



Interruption, disruption or intervention?

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

Small, random and casual acts of audience engagement have become one of the key characteristics of contemporary content flows. To map the changes brought by this trend, seventeen stakeholders were interviewed in five countries – Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Serbia and Sweden.

Since some small acts of audience engagement are invited and facilitated by media, while others are driven by audiences themselves, the stakeholder consultations included respondents in traditional roles of content creators (journalists, social media editors, marketing professionals), as well as amateur and semi-amateur producers (bloggers, vloggers) and non-profit organisations aiming to empower audiences or to supplement mainstream media offer.

The consultations result in four key findings:

- Software supported analytics and online comments provide media producers with a continuously updated view on their audience.
- Production routines of the legacy media change in response to small acts of engagement.
- Audience creativity enters economic relations.
- In relationship between audiences and media there is a transformation related to (dis)trust.

The 'real-time' audience

Digital communication technologies have scaled-up the two-way communication channel between media producers and their audience. *'Media producers now have a permanent relation with their audience because they see in real time what people are consuming on different platforms'*, to quote Wouter Verschelden, a founder and editor-in-chief of Newsmonkey.be (Belgium). Hence, media producers' perception of their audience equally evolves in real-time, based on a continuous feed of quantitative and



qualitative insights about their audience. Editorial analytics such as Google Analytics, Chartbeat or Hotjar provide media producers with up to the minute information on who is visiting their platforms and which content is performing well. Additionally, comments and @replies on social media give media producers a 'qualitative' sense of the concerns and sensitivities amongst members of their audience.

These analytical tools fragment the monolithic audience in tangible sub-communities that can now, supported by personalisation algorithms, be easily targeted with specific information and advertisements. Furthermore, the dramatic shortening of the time lapse between an editorial action and feedback on the audience' reaction (one recalls quarterly circulation numbers) might further reinforce the 'entertainment' bias in media production towards 'nice to know'-information as opposed to 'need to know'-information.

Adjustment and control of content

In networked media ecology, the production routines within legacy media are changing because of small acts of engagement. Large scale audience engagement is increasingly seen amongst stakeholders as not done for the right reasons, partly because of lacking public interest orientation, partly because it is turning towards commercial content seeking to reach more views, likes and shares. There is an increasingly niche-orientation in the production of content as bloggers and vloggers are producing content to different niche audiences, that again become more niche, for which community building seems to be crucial.

Disruption is thus a form of co-created ecology of content, between legacy media as proactive with content distributed following existing norms and routines and producers of small acts of online engagement as re-active. This in some cases results in the change of content and making it their own, which can transform small interruptions into larger ones. These disruptions are issue-oriented rather than brand oriented.

Therefore, both public and private actors who aim to influence the public with content, i.e. encourage small acts of engagement, have to be much more re-active to a general agenda set by audiences. However, this is difficult as the media driven engagement is influenced by institutionalised routines and norms of production within legacy media institutions, whereas audience driven engagement is driven by a 'making it up as you go along' logic. Public and private bodies are reacting to this trend by adapting their micro-communication across different platforms, *'the platform shapes how we think about certain issues'*, says Tobias Egmose, social media strategies at Økologisk Landsforening (Denmark).



Audience engagement between creativity and economy

Small acts of engagement contribute to the segmentation of the audience around various 'affective spaces'. They often have an artistic potential that is supported by the infrastructure of the platform and seen as a contribution to the community. Current trends are showing that small creative acts made by the audience are often taking place within the predefined niche-spaces carefully designed to encourage desired activity. When this **immaterial labour** is substantial, the important cohesive element is community-building, where the most prominent audience members gain a special status: they become trusted people within the community.

This creative potential of audiences' engagement is greatly fostered by the media, for example in the case of game and transmedia projects that are designed to involve creative interventions by the audience members. Cecilie Stranger-Thorsen, founder of Stranger/Nordic transmedia Producers (Sweden) gave the example of the game made by Malmö-based company where audience members can produce goods that are traded within the game. Alyssa Levin from BoostHbg (Sweden) emphasizes: *'You have to create audience engagement!* In other words, the infrastructure and support has to be there to facilitate audience activity.

The interruption of trust and trustworthiness

Audiences' small engagements in the form of various endorsements granted to online content establish an alternative mechanism of visibility and prominence of content. Audiences' quantified attention is, by various algorithms, prioritised over quality of the content and its standards of production. The notion of popularity and public appreciation then stands for proof of reliability and trustworthiness. The legacy ways of working are being contested by new practices arising from the notion of shared audiencing, intertwining with the traditional values of journalistic practices.

With the increasing amount of available sources, and often contradictory content, **audiences are burdened anew with the task of selection and verification of content**. Therefore, they are looking for media providers or opinion leaders (media- or audience-driven) they can relate to, and invest trust in the process. *'We are the curator, we will follow all the blogs, do that intensive task for you, that is something that has great value for readers'*, says Robin Wauters, founder and CEO at tech.eu (Belgium). Legacy media are supplemented and increasingly substituted by media



authorities that due to their niche-orientation are able to build a closer relationship with their specific audience.

Legacy media operating in different legal environments as opposed to audience-driven media platforms face particular challenges in relation to audiences' engagements by being accountable for the content produced by audiences yet distributed via them. That leads to their editorial involvement or even interference with the content contributed by audiences', for example closing down discussion threads or editing live feeds from social media in television broadcasting.