dupret, 2012, p. 164) and internalize a media message. The concept thus assumes that users are captivated by a brand, a news application, or media content. These psychological experiences would motivate them to use it longer and more intensively, and stimulate user loyalty, attentiveness, and thought formation. Moreover, engagement is presumed to result in users acting upon their experiences with media. It implies behavior, that is, what people do with news. This could result in them consuming more news, interacting with online content, buying certain products, or building upon the provided information to take political action in their personal life. Engagement therefore is a precondition for processes of meaning-making, value creation, and connecting to public discourses.

Audience engagement has been a common term in the twentieth-century news industry. Newspapers and broadcasters have measured their audiences for over more than a century in order to prove to advertisers how many consumers they have reached and which demographic groups a certain publication has catered to. However, these studies were mostly exposure- or impression-based. They measured circulation and the numbers of viewers and listeners, but also time spent on consuming news. It has always been difficult, and rather unsatisfactory for advertisers, to show to which specific news content people devoted time and attention, and even more difficult to say if and how they processed the information in a news item. Moreover, the limited in-depth research conducted in the industry was always restricted to small samples of the user population because of time and financial restraints. The individual “transactions” in which the intake of media content results in some kind of output, whether cognitive, emotional, or physical action, thus largely remained hidden in the era of mass communication.

Following the rise of the Internet, audience engagement has gained increased importance in the media and advertising industry. In newsrooms the audience traditionally was largely taken for granted. Especially the decline in print circulation of newspapers and magazines, but also the loss of television viewers and radio listeners, caused more awareness among journalists that they should cater to the needs of news users without solely gearing their news production toward market demands. This was fostered by the new opportunities for interaction that online journalism offered. “Increasingly, companies are seeking to monitor (though some would describe it as surveillance) these

networked transactions as they seek to better anticipate what kinds of content consumers value, how much value they put on it, and in what contexts they are willing to pay for content” (Green & Jenkins, 2014, p. 121). Now that consumers have more power to choose freely from a prolific supply of media, the struggle for attention has become increasingly important.

On the advertisement side, the second traditional source of revenues for news companies, it was considered a top priority by media companies to shift from impression-based (quantity) to performance-based (quality) indicators. Accordingly, engagement became the new buzzword. Online platforms have made it easier to measure engagement on an individual level through online behavior metrics. This would present a clearer indication of the commercial and societal value of journalism than passive exposure does. Indeed, a range of studies have consistently found that the level of engagement with media content is positively related to recall, receptiveness, and persuasiveness, and positive engagement translates into a higher willingness to purchase products. Most of these studies, though, are not about journalism and news specifically but about adjacent fields, such as social psychology, marketing, and human–computer interaction.

There is no agreement in academic literature, the news industry, or professional journalism practice on what engagement actually entails and how it should be measured. It is, as Napoli (2010) notes, a complex, multidimensional, and ambiguous construct that functions as an umbrella concept for active audience behavior. Napoli compiled a list of 20 definitions that are used and could easily be expanded based on industry reports and scholarly work. Part of the confusion about definitions is due to the fact that engagement is applied in different fields and on various levels (ranging from psychological to behavioral experiences) to study different objects for different goals. This ambiguity allows both scholars and the media industry to loosely apply engagement wherever it fits their aims and priorities. However, “basically all of the post-exposure dimensions of audience behavior have been associated with one or more definitions and operationalizations of engagement” (Napoli, 2010, p. 90). For news organizations, engagement is merely instrumental and commodified. It is a means to other ends; to create more loyal audiences.

It is useful to distinguish between manifest and latent categories of engagement. Manifest categories are derived from usage and exposure, and can be measured quantitatively. Metrics such as unique visitors, page views, time spent, percentages of content that is read, shared, or liked, and click-through rates, function as proxies for engagement. The presumption is that when usage is more frequent, sustained, and interactive, users are more engaged. Although this might lead to figures that can be compared between different media types and outlets, it is still unclear what these numbers actually mean. Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer (2017), for example, distinguished between 30 reasons that users had to click or not to click. They showed that clicking does not mean that people are interested in a news item or not. They conclude that this is a flawed metric. In general, it is questionable if so-called engagement metrics actually represent this complex and multidimensional concept in a reliable and valid way.

Latent categories of audiences’ engagement are derived from qualitative or holistic approaches to how users perceive media content, how they interact with it, and how

they participate in the production of it. A classic example of the last type of engagement is letters to the editor. These illustrate how newspaper readers have perceived news, attached meaning to it, phrased a well-considered response, and, based on these views, contributed to public debate. On the Internet, this has translated into reader comments and other forms of participation in the journalistic process. But engagement is also increasingly provoked by journalists and newsrooms by reaching out to readers and inviting them to put issues on the media agenda and contribute to news coverage.

Next to text-based methods, self-reported engagement is studied via interviews, focus groups, and surveys. Users here indicate themselves how they perceive media content, how this triggers them to develop certain attitudes, and if and how they act upon this. Cognitive research applies an experimental setting to measure via task-based methods how users interact with news. Physiological and sensory measurements such as eye tracking, heartbeat ratings, and recording of facial expressions and mouse movements are taken to analyze if and to what extent people engage with news.

Contrary to what many of these indicators for measurement might suggest, engagement should be conceptualized as a process rather than as a measurable stable state of being. Scholars have, albeit in different terms, commonly distinguished between four stages in the process of engagement (O'Brien & Toms, 2008; Oh, Bellur, & Sundar, 2010). First, there is a *point of engagement* at which passive news consumption translates into active news use and users decide to physically interact with media content. This could be via different interfaces such as the television screen, the newspaper page, the mobile phone, or a website and involves various practices such as reading, clicking, or watching. The design of the interface, the interests and motivations of the user, and their goals determine if they engage with content in the first place.

Second, in the stage of actual *engagement*, cognitive and/or emotional attachment to media content takes place. Users here interpret news texts and invest energy in making sense of them by relating them to existing knowledge and integrating them in cognitive frameworks. The degree of involvement with news can vary between simply investing time and paying attention, to being absorbed in a story, and to interacting with news or participating in it. The intensity of the activity, based on a continuum of use practices ranging from more passive to more active behavior, results in various modes of engagement. Scrolling through one's social media timeline, for example, results in a different kind of experience than intensively reading a newspaper article or watching the news. Moreover, the engagement stage can be longer or shorter due to the level of interest users have in the item and the extent to which their attention is grabbed. The latter relates both to the content and design of media content and to the degree in which the affordances of the platform facilitate and stimulate engagement.

In the third stage, referred to as *disengagement*, users stop investing time and attention in a specific news item. This could be due to reasons on the psychological level such as negative effect, or on the contextual level when users, for example, lack time or are interrupted. In this stage outreach take place; engagement then leads to actual behavior. This could be immediate when users, for instance, decide to post a comment or it could be delayed when they decide to take political action. When there is a positive effect, this could lead to a fourth stage of *reengagement* in which users decide to engage

again with similar media content, for example, by following a hyperlink to a new article or by online searching for new information on the topic. User engagement is thus a continuous process that builds up to meaning-making, value creation, and connecting to public discourses.

Moving from the audience perspective to news production, engagement is also increasingly picked up by newsrooms and included in day-to-day journalism practice. While in the second half of the twentieth century disengaged journalism, in which the profession claimed autonomy from politics, business, and, also, from its audience had become the norm, interacting with news consumers has made a comeback in the new millennium. This has been motivated by the fact that for news organizations the ratio between revenue from advertisements and from paid circulation has radically shifted. They are now dependent on news consumers for the majority of their business. Moreover, because of the decline in audience share, news organizations have come to realize that their legitimacy and existence is contingent on their relation to audiences and society at large. They have even increasingly created new positions of engagement editors to nurture their relationship with the audience.

Engagement is conceptualized here as listening to audiences, communicating with them, taking their needs into account, and collaborating with them. The “minimalist” mode of considering audience engagement is rooted in the growing importance of metrics in the news process. Many news organizations nowadays distribute lists of high-performing news articles on a daily basis. Moreover, editors can follow live on screens in the newsroom how news items on the website are being read. Some argue that this functions to discipline journalists and gets them to write articles that perform well online. Others contend that metrics help to produce better journalism. Heat maps, for example, indicate where users have stopped reading. Taking such metrics into account could help journalists to write stories that readers engage with longer or more frequently.

A more active strategy for fostering engagement and improving relationships with audiences is taking their questions and feedback seriously. A “middle way” approach is to ask users to provide input at the end of the assembly line. Their responses to published content might be organized through comments on the website, posts on social media, actively asking for tips, or offline discussion meetings about topics addressed in news coverage. This should not only make news consumers feel they are involved in the journalistic process, but also result in valuable input for news coverage that is of interests to people. Especially on social media, reporters and dedicated engagement editors interact with news consumers and try to create conversations about the news.

A “maximalist” approach involves activating users and engaging them in the newsmaking process. In the 1990s, the public or civic journalism movement already made a plea for taking the concerns of audiences as point of departure for news coverage. It urged news media to organize audience input and debate about public issues. Moreover, it had the ambition to not only cover issues that matter to people but also to help solving them. Reminiscences of public journalism resonate in movements like constructive and solution journalism. Participatory and reciprocal journalism have similar characteristics. They promise to not only listen to their audiences, but

also take their ideas and interests on board when practicing journalism. The gist is that professional journalists and amateur citizens join forces to report on stories that matter for communities. This would raise the level of engagement and thus create better and more valuable relationships with audiences which can also be commodified.

As a concept, engagement offers an indicator for the value and worthwhileness of news for individual users and society at large. Although definitions differ, it denotes both valuable relations between journalism and its public, and between users and the public world. For many in the news industry engagement might be merely instrumental, geared toward securing the loyalty of news consumers which can be commodified and sold to advertisers. Others have a more holistic and idealistic view on engagement and contend that it should not just be about involving the public in news, but also about activating them to participate in public life. Engagement with the news is an important precondition for civic engagement with public issues, specific communities, and society at large. As such, it is an important indicator for the function journalism claims to have in society and democracy.

SEE ALSO: 21st-Century Journalism: Digital; Audience Measurement; Audience Studies; Audiences for Journalism; Citizen Journalism; Letters to the Editor; Media Market Research; Reader Commenting

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