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## Chapter Abstract

This chapter develops a set of findings around audiences' small-scale acts of engagement with media texts. We identify and discuss three distinct emanations of these small acts: 1) one click engagement, 2) commenting and debating and 3) small stories. In contrasting them with more structural productive practices, we further conceptualise them in relation to two main dimensions: effort and intentionality. Lastly, we suggest to develop a conceptualisation of the influence which we have labelled interruption. Content 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. Profound changes in the way information is produced and distributed are fuelled by small acts of engagement rather than by more laborious practices.

*Keywords: audiences, content, engagement, participation social media, online behaviour*

**Small acts of engagement and audiences interruptions of content flows**

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In 2006, Jay Rosen coined the famous term “the people formerly known as the audience”. He did so in a context of promising disruption. Tim O’Reilly, who coined the word “Web 2.0” promised “a world in which ‘the former audience’, not a few people in a back room, decides what’s important”, insisting that “users must be treated as co-developers” (O’Reilly, 2005). Axel Bruns (2008, Bruns & Highfield, 2007) spoke of “produsage” to denote those collaborative processes where knowledge is produced by both professionals and users. Authors like Dan Gillmor (2004) hailed new times, where not journalist but people would be “the media”. Henry Jenkins (2006) used the term “convergence culture”, where production and consumption converge as audiences are no longer bound to stay on the reception side of media texts.

Ten years on and the shape of the audiences seems much more complex than the “everyone is a media producer now” atmosphere suggested. Admittedly, the productive dimension of media use is thoroughly ingrained in people’s everyday media practices. But blogs have not taken over media institutions so far. YouTube success stories like that of renowned game commentator PewDiePie are rather exceptional. Although the “long tail” (Anderson, 2006) of amateur content production might form a colourful ensemble of consumers-turned-producers, the Hollywood Studios are still very much running the show.

When we look at some of the biggest disruptions the media sector is confronted with, they are for a large part driven not so much by these structural forms of audience-driven content production, but rather by what we would call small acts of engagements. Not blogs and personal web pages drive audience production, but commercially driven networks and mobile

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devices providing cross-media infrastructure of content flow, and offering to media users various ways how to react to diverse media content spontaneously. Not so much journalism-driven information endeavours, but rather “random acts of journalism” (Holt & Karlsson, 2014) occurring when coincidentally witnessing a newsworthy event seem to have become the most prominent emanation of citizen journalism. Social media have primarily become spheres of self-publication for instant gratification rather than spaces of deliberation and socio-political identity-building (although there are numerous examples of social media use for activist and political purposes: so-called Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street in 2011; Black Lives Matter in 2013; #JeSuisCharlie in 2015, #metoo in 2017 etc.). Admittedly, engaging in merely the consumption of content can even lead to disruptions of content flows, as our digital media use is continuously tracked, producing a stream of meta-information through meta-communication (Jensen & Helles, 2017). Media producers harness these data through editorial analytics in order to optimize or redirect their content flows. Subversive interpretations of content by members of the audiences since long lie at the origin of more productive audience practices, such as fanzines (Jenkins, 1992).

Following the review of literature about audiences from the last decade (see Chapter 1), this chapter takes this trend as a starting point: small-scale audiences interactions with media text have become the most prevalent audiences interventions in the flow of media content. They might not seem very disruptive on an individual level, but they have the capacity to engender large interruptions in media content on an aggregate level. For example, the act of sharing at the personal level might boost a piece of content to go viral, and hence more profoundly impact the direction of content in the network. We acknowledge that the audiences have become highly productive, but rather through what we call **small acts of engagement with media texts**. We conceptualize “small acts” by showing how they contrast with more structural productive practices on two main dimensions: effort and intentionality. When we talk about engagement in those forms of small acts, we mean the engagement in the productive practise, of text and discourse, generating input into existing content flows, possibly interrupting these flows as a result.

These small acts of engagement might furthermore be considered as very idiosyncratic acts, intended in the first place for a potential public of relatively closely related contacts, confining

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their scope to the sphere of individual gratifications. The point we seek to make in this chapter however is that these small acts of productive engagement can, on an aggregate level, become forces of major disruption in media content flows. To make that point, within the multiple steps of literature review conducted in the CEDAR framework (see Chapter 1) we identify three modes as distinct emanations of these small acts of engagement: 1) one click engagement, 2) commenting and debating and 3) small stories. We explore each in more detail to surface how they interrupt content flows in their own terms. We then discuss these interruptions relating them to the drivers behind the productive engagement. We conclude by reflecting to what extent these interruptions signal a genuine empowerment of media users over content flows or on the contrary get co-opted by business-driven media logics.

We should also stress that we do not limit our scope to social media only but include a broader spectrum of digital engagements, given that various forms of “sociality” are present on a variety of different digital formats. The claim of Lövgren and Reimer that, “you would be hard pressed to find a medium that could not be characterized as social” (Lövgren & Reimer, 2013, p. 5) should be even taken further because of the emerging technologies and connectivity they provide, such as Internet of Things. Audiences are “inherently cross-media” (Schröder, 2011) and the flows of content in which they take part cannot be limited to a single platform, provider or device. In that sense, small acts of engagement do happen within the digital environment but in response to both online and offline content (e.g. watching a TV series and commenting it online).

### **One-click engagement**

Like, retweet, heart, upvote, vote... these are activities literally requiring one click or tap by media users. The required effort is close to none, but even so, media users produce a piece of information that can interrupt content flows. “Most liked news” or news shared on Twitter and Facebook offer an alternative to content flows directed by editors. This idea of such small acts having disruptive effects is well illustrated by Gerlitz and Helmond (2013) when they talk about the “like economy” and how the “social validation of web content” (p. 1351)

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contributes towards “a decentralization of actors involved in value creation” (p. 1354) – also showing how at the same time Facebook keeps control over the user data generated by these actors. A general hypothesis in the literature has been that the reader can consume, for example the news, literature or popular culture, and also actively participate in the distribution of this content, while journalists and editors no longer guard the gate, but only monitor and can be described as “gate-watchers” rather than gatekeepers (Bruns, 2011; Bruns & Highfield, 2007).

Nahon and Hemsley (2013, p. 3) distinguish this more top-down approach to the study of content distribution across media to a more bottom-up approach, focusing on users’ ways of engaging in this process in terms of motivations and social connectedness. Within much of these more audience-oriented studies, actually producing media content has received more attention than liking, sharing and other types of less active acts of disruption (Pavličková & Kleut, 2016). Most studies looking at sharing activities from a user perspective so far adopt a *Uses & Gratifications* or *Diffusion of Innovation* perspective to the matter (Kümpel, Karnowski, & Keyling, 2015). In their overview article of news sharing studies from 2004 to 2014, Kümpel, Karnowski and Keyling (2015, p. 6) identify three basic categories of motivations to share news: self-serving motives (gaining reputation and status among peers and other users), altruistic motives (inform others) and social motives (interact with others and get social approval).

One strand of research that has taken a closer look at clicking and sharing as forms of engagement is the study of “clicktivism”, a term used in an overtly derogatory way to “denote the simplification of online participatory processes: online petitions, content sharing, social buttons (e.g., Facebook’s ‘Like’ button), etc. [...]with the idea that the streamlining of online processes has created a societal disposition toward feel good, ‘easy’ activism” (Halupka, 2014, p. 115-6). The underlying idea is that, for example, sharing a link to a campaign does not require much effort, certainly in comparison to traditional political engagement, and therefore is a way of granting satisfaction to the person engaging in it rather than a legitimate political act. Halupka argues however that such perspective does not consider enough the affordances of new technologies, and how they can amplify the outcome of such seemingly easy engagement. The Ice Bucket Challenge has been criticized for focussing more on the

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funny challenge than on the ALS disease for which the campaign raised money, but it did raise 115 million dollars in 2014 in the USA.

It is interesting to apply this reasoning to small acts of productive engagement. Similarly, they may look like forms of “easy” engagement, deserving a critical reflection in light of the promise of a more participatory culture facilitated by the affordances of online media. Media users liking a piece of content can hardly be considered on the same level of engagement as those keeping a blog or pro-actively using social media to get messages across. On the other hand, these small acts can have fundamental repercussions on the way content flows through the media ecosystem, and hence deserve a closer look. The risk of analysing these streams of responses in, for example, big data analysis is that people disappear in the data, and we would emphasise a need to also study these small acts of engagement from the perspective of the audience studies.

### **Commenting and debating**

A second example of what we label “small acts of engagement” is audiences commenting and debating the content produced by legacy media. In the literature, this has by large been investigated as a part of a conceptualisation under theoretical headlines such as “engagement”, “interactivity”, “participation” or “user involvement”. The studies into debating and commenting can broadly be divided into studies that look at instruments and possibilities for debate (Karlsson, 2009; Domingo et al., 2011), studies that look at the actual debates (Miloni, Vadratsikas & Papa, 2012; Ruiz et al., 2011; Eberholst & Hartley, 2015) and lastly studies that examine the moderation and the influence of, for example, pay walls and anonymity, content formats and other factors on the debates (Ksiazek, Peer, & Lessard, 2014; Weber, 2014). But what has been missing and which is of particular interest to our focus in this chapter is how the audiences actually engage in these debates, as moderation, upvoting and other instruments can be seen as media driven ways of *controlling* or *encouraging* commenting as a small act of engagement. As Pavlíčková and Kleut note “despite putting the

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users' production at the centre, produsage paradoxically overlooks the users themselves" (Pavličková & Kleut, 2016, p. 5).

A conceptualisation of commenting as a form of small engagement is offered by Picone (2011), who examines how casual produsers' experience contributing to news, and what factors shape their experience. Picone is interested in the users who occasionally make smaller contributions, such as voting, sharing or commenting, that are also different from typical produsage as they encompass "personal productive use of information" (Picone, 2011, p. 105), and not collaborative engagement with other users. The main finding of Picone's research is that, even though small, these activities are experienced as *investment*. Whether or not this investment will be made depends on factors related to mass-produced content, social context or personal motives, attitudes and skills. By turning attention towards the users themselves, Picone is able to theorize on the motives for small acts of engagement and the effects of this engagement on an individual level. Similarly, in a study carried out by Oeldorf-Hirsch and Sundar (2015), commenting on news stories is somehow also conceptualised as investment that pays off in terms of a "feeling of involvement". "Discussion through comments led to a greater sense of influence and greater involvement for those sharing the news story" (Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015, p. 1). Likewise, Bergström finds that "the minority who are actually commenting on news articles, or otherwise participating in the journalistic process through blog-writing, seem to consider these activities as part of a creative leisure-time, rather than as partaking in democratic activities" (Bergström, 2008). To sum up, both commenting and debating has mainly been investigated from the affordance-side, whereas audience research is yet to grasp who the audiences are, what are their motives for engaging in these small acts and how this affects the content flows.

### **Small stories**

Audience activity in creating texts, discourses and narratives around the media products has been well documented in audience studies (De Ridder, Vesnić-Alujević, & Romić, 2016). Using the label "small stories" here we want to point to the discursive audience activity that



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does not fit into produsage when the bar is set too high in terms of scope, time and visibility. We use it to describe individual, casual and occasional audience practices – a single video not a YouTube celebrity channel, a single eye witnessing photo not a blog. Unlike the previous modes of small acts of audience engagement which follow the socio-technical frameworks of the legacy media or platforms or which build upon the critical and creative position towards the media content, small stories reflect individual experiences, identities, and interpretations. They can be compared to digital vernacular storytelling discussed by Burgess: “The personal narrative, told in the storyteller’s unique voice, is central to the process of creating a story and is given priority in the arrangement of symbolic elements. Narrative accessibility, warmth, and presence are prioritized over formal experimentation or innovative ‘new’ uses for technologies” (Burgess, 2006, p. 207).

Because of all these characteristics small stories are often studied in relation to social and cultural identity expression and construction, especially in the context of minority audiences or marginalized groups. The social dynamics of online identity expression are usually conceptualized within the framework of symbolic interactionism, referred to as online *self-representation*. The work of Erving Goffman (1959) is deemed important to study the social identity aspects of audiences creating online content. For example, research has been exploring how people very actively manage impressions when creating online content (Ellison, Heino, & Gibs, 2006), for which they use digital semiotic tools to show “idealized” versions of selves (Manago et al., 2008). Such knowledge may be crucial to understand the social and mediated contexts in which small stories are produced. Equally, there has been a keen interest in how online storytelling relates to aspects of cultural identity expression and construction through exploring, for example, the performative nature of gender, sexual and ethnic identities in online contexts (Cover, 2012). Acts of online storytelling have been associated with continuous power struggles for minority audiences, but also as opportunity structures for marginalized groups to resist violent discourses (e.g. oppression, shaming, othering), through positively reworking them. An example may be young gay people’s coming out stories on YouTube (Wuest, 2014). While they may be small acts of online storytelling that are based on a very personal identity narrative, such stories have “larger

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discursive potential” (Pullen, 2012, p. 8), they may offer moments for identification, agency and reflexivity for audiences.

Similar role of identity is found in the context of political participation. Using the notions that link cultural and political – “civic cultures” (Dahlgren, 2009), “public connection” (Couldry, Livingstone, & Markham, 2007) and “subactivism” (Bakardjieva, 2009) – Mascheroni comes to conclusion that “Most pre-political and political groups on Facebook are perceived and practised as an expressive performance of individual identity” (2013, p. 114).

The fact that small stories are told by less productive audiences which narrate their identities and experiences does not make them a parallel universe, unrelated to media logic. The idea that all social life is mediated (Livingston, 2009), in the context of small stories means that 1) in terms of aesthetic and discourse, audiences can use and reuse existing media templates, 2) their content can be incorporated in traditional media flows (for example as news about a YouTube video), and 3) even though it is audience driven, such content also has audiences of their own, who interprets small stories, shares and uses them for various purposes.

### **Conceptualising small acts of engagement**

Using these three modes as a starting point, we can now reflect on how to further conceptualise small acts of engagement. In contrasting them with more structural productive practices, two dimensions are central: effort and intentionality. Writing a blogpost demands a big effort, commenting, liking or sharing does not. Producing meta-communication by using digital media might even require virtually none. Hence, small acts of engagement feature outputs that require a lower level of input, or less effort. This has been previously related to the notion of slacktivism to point out how social networking sites foster forms of engagement with low thresholds to participate. On the more positive note it is possible that the lower threshold means that more people engage. Looking at productive media practices through the lens of the effort they require has also been used by Picone (2011) to address the lead-user bias in the study of participatory media uses.

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Second is the dimension of intentionality. We conceive small acts as less premeditated and more casual ones (see Picone, 2011), happening on the fly as individuals carry their communication technologies with them. These practices tend to occur mainly in what Dimmick, Feaster and Hoplamazian (2011) call the “interstices”, those tiny periods between our daily activities where we often glance at our mobile devices for micro-information or micro-entertainment. The same observation leads Mark Deuze (2012) to state that media are increasingly so ubiquitous and pervasive that they become transparent through our daily use of them. It might be the transparency of these small acts that render them largely invisible, in the sense that they are difficult to single out, hence to problematize and be considered as the focus of any audience research.

Intentionality points to the casual character of these small acts of engagement, in contrast to more sustained, purposive efforts to maintain productive practices. It connects to Rosen’s (2004) idea of “random acts of journalism”, when people contribute to the news because they happen to be at the right place at the right time to witness a newsworthy event. Expanding on this idea, media users might engage in productive practices in a similar casual or random way, not because they see themselves as a producer – contrary to a blogger – but rather because the occasion presents itself.

This randomness of acts happening in between activities, in the “interstices” (Dimmick, Feaster, & Hoplamazian, 2011), shows the importance of taking into account implicit and more invisible factors shaping the engagement. This includes media related factors like, for example the time, space and technical affordances surrounding the practice. The algorithms geared towards offering media users tailored content they are more likely to engage with are an example of these technological affordances. Other types of “designs for spreadability” (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013) should also be taken into account.

Together with socio-demographic factors, the questions how and why people act should be asked. As Trültzsch-Wijnen, Trültzsch-Wijnen and Siibak (2015) discuss in relation to social media use among young people, these questions can be approached with different concepts in mind: self-representation, social capital, moral economy of household, uses and gratifications. These would allow us to see what is the role of small acts of engagement in impression

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management, establishment and maintenance of social ties, creation of private-public boundaries within families (and beyond). More subjective factors also fit here, the motivations and thresholds for people to engage in productive practices. These are the subject of various studies already (see e.g. Kümpel, Karnowski and Keyling (2015)), however, how these motivations interact with the effort people have to put in, and how this may vary from small acts of engagement to more sustained production of content, still needs further scrutiny. Valuable insights could come from media literacy studies as they pave the path to connecting social and individual factors of media use with the (understanding of) affordances that facilitate engagement.

The three modes we discussed (one-click engagement, commenting and debating, small stories) should be taken as examples of a broader field of diverse modes through which individuals are engaging with the media texts. They may equally include flagging, checking, rating, remixing and indeed many others that will come into life with new emerging technologies (see Chapter 10). The modes of engagement differ on the dimensions of effort and intentionality, and then further within each mode there are differences that arise from multiple other factors. This diversity renders a question “how small is small” or in other words at which point we can describe an engagement as “big”. We started from the idea that all modes of engagements with media should be accounted for in the audience studies, primarily but not exclusively because they are part of contemporary content flows - they should be studied and better understood because they are part of everyday lives, they explain individual experiences, they feed into individual and group identities. With this in mind, we do not aim at drawing the conceptual lines between big and small, they should be identified in the research that follows the tradition of critical cultural audience studies. Such an attempt might start from Schröder’s (2000) multidimensional model of media reception that includes: motivation, comprehension, discrimination, position, evaluation and implementation. Small acts of engagement should be placed on the scale between evaluation as “domain of social discourses” and implication as “using media as political resources” (Schröder, 2000, p. 251). Together with the factors that lead to small acts of engagement, such research may further bring the understanding of the relations between small acts (i.e. how is clicking as selection of

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content related to liking as its evaluation, or to commenting as its discursive expansion) and the bigger acts such as campaigning, produsage or citizen journalism.

Lastly, we suggest to develop a conceptualisation of the influence or effects, what we have labelled *interruption into content flows*, on a more aggregate, also discursive, level and on an individual level. That is to say that the engagement can have an unintended or intended effect, both on the individual agent/producer level, for example for the identity construction, or on the level of the discourse of debate, for example the tone or the “way we talk about things”. The idea of explicitly incorporating the outcome of small acts of engagement here is to acknowledge that even if they might be small, effortless, casual, idiosyncratic, invisible – they may very well impact the way content is flowing through the ecosystem. This however, does not imply a de facto empowerment of the audience. By way of conclusion, we address this point in the last part of this chapter.

### **Small acts of engagement, big interruptions in media power?**

Considering the question of audiences’ (small) productive engagements with media, the question of power is crucial. Various authors (e.g. Deuze, 2007; Jenkins, 2006; Gillmor, 2004; Cohen, 2002) address people’s contributions to media content flow in terms of empowerments, and broadening the diversity of voices in the public plethora. Whether referring to journalism and news production or popular culture and fan activities, these accounts are focusing primarily on the media affordances and the users’ access and ability to produce and channel their productive efforts, using significant and selected examples to demonstrate the potentiality of such an empowerment.

In order to address how mainstream media flow is being broadened and/or challenged, the category of people’s small casual everyday acts of engagement with media must be equally considered and fully conceptualised (Picone, 2011; Pavlíčková & Kleut, 2016), and the connotation of participatory empowerment that comes with it should be critically assessed (Picone, 2017). These small acts in the form of comments, shares and various forms of endorsements are first and foremost expressions of one’s acknowledgement of media content

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to which they are attached. Therefore, the locus of potential power and empowerment is not considered exclusively to be placed on the laborious effort of audiences' productive acts like blogs or vlogs with regular posts and subsequently v/bloggers' laborious use of various media platforms to self-promote and to harness attention. These acts, often described as part of a participatory culture (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013), might in the end not have impacted the structural relationship of power between media professionals and media users to the extent envisioned by its proponents (Bechmann & Lomborg, 2013, p. 778).

On the other hand, when looking at the small acts of engagement at the aggregate level, and understanding power in terms of granting this attention through those small acts of engagement with media, we could argue that this has had a large impact on the media industry. Bloggers might not have challenged journalism to a large extent, but sharing stories on social media sure did. It forced media companies to review their distribution strategies, alter their content (e.g. clickbait), made the public agenda tangible (see Chapter 8 for further discussion). The mainstream media flow can be challenged if not transformed due to the volume of those casual productive acts, which is realised by the producing audiences as well as the mainstream media. Gerlitz and Helmond (2013) discuss how metrics of Facebook like buttons translate into diverse web economies. Among others, these can be traded for further attention from the mainstream media.

Can we in that sense truly speak of audiences that have become more empowered through the technological affordances that allow for them to engage in these small acts of media related production? As Scholz (2016) amongst others has argued, companies like Facebook thank for their huge resources to their users' "immaterial labour", commodifying people's personal data in unsolicited ways. In the name of better user experience, media companies collect data and tailor their content accordingly to target specific user groups. The platforms enabling these small acts of media production, possibly disrupting media content flows, are on a more profound level maybe enslaving rather than liberating media audiences (see also Chapter 4). Finally, the established media aim to appropriate those alternative voices and their potentially rising prominence within public discourse, in order to adapt them for their well-established journalistic practices and routines (see Chapter 8). They implement their own policies of

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selection, ordering and attention, hence the empowerment is mostly a slow shifting of media discourses, as opposed to radical uncontrolled disruptions.

On the other hand, social media have the ability to mobilize people that share similar interests giving them space to start an immediate discussion. In the early rise of social media, some media researchers have been suspicious about its ability to make any real political impact. However, after so-called Arab Spring and 99% Movement, there was little doubt that user activity on social media does have a potential for the political resistance or social change (Castells, 2012; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013, p. 41) producing a “new forms of political and social connection” (Couldry, 2012, p. 109). Thus, Leah Lievrouw goes on to claim that “engagement via new media is both symbolic *and* material. Communication, media, and ICTs not only express or represent movement messages, but in fact are how participants *make* and *enact* movements in a ‘politics of connections’” (Lievrouw, 2012, p. 158). Both these discourses related to power are the topics audience research will need to address.

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