Reality TV Engagement: Producer and Audience Relations for Reality Talent Shows

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Abstract:

This article focuses on media engagement within the reality television industry. It draws on qualitative research of production practices and audience participation in live reality events to explore the multiple meanings of engagement as a series of relationships between creative and executive producers, broadcasters, performers, and audiences. A key question concerns how do producers and audiences cocreate, shape, and limit engagement with reality television? John Corner's idea of stages of engagement is used to analyze multiple modes of engagement across production and reception contexts. The case study of talent show *Got to Dance* is used to think through the crafting of engagement within live reality television, and the ways producers can make or break engagement with their regular audiences, participants, and loyal fans. The idea of a spectrum of engagement is developed to capture the multidimensionality of this term and to open up understanding of the value of engagement within industry and academic research. From an industry perspective, this research contributes to strategic thinking and creative knowledge on how to build engagement and trust with diverse audiences and fans for cross-media content, while offering critical analysis of how television as an institution is failing to nurture the "reality relations" so crucial to durable engagement with an entertainment brand. This article uses research that is part of the project Media Experiences, funded by the Wallenberg Foundation, Sweden, and in collaboration with Endemol Shine.

Keywords: Media Engagement, Reality Television, Live Events, Production Studies, Reception Studies, Qualitative Research

Got to Dance (2010–2014) Sky 1, Princess, is a reality talent competition showcasing adult and child dancers, with a series of live events, public voting, and integrated online content. This article draws on empirical data from production and audience research of the fifth and final series of *Got to Dance* (2014). A total of one hundred interviews were conducted during the auditions and live shows, and the data range from qualitative interviews, ratings, social media analytics, YouTube videos, to photographs. This article focuses on engagement within the reality television industry because it is a rich site of analysis for critically examining the crafting of engagement through production practices, and the multidimensional meaning of engagement for participants and crowds of live events, and audiences and fans for digital

television. A key question concerns how do producers and audiences co-create, shape, and limit engagement with live reality television?

The empirical research suggests engagement can be understood as relationships and meanings formed between executive and creative producers through a dialogue with participants and audiences. Traditionally engagement within the industry is taken to mean attention and investment, using the language of consumption and relating to the context of an attention economy. However, the qualitative research conducted with Princess executive and creative producers and the diverse audiences for *Got to Dance* suggests that the series is more than an entertainment brand, offering its regular audiences and loyal fans, and passionate participants at the live events, a memorable cultural experience. Here then, engagement is much more than a commercial transaction, or a momentary communication; it is the engagement of producers with the creative values at work in this production culture, and the engagement that audiences make with this series, year on year, a serial engagement that signifies long-term relationships with this talent show. Such a sense of engagement also implies that regular audiences and fans, and performers and live crowds, choose this talent show over others, making a commitment in time and money to watch, attend, and vote during the event, to audition and perform in the competition, all of which involves disengaging with rival brands, or other content, because of their affective investment with this series. Thus, the meaning of engagement as the relations between producers and audiences highlights the role of engagement in broader ways of experiencing media and what it means to us within the context of our lives.

The research extends Corner's work on stages of engagement, where he argues engagement varies in intensity and involves sustained cognitive and affective work by audiences.² In this special section, Corner reflects on the interplay between communicative engagement, looking, listening, and reacting to a text, for example, and a more immersive engagement, participating, making, and doing something beyond a text. This sense of engagement as multiform is used to explore the idea of a spectrum, where engagement is based on core elements, but is experienced in diverse ways. A spectrum of engagement includes the cognitive and affective work of producers and audiences, for example, the way producers engage with each other in the construction of engagement with creative values, or the way viewers engage with particular performers; this engagement extends across an emotional range where people switch between positive and negative engagement, or disengagement, for example, switching from positive identification with performers, to negative identification with judges. A spectrum of engagement also works across different contexts, such as the context of time, including fleeting engagement with a live event, or long-form engagement with a brand on broadcast schedules, and the context of space, including live venues, television distribution, and digital spaces, and the spaces of everyday life. A spectrum of engagement, then, is a concept that captures the multidimensionality of engagement within industry settings and reception contexts, pushing the meaning of the term beyond audience attention and ratings metrics where there is a primary focus on economic value, to also include the social and cultural values of engagement.

The case of *Got to Dance* highlights tensions and contradictions across a spectrum of engagement with creative and executive producers and varieties of audiences, from live crowds, to audiences as performers, social media users, and at home audiences watching the televised

events. The fifth and final season of *Got to Dance* included the strategic integration of more live shows, a wide range of digital content, and the hiring of a YouTube celebrity to increase social media engagement with a younger audience. The crafting of an ephemeral engagement for live crowds, dance performers, judges, and the digital presenters tells one story of successful live television and social media buzz, but the regular audiences and fans for *Got to Dance* tell another story of disappointment with the commissioning channel's budget cuts and scheduling decisions. The production efforts to craft positive engagement through live interaction and social media were counteracted by the disruption to the normal scheduling of this reality event, resulting in negative engagement and disengagement with audiences loyal to the series and its prosocial brand of passion for dance. The case study illustrates how the notion of audience engagement needs to be expanded to include the multiplicity of entry points to engagement with live reality talent shows, where varieties of audiences, performers, internet users, consumers, and crowds, all work at engaging with content across traditional and digital platforms. This means that an engagement strategy within a production company needs to have a portfolio of connection points to capture the interplay between varieties of audiences and their spectrum of engagement with cross-media content. The case study also illustrates how the institution of television can make or break engagement, something hard won but so easily lost in the new landscape of television content across broadcast and digital spaces.

Researching Reality Television

The empirical research of television producers and audiences involves the case study of *Got to Dance* reality entertainment format (Princess and Endemol Shine). This case study is connected to a larger project on media experiences, conducted in collaboration with the production company Endemol Shine and funded by the Wallenberg Foundation. This broader project examined how producers created experiences and how audiences actually engaged with these experiences. The project used multimethod and multisite research where each television series studied was treated as fit for purpose (see the research note for further information). A range of qualitative methods place listening and respect for producer and audience practices at the heart of the research, using cultural sociology to examine how culture is made and remade by producers and audiences.³ The work connects with Hesmondhalgh and Baker in that the theoretical and normative underpinning to the research is provided by Raymond Williams's notion of the communication of experience as both objective and subjective, where creative producers craft engagement, and audiences in turn "formulate, describe and communicate" their engagement with this creative work.⁴ The findings of the project illustrate how media engagement is multidimensional, including performative and interactive practices that are evolving within the broader transformations taking place within production, consumption, and social relations.⁵

The fieldwork was conducted during the auditions and live shows in May, August, and September 2014. The data include ten production interviews, ten performer interviews, eighty audience interviews with individuals and groups of children, young adults and adults, aged 5 to 65, from all over the United Kingdom, and observations at the live venues with crowds of between 4 to 6,000. All interviews were transcribed and analyzed using qualitative data analysis, where descriptive and analytical coding was combined with critical reflection of

interviews in the context of fieldnotes and participant observations.⁶ The empirical data include executive interviews, industry reports and workshops, and participant observations within the production company and the live reality events; these data offer a cultural analysis of the structural factors underlying the reality format *Got to Dance* in terms of financing, the statistical performance indicators for the series in the UK television market, and the creative practices for reality television production. The social media analysis includes industry reports on the digital performance of season 5, and the ratings data include performance metrics for all five seasons.

To reflect on the diversity of audiences for the research, the range of participants in this case study suggests two issues for the argument presented in this article. First, the diversity of audiences reflects the current fluidity in being an audience for traditional and digital television content. *Got to Dance* exemplifies the current mediascape where live event television, the very basis of what is television in its classical sense, dominates the format, at the same time as myriad other features are woven into the fabric of the series overall, from interactive voting and integrated social media comments in the live show, to a live Facebook studio, a YouTube celebrity, and Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram marketing. It tells us something about the continuing power of live television that the digital elements are there to support the ephemeral spectacular.⁷ This kind of multifaceted content attracts a range of audiences, including at-home audiences, live crowds for the theatrical venues, audiences as participants and performers in the competition, fans watching at home and participating in the live events, social media users, and consumers. The second issue is that engagement with *Got to Dance* is not going to be easy to measure with ratings and social media analytics, or voting profiles. Statistics will offer a valuable picture of the communicative engagement with the ephemerality of the show; but the more sustained kinds of engagement from loyal fans, families who have seen every series, and regular viewers who have travelled to the live shows for a cultural experience will inevitably be hidden within a quantitative measurement of engagement.

For example, the qualitative interviews with regular audiences captured the meaning of engagement with the series when watching it at home, with family and friends, voting for favorites, and judging contestants from a distance. In these interviews, the everyday routines built around the series were vital, not only in building engagement series by series, but also in appealing to a family audience that made time for the series in their everyday lives. Interviews with fans of the series captured the passionate labor of fandom, where engagement with the series involved watching, reacting, voting, and attending live events, mixing an “at-home fandom” with an up-close and personal connection with performers, judges, and the production itself. Child fans were both audiences and participants, transforming their passion for dance into a chance to audition in the series. Family fandom also featured in the empirical data, where budding young dancers would join forces with parents and siblings in combining learning to dance with watching *Got to Dance* and auditioning in the series. This organized family fandom connected with dance schools and local communities who offered a valuable support structure to the competition. These regular audiences, fans, and participants highlight long-term engagement with the brand as a fixture in the annual television schedule and dance competition arena. It is these kinds of audiences and fans who talked of engaging with the prosocial side of the brand, while disengaging with the final season because of controversial changes made by the production company and commissioning channel.

The participant observations of the auditions and live events, during the semifinals and finale, offered an in-depth analysis of the contradictions and tensions within cultural production and audience engagement with live reality television. The auditions included dancers, and families and friends of dancers, showcasing the flow of identity positions as audiences of the series and contestants in a dance competition. A love of dance as a means of expressing individual and collective endeavors dominated the experience of the audition space overall. According to people at the auditions, *Got to Dance* attracted passionate performers in comparison with other talent shows where talent was often secondary to entertainment as spectacle. In this instance, the auditions highlight how engagement, coming from an audience at home, can transform into participating in the series itself and having some agency in the outcome of the competition. If we want to know what happens after engagement, then auditions for a talent show offer one opportunity for researchers to understand the symbolic power of engagement with a reality series as it transforms into participation in the next iteration of the series.

The live crowds at the televised event captured the diffuse audiences for *Got to Dance*. By far the most vocal were audiences and fans who could be seen and heard shouting, dancing, and voting during each live event. These audiences and fans were also highly vocal about their anger with changes to the series. The participant observations at the live venues highlighted the risks in designing an engagement strategy for a particular kind of audience, in this case young internet users and live crowds, which overshadowed the regular audiences and loyal fans at the venue and watching at home. As we shall see later, the demise of the series can be partly connected to an industry perspective of engagement as fleeting communication at the expense of the durable relationships of audiences and fans with the series.

In terms of existing research on media industries and live reality television, the article offers original data and critical analysis of the production and reception of live reality talent shows. The combination of methods used in this project is similar to research by Boyle and Kelly who studied producers and audiences for business reality entertainment, arguing that “television remains a compelling medium for constructing emotional identification with its audience” and that television is “central in debates about the creation and dissemination of public knowledge.”⁸ The focus on live television and integrated digital and social media extends Boyle and Kelly’s research to a range of audio-visual content in the context of live events, and it places greater emphasis on engagement with entertainment. Despite the increased hype in digital content and social media trends, the research suggests television is still a compelling medium for creating emotional identification and building trust and dialogue between producers and audiences for reality entertainment. As talent shows have attracted scandals in voting irregularities, and suffered ratings decline due to format fatigue and overcommercialization of competitive reality, trust and viewer loyalty is in short supply.⁹ From an industry perspective, this research contributes to strategic thinking and creative knowledge on how to build engagement and trust with audiences and fans, while offering critical analysis of how television as an institution is failing to nurture the “reality relations” so crucial to durable engagement with an entertainment brand.

The Meaning of Engagement

The meaning of engagement within the television industry encapsulates a more pragmatic, goal-orientated understanding of the term as audience attention, measured through ratings

data and social media analytics. In an article in this special issue of *Media Industries*, Douglas Wood, Director of Research and Insight at Endemol Shine, argues that there are new currencies of engagement that include audience measurement and cultural resonance. This broader notion of engagement is something executive and creative producers have long understood as part of the cultural impact of television in society, but the tools to research this type of engagement are still in the early stages within industry audience information systems. Here, the prime focus remains on engagement as economic value, with performance metrics for live and consolidated television viewing, and social media trends connected with sharing content and sparking public debate. Undoubtedly short-form engagement takes priority for live reality television—overnight ratings, consolidated figures for a seven-day window for catch-up viewers, Twitter analytics, and audience appreciation indexes, all frame engagement as fleeting, here today and gone tomorrow. A reality talent show primarily relies on being recommissioned on the basis of its ratings performance, interactive voting, and social media buzz.

There is a more nuanced understanding of engagement within academia, and it is worth unpacking the term to fully appreciate the subtleties and complexities of engagement as both economic and sociocultural relations cocreated by producers and audiences. To mix money with emotions is not a new notion; the history of sports and popular culture tells us the long tradition of connecting economics with feelings. Terms such as emotional economics, or the experience economy, highlight the business trends in this area; work by economic sociologist Viviana Zelizer on what she calls economic lives makes a strong case for how subjective feelings are mixed up in legal and economic matters in many industries, be that the caring industry or the media industries.¹⁰ But when it comes to engagement, there has been little academic attention given to the core meanings of the term as economic and sociocultural relations, the lives hidden within the ratings data.

John Corner in *Theorising Media* has given analytical purchase to engagement. He describes the stages of engagement, opening up the concept so that we can see how engagement can “vary in intensity,” sometimes “casual and intermittent” and at other times enduring and long lasting. Stages of engagement signal the differences between casual viewers and users, and fan loyalty with a brand, for example. Corner also shows the practices that make up engagement, where the more intensive stages of engagement involve “sustained cognitive and affective work.”¹¹ In this special section of *Media Industries*, Corner reflects on his early thinking of engagement, extending his ideas to include an engagement profile within production contexts and urging researchers to study engagement in all its forms, including what happens beyond engagement, such as participation in the media, or creating content from our engagement with texts.

The affective work of engagement is related to subjectivity and feelings, the build-up to the cultural experience and also something experienced in the moment itself. Kathleen Stewart calls this ordinary affects, where she argues for attention to the affective dimensions of everyday life, urging researchers to consider the intensities and banalities of common experiences.¹² In terms of cognitive work, this involves more objective modes of engagement, related to critical appreciation and genre knowledge, or storytelling, aesthetics, and style. In previous research on reality television, I argued for critical engagement that might involve more of a focus on the genre knowledge of producers and audiences, truth claims within a series, or issues of morality and ethical treatment of participants.¹³

In a production context, subjective modes of engagement might involve the physicality and sensations associated with a live television experience. Paddy Scannell's recent work on live television highlights the care structures within live events, where he argues that electronic media organizes the living moment for us and reduces the existential strain of existence.¹⁴ The intensity of a live audience, the adrenalin-fueled participation of a large crowd, and their immediate reactions to performers on stage are crucial to a reality spectacular; this is what drives a live talent show and is part of its mass entertainment appeal.¹⁵ These events are carefully managed and the care structures established by the production include affective modes of engagement. For example, crowds want to feel they are treated with respect, from the way they are seated to how they are invited to vocalize their feelings; crowds expect to see a duty of care from the presenter and judges, to the performers. This is the affective element of the care structures to live reality television, and it is a very significant means of crafting positive engagement from crowds participating in live television.

In a production context, objective modes of engagement can include the construction of performance and authenticity. Erving Goffman's early research on pragmatic impression management is helpful to understand the cognitive work of critical modes of engagement. In his landmark study of the presentation of the self in everyday life, Goffman highlights how we perform different selves, a frontstage and backstage self that projects public and private aspects of our identities.¹⁶ This performative frame is very prevalent in the production of reality talent shows. There are performers on stage, and also the backstage experiences of these people and their emotional journey through the competition; there are the reactions of family and friends to these performers, adding another layer of the performance of supporters of reality contestants; there are the performances of the judges, including their professional opinions, and the whispered asides caught on camera and microphone; and there are the performances of audiences themselves, either in the live venue, or at home and through social media, reacting to themselves watching a live event. For producers, the casting of performers is crucial, especially the balance of skill and personality in a talent competition. For audiences at the live venues, at home, and on social media, critical evaluation of the professional performances of contestants, and the public and private personas of these same people, is also crucial. This genre knowledge of the value of performance and reaction within reality television is significant to critical modes of engagement.

In the next section, the idea of a spectrum of engagement is explored further. In other research, the term is analyzed on more conceptual levels, comparing theoretical developments in political engagement with those of cultural engagement, but here the focus is on the value of the term for understanding changing industry notions of engagement.¹⁷ The article turns to the empirical research to embed the idea of a spectrum of engagement within the craft of producing talent shows and the meanings and relationships formed by producers, participants, and audiences for reality television.

Spectrum of Engagement

A spectrum of engagement is an idea that captures the dynamic movement across the cognitive and affective work of audiences, highlighting the different positions and intensities of engagement. This is a sense of engagement as multiform, where engagement is based on core

elements but experienced in diverse ways. A spectrum includes emotional and critical modes, switching between positive and negative engagement, to disengagement. Positive engagement typically might include emotional identification with a character, inviting sympathy and empathy, voting for the underdog, sending encouraging tweets, for example. Negative engagement might involve emotional disidentification with a character, closing down sympathy, voting to eliminate, trash talking on Twitter, for example. These two emotional modes on the spectrum of engagement often work in tandem, and writers, directors, and performers are fully aware of how to craft both positive and negative emotions even in the same character, thus inviting intense feelings from audiences who emotionally invest in a story. Disengagement is often something ignored within research. There can be an assessment of performative failure, why did viewers ignore a series, or switch off half way through? But there is little sustained research on how this happens and why it is a routine feature of our experience of television. Disengagement can be sudden, a brusque disconnect with series, or it can happen gradually, an increasing awareness that the presence of a series in your life is gradually becoming an absence. Disengagement is a means of interpreting how audiences disengage with shows on a regular basis, sometimes due to the simple fact that there is not enough time in the day and they need to make room for other content, and also due to disaffection and even anger with a brand.

We can see how the dynamics of reality relations work across a spectrum of engagement for *Got to Dance*. It all starts with the values of the production. Executive Producer Duncan Gray (2014) developed the format with Princess, owned by Shine at the time, for Sky 1, a subscription-based service that is part of the Murdoch enterprise. Gray is an experienced executive producer for talent shows, having overseen the first competitive mentoring talent show *Popstars the Rivals* (2002, ITV) and the ratings juggernaut *The X Factor* (2004–, Syco, ITV), while he was controller of entertainment at ITV. He wanted to “make a big show work with the values that were true to the idea of a talent show” (Gray 2014). Such values included dedication to an art, performers who win a cash prize with no contractual ties to the company, judges uncompromised by commercial decisions, and audiences who really vote for the winners. He called it an “authentic talent show,” signaling a move away from the faux participation and market in negative emotions that had become a feature of shows like *Britain’s Got Talent*. The *Got to Dance* brand became passion for dance, youth, and optimism, and this brand was imbued in local production values that were associated with trust between the producers and performers, and the crafting of positive emotional engagement through storytelling and audience interaction.

Audiences for *Got to Dance* responded to these prosocial values, loving the show because it inspired them to dance, to express themselves through physical performance. When a ten-year-old girl was asked at the live venue what she liked about dance she said “It’s a chance to be me.” The performative frame of the talent show and the positive value system of the production became embedded within families, schools, dance companies, and local communities, across the United Kingdom. What made the show so positive to viewers?

The show’s message is if you’ve got talent pursue it. (a 30- to 40-year-old male viewer)

It shows anybody, no matter what their age and background, people love to dance. (a 20- to 30-year-old female viewer)

This show allows people to have their chance. (a 16- to 20-year-old male viewer)

Got to Dance was a family show that, as one dance mum noted, “kids can look up to.” Time and again parents pointed out that of all the talent shows this was the one they wanted their aspiring kids to participate in. One viewer explained,

I don’t like *The X Factors* anymore, this one is better. The judges make a big difference. Their hearts are in it. People go in it to be like them. The judges get really excited. I like it when they get emotional, then you know they really care. (a 40- to 50-year-old female viewer)

Another viewer said, “It encourages kids from different backgrounds that through dance you can still do very well. Out of all the shows I think it has the most positive attitude. It makes me very happy” (a 20- to 30-year-old female viewer).

Positive identification with the judges underscored the prosocial brand. For example, “the judges are not nasty, they make a huge difference, they give them encouragement” (a 65-year-old female viewer). Or “all the comments from the judges are positive, they are very, very constructive” (a 30- to 40-year-old male viewer). Ashley Banjo was perceived as a role model, representing the career of someone who won a talent competition and continued to care about dance and local community through his work with Diversity. Ashley and Diversity were in essence what *Got to Dance* was all about: passion for dance, commitment and hard work, and a community feeling. Many children talked of Ashley’s career as one they wished to emulate. One dance mum said, “Ashley is so nice, he is a genuine person.” Or “Ashley is all for doing things in the community so it can inspire people to dance” (a 30- to 40-year-old male viewer). Such comments highlighted the dialogue between producers and audiences about what made this an authentic talent show.

Another aspect of positive engagement was the emotional identification with performers. Cynthia McVey was a psychologist on set for all five seasons, there to support performers and crew. She described being in the auditions, watching a child performer, and feeling moved by that performer’s backstory; she turned to a producer and found he was crying too: “how many shows do you get where you have an executive producer in the wings who cares and empathises? You just don’t get that very often.” For McVey, caring “cascades down” from the executive levels through to the crew on the ground, live crowds, and audiences at home. For example, a fan reflected on the performance of Sharifa in the live semifinal:

She really, really moves me. You can tell that she has a backstory, that she was very, very nervous. You can tell from her performance. A lot of pain comes out in her performance. I am sure she will go on to do something really special. Loved her! (a 20- to 30-year-old female viewer)

Here we see the crafting of positive emotional identification cascading down, where performances act as emotional hubs for producers and audiences.

And yet for all this positive engagement, the series was axed after its fifth season due to poor ratings. This outcome is worth unpacking in more detail in relation to understanding tensions within television production and the meaning of engagement. For the ill-fated season 5, there were tensions within the cultural values of the brand as an authentic talent show, something that had been built up over four years, and the economic values of a format that needed a broad appeal to entertainment audiences. From a casting perspective, the show had to work hard from its inception to build trust in the dance community, creating positive engagement between professionals and entertainment television. Casting director Katie Le Corre (2014)

explained, “We have to persuade the really talented people who want to be professional dancers and question ‘is it right that I go on a TV talent show?’” Le Corre noted how she overheard crew members who had worked on other talent shows describing the contestants as punters, and she told them in no uncertain terms that this show was different, and respect for the dance community was paramount—the word punter was banned from her crew. In fact so successful was Le Corre in engaging with the dance community that she had to work extra hard in finding a balance of highly trained dancers and the characters normally associated with talent shows, those happy amateurs who have never been discovered until their moment in the spotlight. The trouble with dance is that unlike singing you cannot prepare the night before, or fake it in an audition. Dancers, even child dancers, train long hours, year on year, to be able to perform to the standards of *Got to Dance*. By Series 4, there was some criticism that perhaps the focus was too much on professional skills at the expense of a broader entertainment audience.

Series 5 included a range of performers, ballet dancers, contemporary solo artists, youth street crews, and experimental street performers; it also included some dancers who had already appeared on other talent shows. In particular, a double act of a young boy dancer and adult partner offered a popular performance that eventually ensured they were crowned the winners of the final season. Both dancers had been in talent shows as solo artists and their strategic coperformance paid off for this competition. In fact, their success signaled a problem with core audiences and their disaffection with the brand. As one producer said, this act represented the kinds of performers that won *Britain’s Got Talent*, the type of show that *Got to Dance* positioned itself as different from in its authentic values. The outcome of Series 5 showed cracks in the prosocial values of the brand and the pressure for commercial appeal with younger audiences. Why did this happen? The next section critically examines the contexts to engagement as we shall see how priority was placed on younger viewers and social media buzz in the here and now of ratings, at the expense of loyal audiences who had lived with the series as embedded in their everyday lives.

Contexts to Engagement

A spectrum of engagement works across different contexts, such as the context of time, including fleeting engagement with a live event, or long-form engagement with a brand. Such attention to live ratings and viewer loyalty connects with institutional notions of time, so it matters to audiences if a show is a one off, or a returning vehicle, scheduled at fixed marker points in the day or seasonal calendar. A reality talent show is based on live events, but can also be a recurring feature of a television season, and as such a brand can be based on the immediacy of live, short-form engagement, and at the same time be based on audience expectations that the live experience is embedded in routines, year on year. Sporting events, such as football seasons and tennis tournaments, all rely on mixing different kinds of short- and long-form engagement with institutional and seasonal constructions of time. Similarly the context of space is also significant to a spectrum of engagement, including live venues, television distribution and digital spaces, and the spaces of everyday life. Certain venues have particular lighting and atmosphere that help to build a brand, that all important look and feel of a show that is instantly recognizable to audiences. Change the venue and problems can occur with the experience of a brand, that show that seemed so light can now be

gloomy and hard to decipher all because of the production space for the live event. Distribution is a major aspect of audience engagement, especially given the myriad spaces people can pick and choose from to consume content; how people make space for television content is perhaps one of the most pressing issues for engagement, shoring up time to make space for television drama as binge viewing, compared with integrating live television into everyday life and family routines.

Up until season 5, *Got to Dance* was scheduled in the winter months of January, February, and March. There were domes, temporary sites that traveled across the United Kingdom for the auditions, lit up so the show symbolized light during the winter months. To audition for *Got to Dance* meant a lot of preparation – dance school teachers spoke of planning routines once children were back at school in the autumn; schools gave permission for children to go to the auditions, teachers and friends supporting their participation, voting, organizing parties back home during the live events; and parents and friends booked time off work, helping with logistics, coming to the auditions and live shows. As the series gathered momentum season on season, it established trust with its performers and regular audiences. Legions of young children watched the show so that they could learn about dance. A dance school teacher said that after every live event, teachers expected to be contacted by the children: “tonight I’ll receive messages ‘I want to dance.’” At the live event for season 5, buses arrived with schoolchildren, teachers taking their classes to learn the *Got to Dance* values of positive role models and a “can-do” attitude to life. One teacher explained how the style of this talent show was replicated in school performances, using gold stars and constructive criticism to highlight how dedication and hard work can lead to opportunities in life.

Many parents spoke of organizing their everyday lives around the twin interests of their children in dance and this television show. There were the practice sessions to organize and get to; there was voluntary work for local dance groups running on limited budgets, sharing skills in sewing, makeup, and hair for competition, weekend events in far-flung places across the country. There was a hidden family support structure to this dance competition that took a lot of planning and prioritizing over the whole year. And then there was the routine of watching a reality talent series in the winter months. One mum explained how she made a ritual of the show, dinner and a bath before watching the auditions and live events: “it is one we can all sit around and watch as a family. My husband doesn’t care about *The X Factor* whereas he will sit and watch this. It’s family time.”

The change in location for season 5 was felt strongly by participants and regular audiences. The auditions and live shows were all in London; the brand had lost its community-wide appeal. And the venues were different from the white domes; now the show felt dark in the summer months. The schedule change, from winter to summertime transmission, was a great source of frustration; gone was the school and weekend routine, and now families had to make special time for the compressed live shows during the school summer holiday. Indeed, the switch in seasons was devastating for the series, disrupting family routines, and breaking engagement with loyal fan communities. One female fan explained, “I was looking forward to ten weeks of the show and feeling like you get to know the acts, whereas with the time and space I feel like I don’t know them as well.” An embedded engagement, so hard to create and something to nurture and value in a seasonal event such as this, slipped away with the

broadcaster's decision to change the timeslot and cut the running time. As this fan noted, their sense of time – the season, time to watch, and share with others – was changed for the worse: "I like the fact that it used to be week in, week out. It has been compressed. I feel like my enjoyment is going to be a lot shorter."

This embedded engagement shows how trust and viewer loyalty are established through the power of television to connect with people and their everyday lives. But this value is hard to capture in the institution of television. The reliance on overnight ratings for a live event gives priority to fleeting engagement, and the social media trends for a talent show give priority to an attention economy. The notion of engagement as a dialogue, with relationships built on trust, can become lost in the audience measurement systems. If we compare the ratings and social media analytics for *Got to Dance*, a stark picture emerges of a strong social media performance overshadowing the core loyal audience base.

On the strength of the social media analytics, *Got to Dance* delivered a successful digital marketing strategy. Karolyn Holborn, digital executive producer on the series, worked across Sky and Princess digital teams. For her, the cultural values of the production that this was a positive talent show were paramount. It was important to manage positive content, never laughing at people, but encouraging the sharing of performances as a positive experience. Holborn (2014) knew that the digital content for the live events needed to connect with the performances: "in terms of big social moments in the actual show they are always around performances and the levels of popularity for an act." The show hired young YouTube celebrity Joe Sugg, also known as Thatcher Joe; he has over eleven million subscribers to his three YouTube channels ThatcherJoe, ThatcherJoeGames, and ThatcherJoeVlogs showing pranks and impressions. The ThatcherJoe videos, a total of over six hundred on the channel gottodancesky1, were popular with younger viewers used to the amateur style of the content, and markedly different from the high definition of the live shows; similarly the branded Facebook live shows after each semifinal were also aimed at this same target group, combining interviews and dance demonstrations with the judges and former winners Wes and Joe. These strategic decisions connected with the framing of performance within positive modes of engagement with the brand across digital content for younger viewers and users.

Table 1 shows the successful digital media engagement for the live shows, with strong performance metrics for Joe Sugg live on Facebook (33,000 likes) and YouTube (50,000 views) indicating a YouTube star at a live event boosted the circulation of the digital brand. Similarly the number of page views for the live shows on the branded website (254,000), alongside Facebook (17,000 page views) and Twitter feeds (133,000 followers), indicated performances were catalysts for engagement with branded social media content. The decision by the digital and program team to open up online voting resulted in 422,000 votes for the finale. The top Facebook post (1,300 posts, 7,000 likes), top Snapchat post (2,200 likes), and top post for Twitter (130,000 followers) were all congratulations to Duplic8. This act was aware of the strategic use of digital media, young viewers, and online voting to generate positive impression and brand management.

Table 2 offers an overview of the ratings for all seasons, including the season average, and the average number of viewers for the auditions compared with the live shows for season 5. The demographic profile of viewers across age, gender, and socioeconomics shows the core

Table 1. *Got to Dance* Season 5 Social Media Engagement.

<i>Got to Dance</i> digital content	<i>Got to Dance</i> season 5	<i>Got to Dance</i> live shows
Twitter	Total tweets 72,000	Total Tweets 22,000
Twitter	Followers auditions 129,000	Followers finale 133,000
Facebook	Live total views 17,000	Joe Sugg live 33,000 likes
YouTube	2.6 million views; 7,400 subscribers	Joe Sugg live 50,000 views
Instagram	6,863 followers auditions	12,427 followers finale
Sky 1 website	254,000 page views live shows	422,000 online votes

Source. Internal report on social media engagement by Princess and Sky.

audience for the series as families, in particular children, women, and housewives in the lower middle- and working-class social groups (ABC1 represents upper-class and middle-class viewers). According to the Broadcaster Audience Research Board (BARB) figures, viewers disengaged with the series, dropping from 646,000 at the start of the auditions to 486,000 for the live finale, losing a percentage point in the share of audiences watching television at that time (from 3.4 to 2.2). The share drop was especially felt among children (from 9.5 to 4.6), and in all the demographics for the core audiences and fans, the share halved for women, adults aged sixteen to fifty-five, and housewives (e.g., housewives, from 2.5 to 1.6 share). If we compare the upsurge in younger users for the digital content and online voting, with the ratings for children, there is a stark picture of fans disengaging with the show. In season 1, 230,000 children watched *Got to Dance*, by season 5 at the auditions, 160,000 were watching, and only 80,000 stayed to the live finale. In terms of mums, recorded in BARB as housewives, the ratings dropped from around half a million viewers for season 1 to 200,000 for the live finale of season 5. The ratings show that the increase in younger digital users for the brand backfired with core audiences (children and parents) for the series.

In the queues for the live events, fans expressed their frustration with the broadcaster and changes made to the show in the schedule and the shortened series. Fans felt short-changed:

Table 2. *Got to Dance* Ratings Performance.

<i>Got to Dance</i>	Season 5 viewers first audition	Season 5 viewers live finale	Season 1 average viewers	Season 2 average viewers	Season 3 average viewers	Season 4 average viewers
Total	646,000	486,000	1,113,000	1,172,000	979,000	820,000
Children	160,000	80,000	230,000	231,000	168,000	166,000
Men	169,000	152,000	357,000	393,000	356,000	266,000
Women	316,000	253,000	543,000	547,000	454,000	387,000
ABC1 (upper and middle class)	423,000	248,000	514,000	494,000	437,000	396,000
Housewives	265,000	207,000	511,000	518,000	437,000	370,000
Adults 16–34	183,000	151,000	394,000	428,000	366,000	251,000
Adults 35–55	244,000	170,000	409,000	412,000	354,000	304,000
Adults 55+	58,000	83,000	95,000	101,000	90,000	97,000

Source. BARB and Endemol Shine.

Note. BARB = Broadcaster Audience Research Board.

"I'm missing my TV time. I want to watch them for longer, not sit down and 'oh, it's over already'" (a 20- to 30-year-old female viewer). A brand based on passion for dance seemed oddly lacking in dance content due to the compression in the program time: one mother said of the new format "I just don't like it. We don't see much dance." In another encounter, two sisters and their children were waiting to enter the venue for the semifinals. They had no idea about the acts as they had been on holiday during its transmission: "I must admit that I haven't watched this one, I never missed any series but we have been away on holiday. We love dance . . . the previous series were shown in January and they changed it" (a 30- to 40-year-old female viewer). If viewers missed the auditions, "then when it comes to the semi-finals they won't know what the acts are. 'Who are these people?'" (a 40- to 50-year-old male viewer).

The positive engagement with the brand that had been built up over time by Princess and the local production team quickly switched to negative engagement and disaffection with the channel. One interpretation of the failure of *Got to Dance* could be format fatigue with talent shows; other brands were also struggling at the time. And yet the cultural resonance of the brand offered a rare example of a prosocial talent show. This format was attempting to offer something different from commercial rivals, and it most resembled BBC's *Strictly Come Dancing* in the positive engagement with the brand as a recurring live experience in local communities, dance schools, and nationwide public debates. *Got to Dance* offered similar public service elements in a commercial setting. The ratings and social media valued engagement in economic terms, but the cultural values were especially strong in viewer loyalty, a passionate fan base, quality standards in the dance profession, and family and school support structures for participant and audience interaction, the positive role models for children and aspiring dancers. This example of audience loyalty to a prosocial brand for a commercial channel remained hidden within the institution of television and its existing information systems.

Conclusion

Engagement is integral to transformations in the television industries. A term that usually means audience attention is changing currency, combining ratings and social media trends with cultural resonance. New research on engagement as economic and cultural value can open up understanding of the term from an industry perspective contributing to strategic thinking and creative knowledge on how to build engagement as a dialogue with producers and audiences, a dialogue that draws on relationships across both cultures and helps generate trust and loyalty in a brand.

John Corner's work on stages of engagement shows how engagement varies in intensity, from live viewers to brand loyalty, and involves cognitive and affective work of audiences in how they think and feel about content. The idea of a spectrum of engagement extends this understanding of the term and contributes to new languages and currencies for media engagement. A spectrum of engagement captures the core meaning of engagement as relationships, and at the same time shows the myriad ways people engage and how this differs from person to person, across varying cultures of viewing. There is a dynamic interplay between producers and audiences about the value and meaning of television, something played out in the contexts of the institution of television, including scheduling, distribution, and everyday routines.

The case of reality talent show *Got to Dance* was used to think through this idea of a spectrum of engagement. Production and audience research, combining interviews, participant observations, ratings, and social media, highlighted the tensions within television institutions about the meaning of engagement as economic and cultural value. This was a talent show for a commercial channel that had prosocial values, an “authentic talent show” that championed passion for dance and a can-do attitude to life. Audiences and fans, performers and contestants, and local schools and dance communities positively engaged with the prosocial values of the brand as a nationwide, live, and recurring experience. One woman literally described *Got to Dance* as a piece of rock candy you buy at the seaside with words written on the inside: “it’s positive all the way through.” With such brand loyalty, how did the show fail? It is an example of how quickly positive engagement can switch to negative engagement by loyal audiences and fans angry with changes to the series in terms of compressed time, a new scheduling slot, and London rather than nationwide venues.

To reflect on the meaning of engagement in television industries, the core economic value of the show was fleeting engagement, the “now” of the live event, and ratings and social media metrics. However, the local production and regular at-home audiences, loyal fans, and participants in the show created an enduring engagement with a long-standing reality television event, where the annual live experience became part of people’s everyday lives. This kind of embedded engagement is in conflict with television itself and the hype surrounding young audiences and digital media. In the short view, if a prosocial brand like *Got to Dance* is canceled, loyal fans lose their relationship with a favorite show, but in the long view broadcasters risk breaking trust with their audiences. Such a move signals a misunderstanding of the very meaning of engagement as multifaceted, built on relations between producers and varieties of audiences, and it signals the risks of disrupting this all important dialogue at a time when power is slipping from the constitution of television to disparate sites of media content across multiplatform environments.

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² John Corner, *Theorising Media* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011).

³ Craig Calhoun and Richard Sennett, eds., *Practising Culture* (London: Routledge, 2007). Richard Sennett, *Respect* (London: Penguin, 2002).

⁴ David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker, *Creative Labour* (London: Routledge, 2011), 165. See also Raymond Williams, *Culture* (London: Fontana, 1981).

⁵ See the forthcoming publication for full analysis of the project Annette Hill, *Media Experiences* (London: Routledge, 2017).

⁶ Clive Seale, *The Quality of Qualitative Research* (London: SAGE, 1999).

⁷ Paul Grainge, ed., *Ephemeral Media: Transitory Screen Culture from Television to YouTube* (London: British Film Institute, 2011).

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- ⁸ Raymond Boyle and Lisa and Kelly, *The Television Entrepreneurs* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2012), 155.
- ⁹ See Annette Hill, *Reality TV* (London: Routledge, 2015).
- ¹⁰ See Viviana Zelizer, *Economic Lives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).
- ¹¹ Corner, *Theorising Media*, 91–93.
- ¹² Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).
- ¹³ See Hill, *Reality TV*.
- ¹⁴ Paddy Scannell, *Television and the Meaning of Live* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014).
- ¹⁵ See June Deery, *Consuming Reality: The Commercialisation of Factual Entertainment* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
- ¹⁶ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin, 1959).
- ¹⁷ See Hill, *Media Experiences*.

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Research Note

The *Got to Dance* research is part of a larger project *Media Experiences*, led by Annette Hill from Lund University, and funded by the Wallenberg Foundation (2013–2016). The project covered three genres: television drama series, reality entertainment, and documentaries, including *The Bridge* crime drama format (Filmlance International and Endemol

Shine), *Utopia* cult drama format (Kudos and Endemol Shine), and *Masterchef* entertainment format (Endemol Shine). We also studied independent documentary films *The Act of Killing* and *The Look of Silence* (director Joshua Oppenheimer). This research used a qualitative approach to *Got to Dance* producers and audiences, combining individual and group interviews, alongside participant observations. A total of hundred interviews were conducted overall. For the production research, there were interviews and observations of the auditions and semifinals and finals for *Got to Dance*, from May to August 2014. Ten production interviews took place with executive and creative producers. For participants, thirty interviews were conducted with performers at the auditions, and ten interviews at the semifinals and finals, including family and friends there to support dancers. Observations took place frontstage and backstage at The Roundhouse, London, and Earls Court, London, during a two-week period, resulting in audio recordings, and fieldnotes. For the audience research, fifty individual and group interviews (one to five persons) were conducted with live crowds at the semifinals and finals, in the queues, coffee shops, and on the street, outside and inside the venue. Each interview lasted for five to twenty minutes. Participant observations took place with the live crowds of four to six thousand people at Earls Court 2, London, during a one-week period in August 2014, resulting in audio recordings, photographs and videos, and fieldnotes. The fieldwork was conducted by Julie Donovan, Koko Kondo, and Tina Askanius during the auditions in May 2014, and Julie Donovan, Koko Kondo, and Annette Hill during the live filming for the semifinals and finals in August 2014.