Afterword: Reflections on Media Engagement

John Corner
Leeds University
j.r.corner@leeds.ac.uk

Abstract:
In this Afterword, I raise general questions about how the idea of “engagement” relates to the different phases of media production, reception, and use explored in the previous pieces. Drawing on my earlier writing, I note how different kinds of engagement and involvement occur within a changing “economy of attention” within which commercial activities, media productions, and the politics of media industries have to operate. In this economy, visibility is clearly a pressing requirement, although one that does not by itself guarantee engagement. Production strategies to generate the “right” sorts of engagement with the “right” audiences are required, although given the range of options which consumers have to choose from and the array of factors bearing on choice, these strategies do not always meet with success. I consider how engagement with media products often leads to forms of engagement beyond them. Finally, I suggest how lines of inquiry in media research might use the term to develop further their understanding of structure, practice, and process.

Keywords: Media Engagement, Media Industries, Media Exposure, Media Involvement

Reflections on Media Engagement

Across genres and phases of production and use, the articles collected here amply demonstrate that “engagement” is a term that we can use productively. It can help us understand and debate the different types of connectedness which our relationships with media systems involve. In this short note of comment, I want to pick up on some general issues which are raised or latent in the work of the contributors and offer a few pointers forward.

As many researchers have noted, it makes sense to regard the present situation as one in which we live “within” the media more than live “with” them—a shift of preposition which recognizes their complex penetration of our thinking and feeling, their provision of an outer, daily framing for our understanding of the social and the political. It follows from this that the terms of our media engagements and their consequences will be widely various. This is certainly brought out by the contributors. It is perhaps worth pointing out that living “within” the media is by no means to assume that the media “control” us; it is just that older notions of their “effects” need to be exchanged for a subtler sense of their permeation of the “everyday” at different levels and from diverse directions. Clearly, recent interest in “mediatisation” as a
term of inquiry (one subject to vigorous debate) shows, in part, recognition of the increased modification both of institutions and then of individual orientations and habits that media systems have now achieved.

*Engagement* is a broad, descriptive term rather than an analytic one, and that is its advantage in exploring diverse if adjacent territories, as in this section. Use of it in analysis often requires at some point, as the articles show, a move “downward” to ideas and words which can explore the specific factors—personal, social, and perhaps institutional—which are at work, often in forms of interplay. In the case of production, questions not just of professional perspective but also of professional vocabulary are clearly relevant. How do those working on different aspects of production view the evaluative framework in which their own contribution, at the level of professional creative skills, is to be judged both within the industry and then, as part of the whole, by audiences? What terms do they use to identify “good practice” in relation to what a particular product is designed to offer, whether by way of information or pleasure or both? How is the unacceptable recognized and named? Here the anthropological model of Born would prove useful, although it is based on high, and still unusual, levels of access.³

In her contributions, Annette Hill notes some recent writing of mine in which I tried, with only partial success, to place engagement within the context of other terms.⁴ I thought “exposure” was a useful word to describe the general, passive situation in which we have notional access to certain media products and not others. Just what we are exposed to or not varies hugely within nationalities and subnational groupings of course, and assuring strategic terms of visibility and of exposure is a key priority of media industry planning, a point fully explored in the pieces. I then thought of “engagement” as a second phase, building on from notional exposure when realized as “encounter” (perhaps by chance in surfing the web, changing channels, or perhaps by intention). Something is visible/audible to us, and we decide with varying degrees of self-consciousness to “attend” to it through a communicational engagement—looking, listening, and processing its significations. My thinking at that point was that if our provisional attention/engagement proved positive, we might move to a stage that could be called “involvement.” At this stage, a deeper cognitive and affective interaction between the media product and our subjectivity would occur, a point which Hill develops in her own account. One could say, with a certain metaphorical license, that we would enter the work and the work would enter us, however light or serious the tone of the encounter (a really lovely song, a frightening documentary, a thrilling drama, an absorbing videogame). It could be temporary in consequence, or have long-lasting effects, but something would have happened to intensify our mode of engagement into a stronger form of inter-locking. As Hill brings out, too, we should not see engagement as being only a positive form of relationship. Hating a show is, in its own way, just as important a form of cultural engagement as loving it, if one with entirely different implications for the producers!

Clearly, around each media product, a variety of levels of engagement/involvement will be generated across audiences who bother to attend at all, ranging from intensive commitment through to a cool willingness to be temporarily distracted right through finally to vigorous dislike. What we can call the “engagement profile” is often not only going to be mixed in character but messily so. It will be the consequence of different ingredients that
have their origins in choices made in production, mode of distribution, and publicity but which finally become “realized” in the relationships generated across the range of audiences engaged. The emerging profile may delight the producers, confirming the decisions they made at different stages, but it may also throw up evidence of “miscalculations” concerning sections of the intended audience, perhaps just a matter of missed opportunities for a wider reach but possibly a more serious failure to achieve primary “targets” for reasons which require discussion about design and delivery. Because of this, anticipating the likely profile of a product—the cultural take-up across different platforms and demographic groups with its consequences for product success and future product development—is an important part of production judgment. It involves second-guessing the “engagements to come” as it were, using a variety of predictive resources, including the record of past success and failure.

I am not sure that my provisional terminological scheme works quite as well for me now as it once did; it has a number of overlaps and begged questions, but the point I want to establish, reinforcing the comments of the contributors, is that we have to see “engagement” within a larger range of psychological orientations to the world and to the artifacts within it, whatever terms we use to identify these. Seeing a “spectrum of engagement” to be at work as Annette Hill suggests helps this differentiation, but we should not allow the word itself to expand its semantic territory to the point that it blocks our perception of decisive and sometime sharp variables in the kinds of orientation to media which we can have and the consequences that follow. However, across the options, “engagement” works well to open up further research questions and connect across a diversity of spaces.

Of course, “engagement” is a word we apply to many situations in which the media component is minimal if present at all. Our personal, recreational, and occupational lives contain business, which requires different levels of engagement, and here we may be affected by a whole mixture of structural and “chance” factors that determine what we give our attention to and how firmly we give it. In many societies, a media element in the direction and nature of behavior starts to appear quite soon however, with the growth of social media increasing its range.

As I noted above, and as the discussions of industrial perspectives in the articles valuably show, engagement of us by various kinds of media now often takes place as part of market competition in what is increasingly a vigorous “attention economy,” one in which a wide range of goods, services, and pleasures compete for attention, vying first of all to become visible to us and then to engage us and perhaps involve us. Two things follow from this, both of them, again, well documented by the contributors. First, “engagement” will, within the media industry, often be viewed as a commodity good; it is a consumer/user action (or reaction) which is necessary for a media product to succeed at the minimal level. The media industries, big and small, have to try ever harder to “engage us” positively. This is so even though we may feel (if mistakenly) that we are doing the real work of “engaging,” we are taking the proactive initiative to connect, and the publicity, advertising, and promotional work simply sets up the conditions of “exposure” and “invitation,” for us to work on as we choose. Second, and following from this often dense interaction between industry discourses and consumer subjectivities, it is clear that engagement with something within the media nearly always and necessarily involves not engaging with something else. Every act of choice involves elements of an act of exclusion, perhaps concerning media use, perhaps concerning other possible uses
of the time that we have allocated to our media relationships. The complex interplay of choices and exclusions in the context of modern “recreational time” as part of “lifetime” and the different levels of satisfaction and reward across different social groups are features of contemporary culture that we urgently need to know more about, and media research can play an important part in this inquiry.

Here, we perhaps need to be wary of assuming that any form of “engagement” is a “good thing.” Since dis-engagement has been seen for some time as a prevalent social problem, it is easy to slip into this position (comparison can be made with the more banal positivities surrounding the idea of “participation,” despite the continuing use this term has in community and political renewal). However, just as we know that engagement with, for instance, a racist political party is definitely not a good thing, we know that engagement with, for instance, violent pornography is not a good thing either. There are many forms of engagement with the media of which we can say with confidence that no engagement would have been far better, and the web is increasing the number of possible examples here. Moreover, the long-standing argument that some media engagement works as a socially and political injurious “diversion” from things to which we should be paying serious attention still requires recognition.

The studies attempt to plot and debate engagement across the phases of the media process. My own view, drawing on what I have said above, is that the relationship between media product and audiences/users is usefully regarded as pivotal, even though we need to go broader than this. That is to say, identification of engagement in the planning and production phases is of most significance to the research themes opened up here when this engagement is about what I called earlier the “engagements to come”—those which audiences and users will have with a product or artifact. This is not at all to undercut the value of production studies but to see the interface between media system and audience/user, however more difficult this is to identify than it once was, as something which analysis needs to have as a regular point of reference whatever the range of inquiry. The opening up of industry perspectives on how to get the “best” engagement and what this looks like adds hugely to our sense of the media–audience relationship.

This brings me to another important distinction that emerges in the preceding pages: that between engagement with the media and engagement through the media. When we have engaged with the media, perhaps watching a drama serial or a documentary, or visiting a website, we may be prompted to make the further move of engaging with something beyond the media—a social campaign for instance, a political movement, a recreational association, or more banally, the purchase of a commodity. Even the changes in our knowledge and feelings which often follow media engagement and which can guide our subsequent behavior in less direct ways can be seen as a form of second-phase process. This relationship, between our connection with the media and our connection through it to things beyond, is perhaps not clear enough in its recognition within much research and debate. Its complexity is too often reduced to matters of “effect,” “influence,” and “impact” which, useful terms though they still are, tend to encourage too narrow a view of what is going on. When we want the media to add value to our lives rather than just give us temporary pleasure and diversion, to give us useful resources for living, and to improve the conditions for social and cultural equality (an aim of many public service broadcasting organizations), it is largely through these types of further engagement that such aims will become achievable. A large number
of media producers, not surprisingly, have no vested interest in helping to carry “engagement” through in this way. They are not actively against it, but engagement with their product, and further engagement with other products that might be related to it, is a primary and largely sufficient corporate goal. As the contributors note, across both the discussion piece and the articles by Jeanette Steemers and Annette Hill, this question concerning what we might call types of “target engagement” (what to aim for and be satisfied with) runs across media planning and production. I mentioned it earlier in relation to the way in which a product’s cultural life can be seen to consist of the “profile of engagement” surrounding it. “Target engagement,” particularly if narrowly focused, makes the funding of projects which have longer-term cultural and social engagement in mind difficult unless they firmly incorporate the attainment of conventional forms of media engagement in their plans. Moreover, as Steemers shows, planning with the conventional forms exclusively in mind may not only disregard but also actively impede the achievement of longer-term desirable goals. One option is the seeking of “alternatives” to the mainstream, using the expanded space for low-funded “independent” production. But this is only a partial resolution—although the “mainstream” is changing, choosing to work in the “margins” for many types of projects is likely to bring about only marginal cultural change. Thinking creatively, and critically, with elements of the industry rather than thinking completely against them, therefore, makes good sense.

How to explore deeper into “engagement,” into the orientations and satisfactions it involves? Well, these articles point in some promising directions. What are the points of initial attraction or rejection in relation to media products, how do these fit into broader taste profiles (biographical but finally sociological and, in part, political), and how do they square with what producers envisaged? Can we plot the phases through which what I called “involvement” develops across different generic areas, fictional and nonfictional—involving issues of form as well as of thematic focus? What kinds of extratextual materials resource and strengthen “engagement,” perhaps in some cases directing it toward that further engagement beyond the media which I noted above? How is the picture changing?

This is certainly not a completely new agenda, some elements on it are well established and evident in this section, but there is still strong potential in pursuing its questions. Here, Hill’s use of the term “experience” can be helpful, despite (like “engagement”) the risks carried by its very breadth. It is the experiences, both shaping and shaped, which variously precede, inform, and then follow media engagements that are often the real matter at issue. Research into media engagement is often, if only partly, an inquiry into the realm of the experiential and its contemporary cultural resources, with all the challenges that implies.

---

1 John Corner is currently Visiting Professor in Communication Studies at the University of Leeds and an Emeritus Professor of the University of Liverpool. His latest books are *Theorising Media: Power, Form and Subjectivity* (2011) and *Political Culture and Media Genre* (with Kay Richardson and Katy Parry (2012). He is an editor of the journal *Media, Culture and Society*.


5 This point is polemically captured in Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985).


**Bibliography**


