MEDIA ENGAGEMENT

CONNECTING WITH AUDIENCES IN MEDIA MARKETS

Edited by Mercedes Medina and David Kimber

ROUTLEDGE

Media Engagement

This book outlines the need for media companies to embrace an audience-centric approach to thrive in today's fiercely competitive global market.

Chapters in this book cover different media sectors such as audiovisual, news and user-generated content (UGC), media branding and reputation, and include experiences from Europe, Latin America, Asia, the Middle East, and the United States. To enable readers to assess and compare contexts, the book supplements theoretical discussions with real-world examples related to legacy and new media from international markets and companies. It also explores the dynamic role of technology and its transformative impact on audience media consumption habits. In doing so, the book provides strategies that foster emotional connections and engagement between media companies and their audiences and offers innovative solutions to face challenges such as news avoidance, eroding media trust, declining audience shares, and content oversaturation.

With a thorough exploration of how media companies try to attract their audiences, this book will be of interest to scholars, students, and professionals in the field of media management, media economics, media analytics, and marketing.

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Media Management and Economics
Series Editor: Alan B. Albarran

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and David Kimber**

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

NEW YORK AND LONDON

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Part I

Theoretical Foundations and Measurement

1 Audience Engagement as Pillar of Sustainability of Media Companies

Now and Beyond

Mercedes Medina and David Kimber

Introduction

Media companies have always aimed to attract audiences' attention to their products and services, hoping to become the prevalent choice in consumers' lives for entertainment and/or news consumption. However, hyper-competition arising from the convergence of the internet, new technologies, and media content has reshaped the market landscape and consumption patterns. New media alternatives, unexpected competitors from other industries, and an ever-growing array of content options have fragmented audiences, making it increasingly difficult for any company to survive and differentiate itself. Therefore, merely competing for audiences' attention was no longer sufficient, emphasizing that engagement with the audience is a key variable for long-term sustainability.

Engagement is a slippery concept, with no consensus among researchers about its definition (Benavides et al., 2022; Lawrence et al., 2018; Nelson, 2018). It is mostly defined as a behavioral aspect, with a focus on measurement (Dahlgren & Hill, 2023). However, it is a more complex concept than that and far beyond just attention. In fact, engagement involves not only behavioral aspects but also affective and cognitive ones. It is related to interactions between consumers and media brands, the resulting set of good and/or bad experiences, and how these fit into consumers lives generating (or not) a sense of consumer-brand connection (Calder & Malthouse, 2008; Calder et al., 2016; Hollebeek et al., 2014).

Media engagement is about how a media product "is experienced motivationally in terms of making something happen (or not happen) in the consumer's life" (Calder & Malthouse, 2008, p. 5). It is a consumer's inner force, which generates thoughts, feelings, and behaviors about and directed to the media brand and its products. However, media companies are profit-oriented firms, and their interest for audiences also has a commercial interest. Therefore, understanding media engagement implies to know and measure those experiences and their resulting thoughts, feelings, and behaviors associated with a media brand.

In the current media and entertainment landscape, most media companies, especially legacy media, are suffering a steady decline in audience size. The competition for viewers, readers, and users is intensifying. Analyses of audience levels of engagement are particularly relevant in the current digital scenario. Relationships between the media and the public are no longer distant or superficial. When these relationships are satisfactory, consumer experiences generate long-term connections as consumers become a fundamental element of the value chain (Liu et al., 2024). Thus, brands are consolidated and made stronger by customer loyalty (Napoli, 2020). Therefore, innovation and more sophisticated research and analytics are essential to understanding audiences and developing new ways to engage with customers.

In addition, the digital media ecosystem has changed the way audiences relate to media contents. Before digital transformation the relationship between media and their audiences was a short-term relationship, in some cases unpredictable due to the uncertainty of the tastes involved in consumption, driven by rational drivers, individual and measured with quantitative variables such as time consumed. The new digital media allows to build a long-term relationship on the basis of a deeper understanding of the users and based on metrics more qualitative than quantitative such as emotions, interests, behaviors, hobbies, and previous elections (Arrese et al., 2019; Nelson & Webster, 2016). In fact, the recommendations systems are a key added value to the supply of media, and they have become a cornerstone of the algorithmic economy (Gillespie, 2016; Herrero et al., 2018).

Audience engagement in media content leads research toward the economy of attention and the multitude of distractions that users suffer (Chan-Olmsted & Wolter, 2018; Nelson, 2018). It also has connections with the economy of participation and the challenges of managing the participation of external actors in the company (Livingstone, 2013). Furthermore, it can also be related to the architecture of listening and how to convert listening into correct decisions to reinforce the media brand and the culture of the corporation (Macnamara, 2024).

Media managers face the following dilemma: to prioritize what audiences demand or to choose the audience for which they want to produce. Where does the authority of professionals stand in relation to the changing and possibly misguided tastes of audiences? In the past, the media held a status recognized by audiences, establishing them as an authority. Today, this authority is challenged and needs to be legitimized. Therefore, media outlets must stay close to their audiences and understand their preferences, interests, and choices. This is why they need to embrace open innovation (Chesbrough, 2010) which enables audience participation in shaping content.

Understanding audience engagement provides a competitive advantage for the resilience of media companies. We believe that audience media engagement has stopped being a "buzzword" (Phalen & Ducey, 2012), and this is the purpose of this book. In this book, we asked for contributions from authors who have

studied the strategies of media companies to reach the audience from different perspectives. In this book, we want to show what audience engagement means from both theoretical and practitioner perspectives, and how media companies can increase their engagement with audiences. We explore this concept theoretically and through successful cases of audience engagement to gain insights on how to improve it and get the audience more engaged.

Some Deep Convictions

We cannot deny that in most of the news media all over the world, there has been a disconnection with the audience as reflected in audience figures. In addition, audiences access the content through multiple channels such as social media, and platforms, both those controlled and those not controlled by media companies. Although a number of challenges remain such as how the audience engagement might lead to filter bubbles, the new digital ecosystem could be a golden age for media audiences and valuable for media companies to increase the trust of their audience.

We deeply believe that audiences must be the center of the media and entertainment industry. All decisions should be made keeping the audience as the compass that leads them: how news affects the audience, what it means for them when certain events occur, and how they can contribute to making stories more aligned with their interests and concerns. There is a growing need to listen to the audiences, and the digital context provides significant opportunities for audience interaction, engagement, and participation, thereby increasing consumer sovereignty and empowering audiences (Macnamara, 2023). In a recent interview, Fernando de Yarza, president of the regional Spanish Henneo group, commented that he had to humbly accept that the first thing readers look for in the *Heraldo de Aragón* was not the editorial but the horoscope and then the obituaries. With this anecdote, he reinforced the idea of putting the reader at the center of the information project, and not the partisan or egocentric pretensions of the editors (Bel, 2023). Another good example was the newsroom organized by Chris Peña, the Senior Vice President of News for Univision Local Media in Miami. This meeting, called *watch party*, gathered the journalists, the weather specialist, and some other executives of the channel. There they discuss and criticize some of the news pieces broadcast by the channel during the last month. After hearing all the comments, Peña usually adds the final icing on the cake showing how this news could affect the audience and how the story could be told in order to make it more interesting for the viewers. Univision was focused, among other things, on protecting the audience, that is why the meteorologists were part of this meeting. They want to be the first ones to make advice when the meteorologic events are adverse.

Though some media companies are trying to develop strategies to engage their audiences, there is a need for consensus on how to measure audience

engagement. For some media companies, the engagement is very much focused on social media activity, and we defend that audience engagement goes beyond the interaction with the social accounts.

One of the ways (perhaps the easiest and the fastest) to attract audiences and to adapt the contents to what they want is to use recommendation tools driven by artificial intelligence (AI) to show to the audiences what they want to follow. However, this approach is not enough. It tends to tire and bore audiences. We argue that editorial curation takes precedence over algorithmic personalization, even if both approaches are data-driven. "Editorial curation" means that recommendations are guided by manual decisions by human editors rather than being driven entirely by automated algorithms analyzing user behavior and preferences. Guided by an audience-centered culture, this approach emphasizes the intuition, experience, and judgment of editors and content producers over purely data-driven insights.

The reflection about why audiences are not engaged with media contents should be put in the center of media management boards and content producers (Osman, 2024). The clickbait is one of the perverse consequences of the obsession to attract audiences (Nelson, 2018). Sensationalist headlines and unfounded alerts that lead to content disconnected from those headlines are causing many media outlets to lose credibility and therefore the trust of their audiences. For mainstream media that are supposed to be the ones that know, there is a path to learn from the new media like podcasters, influencers, TikTokers, and youtubers (Feng et al., 2023). These new media understand that nearness, intimacy, conversation, sharing views, getting involved, being absorbed are the ways of engaging audiences. What are the contents that people share with others and why? The easy answer is that they are full of emotiveness. However, maybe it is something else, and it is time to change the way of understanding the audiences and trying to attract them with relevant and significant content.

The literature and practitioners distinguish three levels of engagement: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral. The interactions with contents are associated with a perception of quality and brand loyalty (Einsle et al., 2023; Krebs & Licchska, 2017). When audiences invest time and attention, it shows the value and worthwhileness among contents and their publics (Broersma & Singer, 2021). Furthermore, when viewers pay for content, it reflects a higher perceived value, indicating that the content is considered worth the cost. There is still a commitment for the content producers to make the best of their products and to put their expertise into the best quality content as possible for their users, whether it is news, fiction, or entertainment shows. Media has a mandate to serve the audiences, especially the news media, but without the support and accession of the audiences, they cannot fulfill the mission given. Communication is about meaning making and influencing awareness, attitudes, or behavior, not simply sending information and messages (Macnamara, 2024).

Following Macnamara (2024), engagement is a psychological bound garnered through a combination of cognitive information processing; positive affectivity, which refers to a deeper level of positive emotional engagement beyond mere liking or attraction, such as enthusiasm, excitement, pride, and/or passion; and finally, the empowerment of those engaged, which is most effectively achieved through some form of participation.

There are some contents such as investigative programs, reality shows, and quizzes, for which citizen participation has value (Vanhaeght, 2019; Vanhaeght & Donders, 2021). For example, *TryLife*, created by Paul Irwin, is an interactive drama series where users shape the storyline by making decisions at critical moments, simulating real-life consequences. Designed with input from experts in youth work, education, and healthcare, it addresses issues like mental health, drug use, and violence. The series has gained significant attention, with a notable social media presence of over 139,000 Instagram and 4,000 Twitter followers, and is praised for its innovative and engaging approach to youth education (Wayman, 2018). In 2019, Netflix launched the interactive series *You vs. Wild* where the viewers could choose what the series starring adventurer and survival expert Bear Grylls could do next. Though it was not particularly successful, it was an experiment with interactive "choose-your-own-adventure" format, where viewers make decisions that influence the story and the outcomes. Two years later, in 2021, Netflix produced *You vs. Wild: Out Cold*, a standalone interactive movie, indicating that the series performed well enough to merit a sequel. For other contents, like fiction or current affairs, the purpose to get the audience involved can be questioned (Dhanesh, 2017), because not being experts they do not have the expertise to distinguish what is relevant.

Understanding why audiences disengage from media content is crucial to restoring their trust and realigning media companies with their core mission, i.e., to inform and entertain responsibly and meaningfully. There are a series of reasons like lack of interest, distrust, avoidance, boredom, disattention, disconnection, and fatigue that can explain why audiences do not consume media contents (Walvaart et al., 2019). This question must be answered before thinking how to build communities or tools for audiences to react. In this sense, the purpose to get the audience engaged can be questioned.

Academic Interest

Academic research interest in "media user engagement" in the digital context began around the second half of 2000 so far and it coincided with the outbreak of social media (Barger et al., 2016; Einsle et al., 2023; Gajardo & Costera, 2022). Some theories such as the Social Media Engagement (SME) and the Dynamic Model of Audience Engagement were generated. These theories include the professional values, the habits of the users and content producers, the time and space issues, and the emotional gratifications (Steensen et al., 2020). In 2005,

the Advertising Research Foundation developed key engagement metrics (ARF, 2006). As González-Bernal (2016) points out, the Uses and Gratifications theory of Katz et al. (1973) provides the basic questions to understand engagement.

In the present book, we are focused on engagement as an antecedent of loyalty that is built thanks to the attractiveness of the content for audiences. We are not focusing our attention on how the media helps citizens to engage with the public sphere (Dahlgren & Hill, 2023), nor other senses of engagement as Brodie et al. (2011) show such as commitment, participation, involvement, and flow. The recent literature and media practitioners have given attention toward social media interactions and how users interact with the media contents through social media. But we think that audience engagement goes beyond the economy of attention, the relevance of the contents, or the perceived quality of them by the spectators. We would like to set the sights toward the full experience lived by media users and its effects, like the emotions and connections movies evoke in viewers through their identification with characters and stories. The theory of expected value (Liao, 2023; Palmgreen & Rayburn, 1982) can contribute to bringing insights in the keys of engagement with their triple dimension of transactional value, emotional value, and identity value. The audiences are looking for those values when they choose media contents.

This Book

Accordingly, the book delves into the ever-evolving role of technology and its profound impact on media consumption patterns. Its primary goal is to identify and discuss trends and strategies, directly related to generating emotional connections and engagement between media companies and their audiences. A critical concern addressed in this book is the imperative for media companies to embrace an audience-centric approach to thrive in today's fiercely competitive market.

Media Engagement: Connecting with Audiences in Media Markets offers innovative solutions to face prevalent challenges such as news avoidance, eroding media trust, declining audience shares, and content oversaturation. It supplements theoretical discussions with real-world examples related to legacy and new media from different markets and companies around the world, effectively illustrating successful strategies for boosting media engagement. With a global focus, it provides valuable experiences from Europe, Latin America, Asia, the Middle East, and the United States, enabling readers to explore and compare them.

This book offers a comprehensive and up-to-date examination of various aspects. First, an overview of the theoretical foundations (Chapters 2–4) encompassing topics such as the engagement concept and audience engagement research in the digital age. After the introductory chapter, Gonzalez focused Chapter 2 on the four dimensions of the audience engagement from the media

management theory: motivations to consume content, the emotions obtained during consumption, the rational process of understanding and learning from content, and the behavioral effects derived from such consumption experience. Phalen (Chapter 3) reviews the history of audience research linked to advertisers' interests up to the present day and addresses the challenges that the digital economy offers due to the dispersion of screens through which audiences reach content. Finally, in Chapter 4, Pérez-Latre reflects on the concept of trust in media companies and the importance of reinforcing engagement with audiences as a way to consolidate the prestige of brands in the market.

Second, media engagement strategies (Chapters 5–10) cover themes such as news avoidance, brand loyalty, quality content, and emergent formats like platforms and podcasts, and their relationship with media engagement, along with proposing strategies to mitigate or enhance it. While in Chapter 5, Nelson provides new audience engagement goals in journalism, Vara-Miguel and Gutiérrez in Chapter 6 highlight the reality of news avoidance in contemporary societies and possible solutions for journalistic media. In Chapter 7, Bellido and Herrero examine crowdfunding as an example of audience engagement, focusing on projects where individuals contribute financially. Their analysis highlights the critical factors that build trust in crowdfunding platforms.

Urgellés (Chapter 8) discusses the challenges video streaming companies face in engaging audiences and the role of recommendations through algorithms as ways to reduce the uncertainty inherent in audiovisual production. Kimber and Medina (Chapter 9) emphasize the necessary quality of content as a key to making the media offering indispensable, and Ames (Chapter 10) reflects on the captivating role of podcasts thanks to their approachable and attractive tone for followers.

The third part discloses how culturally relevant issues in different international contexts widen the media engagement concept and practice (Chapters 11–15). Campos and Goyanes (Chapter 11) explain why it is important for public service media to extend the reach of their content through social media. It is not a matter of increasing the number of followers but of asserting their public service remit and finding them where they are. Wilkinson and Becerra show in Chapter 12 how the media in the United States develop strategies to attract Hispanic/ Latino audiences. On the other side of the world, Mohd and Serrano-Puche (Chapter 13) study the sociodemographic factors that explain and differentiate the engagement with news of citizens of Saudi Arabia and Jordan. An and Lee (Chapter 14) explain how in a collectivist society like Korea, brands find in their engagement strategy the way to survive in the market. However, the effectiveness of their commercial actions will decrease if they are not responsible. Through several examples, they show that brands that do not act with transparency lose the trust of consumers. Coming back to the Latin American context, Rolfsen (Chapter 15) provides valuable recommendations for restoring audience trust in the Brazilian news market.

The fourth part (Chapters 16–19) focuses on the relationship between media engagement and technology, discussing topics such as user-generated content (UGC) and distribution platforms, algorithms and neuroscience, and the impact of Big Tech companies and new-generation technologies. Álvarez-Monzoncillo, Vila-Boix, and Blanco-González (Chapter 16) reflect on UGC as a pathway to audience engagement. They examine the motivations that drive consumers to create their own content linked to brands or to share content created by other users or professionals. Diego, Guerrero, Martín-Guerra, and Soriano (Chapter 17) explore the utility of neuroscience in creative writing, while also addressing the potential negative implications it may have for professionals in the field. In Chapter 18, Guesalaga emphasizes the responsibility of big tech companies, given their immense power and control over the market. Finally, Noam (Chapter 19) reviews the latest technological innovations in content creation, particularly in video formats, and examines them through the lens of audience challenges in engaging with these advancements. He argues that not everything that is technically possible aligns with human interests or satisfies audience needs. Finally, in Chapter 20 the editors reflect on the status of audience engagement today and synthesize the main ideas for further study.

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