



Small acts of audience engagement interrupting content flows

Jelena Kleut, Jannie Møller Hartley, Tereza Pavličková, Ike Picone, Bojana Romić, Sander de Ridder

The audience has become highly productive in many different ways, but we find it analytically fruitful to focus on what we call **small acts of engagement**. Three types of these engagement practices have been identified in the trend analysis conducted in CEDAR:

- One-click engagement
- Commenting and debating
- Production of small stories

In 2006, Jay Rosen coined the famous term “the people formerly known as the audience”,³⁸ in a context of promising disruption in which ‘Web 2.0’ technologies would enable virtually anyone to publish information online at no cost and no effort. Ten years on, ideas of the audience seems much more complex than the ‘*everyone is a media producer now*’ atmosphere suggested back then. Admittedly, the productive dimension of media use is thoroughly ingrained in people’s everyday media practices. But the main way in which members of the audience contribute to production is much more subtle than initially envisioned. The trend analysis conducted in CEDAR allows us to emphasise three such subtle but important practices.

One click engagement encompasses a variety of acts - liking, sharing, re-tweeting, linking, flagging - occurring through social media platforms. What all of these have in common is that user engagement is facilitated by ‘social buttons’ as built in affordances of platforms. Use of ‘social buttons’ requires little effort and is a widespread type of audience engagement, providing users with the sense of (inter)activity and the platforms with valued traffic. Importantly, the abundance of user data gave rise to Big Data analysis, used by researchers and media industries alike. However, this growing field rarely intersects with audience research, as aggregated quantitative data often lacks in-depth individual and contextual analysis.

Commenting and debating also arose as a consequence of social media and web 2.0. A hypothesis has been that readers can consume but also actively participate in the production of news or popular culture. Some have argued that journalists and editors are no longer



gatekeepers but rather ‘gate watchers’ who monitor.³⁹ Studies of debates and commenting can broadly be divided into those focusing on instruments and possibilities for debate, studies that look at the actual debates, and studies that examine moderation. These are media driven ways of controlling or encouraging commenting as small acts of engagement. What has been missing is further research on how audiences actually engage in these debates.

Production of small stories represents a highly discursive audience activity. Small stories reflect individual experiences, identities, and interpretations. Compared to the other small acts discussed here they can be further removed or detached from the socio-technical frameworks of legacy media or platforms. Small stories are often studied in relation to social and cultural identity expressions, especially in the context of minority audiences or marginalized groups. Social dynamics of online identity expression are usually conceptualized within the framework of symbolic interactionism, referred to as online *self-representation* for which people use digital semiotic tools to show ‘idealised’ versions of selves.⁴⁰ Equally, there has been a keen interest in how online storytelling relates to identity construction, for example studying connections to the performative nature of gender, sexual and ethnic identities in online contexts.⁴¹

A conceptual model for understanding small acts of engagement

We argue that a conceptual model of these forms of small acts of engagements need to take into account:

- Implicit and less visible factors influencing engagement, including temporal, spatial and technical affordances, and
- The social position of the producer, for example altruism, personal gain, social contexts, attitudes and skills, social and cultural capital, and subjective reasons for engaging.

We suggest that small acts of engagement need to be conceptualised in terms of their level of productivity, ranging from *casual* acts, such as endorsing, liking, clicking and voting, towards more *intentional* and motivated acts such as sharing, commenting, debating and producing small stories. We can further conceptualise in terms of *effort* – writing a blogpost demands considerable effort, whilst commenting, liking or sharing does not. Lastly, we suggest to develop a conceptualisation of the influence or effects, what we have labelled *interruption*, on a more aggregate discursive level, focusing on intended and unintended effects.



Attentive dimension	Productive practices	Media driven / Audience driven	Interruption	Theoretical concepts
Reading	Liking, sharing, re-tweeting, flagging, checking	Media provide content and structures of audience engagement	Has a role on the aggregate level and indirectly on the content	Sense-making, meaning making
Evaluation of text - content	Commenting, debating	Media provide content and/or structures of audience engagement	Media adopting audience-produced content	Personal productive use of information, identity construction (collectively and individually)
Evaluation of overall media experience	Small stories	Driven by audiences identities, experiences, knowledge and skills	Broadening the mainstream	Empowerment – the audience using the productive dimension as a resource
Implication	Satire, re-configurations of content, mocking, flash-mobs, campaigning, promoting a certain issue, slacktivism	Driven by audiences evaluations of content or overall media experience	Challenging the mainstream	Governmentality – resistance against self-disciplining

Figure 4: Small acts of audience engagement

In order to address how mainstream media flows are broadened or challenged by audiences, peoples’ casual and everyday acts of engagement merit consideration. The rise and prominence of users’ productive practices is mostly and primarily driven by small acts of engagement. These are productive acts of interpretation, an expression of users’ understandings of media texts. Mainstream media flow can be challenged if not transformed due to the volume of these acts, which is realised by the producing audiences as well as by mainstream media. That is to say, profound changes in the way information is produced and distributed are fuelled by small acts of engagement rather than by more laborious and dedicated practices. For instance, the news industry has been more affected by the rise of people sharing news on social media than by bloggers publishing journalistic pieces.

Finally, **legacy media aim to appropriate alternative voices** and their rising prominence within public discourse, in order to adapt them into well-established journalistic practices. They implement their own policies of selection, ordering and attention, and hence, these interruptions represent a shift in discourse as opposed to radical uncontrolled disruptions.