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## Parameters of Media Engagement

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### **Abstract**

Engagement is a tricky term to pin down, shifting meaning in the media industries, across political communication and within popular culture. But the definition of engagement matters, as new currencies circulate in academic and industry discourses. The argument put forward here is that media engagement is a term that has been used in a strategic way within the media industries to capture social media analytics and ratings performance, thus instrumentally using a reductive meaning of engagement as a measurement of interest. We argue for a new definition of the term as an energising internal force; engagement is a subjective experience, protean in character, driven by affect yet always retaining some elements of rationality. We theorize media engagement as linking the personal, the socio-cultural, and the political, and these elements serve as a horizon in the parameters of media engagement. A matrix of five parameters offers a model for analysing engagement in relation to media contexts, motivations, modalities, intensities, and consequences. The parameters of media engagement highlight the trajectories of engagement, including the build up to engagement, the moment and place of engagement itself, and also what happens beyond engagement, such as participation and social activism, or fan production and user generated content. This way of conceptualising and contextualising media engagement offers analytic purchase for empirical research and reflexive theorisation that is attentive to the nexus of relations at the heart of engagement. We illustrate the empirical utility of this theoretical trajectory with an example from professional wrestling and populism. In such a way, media engagement can be a useful analytic term to map and understand how and why engagement matters to people in the context of political and cultural spheres.

### **Keywords**

media engagement, political engagement, civic cultures, participation, audience engagement, public spheres, popular culture, professional wrestling

What is media engagement? Building on previous research on media engagement and civic cultures (see Dahlgren, 2009; 2013; Hill, 2017; 2018) our aim is to develop a nuanced conceptual understanding of what media engagement is and why it matters within political and cultural spheres. We theorize engagement as something more than attention, user interaction, or brand loyalty; typical definitions within the media industries. When engagement happens it is a powerful subjective experience. Engagement is an energizing internal force; rooted in affect and identity, it is a subjective disposition that can propel us to do things. We understand engagement as a nexus of relations that operate at both the individual and collective level; often there is a dynamic that renders the two levels mutually supportive. Thus, engagement is a process whereby we develop relationships with media that are not solely about consumption and economic value, but that also enable us to participate in politics, to recognise the social and cultural, as well as economic, values of media in our lived experiences.

The term engagement points to the various ways we encounter and experience media within politics, society, and culture. This broad horizon of media engagement means that the concept is coloured by a number of research traditions, from, for example, political science, sociology, cultural studies, various currents in business and advertising, psychology, and media and communication studies itself. Our perspective of engagement situates an understanding of the concept within human experience, rooting the term within work on affect, subjectivity and identity. Our perspective also acknowledges that engagement (and disengagement) always in some way touches upon what Mouffe (2005; 2012) calls ‘the political’ – i.e. engagement and its affective dynamics are readily intertwined with various force-fields of power and collective conflict in society, even if these relations are not always overtly visible. The protean character of engagement across political and popular cultural spheres is key to our model for the parameters of media engagement.

In the three sections that follow below, we first present the conceptual building blocks of our understanding of engagement as a nexus of relationships, highlighting the various elements it embodies. In the second section we provide a matrix of five parameters that offers a new model for mapping and analysing media engagement in context. The parameters include media contexts, motivations, modalities, intensities,

and consequences. The parameters highlight the spatial and temporal trajectories of engagement, including the build up to engagement, the moment and place of engagement itself, and also what happens beyond engagement, such as participation and social activism, or fan production and user generated content. As such, the five parameters highlight media engagement as a nexus of relations we make and break with media in everyday life.

The third and final section offers a brief analysis of populism in professional wrestling in order to address the five parameters of engagement across political and cultural spheres. We consider how professional wrestlers shape the cultural experiences of a live match through an invitation to engage in positive and negative ways with contemporary political culture and the rise of populism in Europe. Here the personal, the socio-cultural, and the political all link up in a media engagement that is attentive to live events and the subjective power of human experience.

## **Meanings of Engagement**

The play off between engagement as performance metric and subjective experience is a sign of the tensions around the meaning of the term within the media industries and academic research. In recent work on media industries and engagement (see Hill and Steemers, 2017; Hill, 2018; Evans, 2019 amongst others), we find a strategic use of engagement as a performance indicator for economic targets. This is a rather reductive meaning of the term, where engagement is something to capture and measure in specific places (platforms, channels, or influencer profiles) and at certain times (hourly, daily, weekly leaderboards). Ratings, social media analytics, and newspaper reviews are the primary ways of measuring audience engagement as a basic definition of interest. And yet engagement is so much more than the public's interest in something, as it captures people's subjective positions, such as producers creating content that engages us, professionals promoting and marketing content for mass and niche audiences, and fans, producers and users experiencing media content.

Our article makes an intervention into this industry definition of media engagement by arguing for a meaning of the term not merely as a measurement of interest, attention, or consumption. In today's media landscape, the growing power of

algorithms shapes our experience of software and platforms, generating content suggestions, nudging behaviour patterns, and generically labelling media for our attentive engagement (Bucher, 2018). As abundance and speed increases the competition for attention, and as the media environment becomes denser, the odds of getting and holding attention to any message generally decreases – with long-range and as yet not fully understood consequences for not only engagement, but also memory, cognitive skills, self-reflection, and more. As we develop personal strategies for navigating the daily tsunami of information, ‘infoglut’ as Andrejevic (2013) calls it, ‘distraction’ and ‘disengagement’ become less the antithesis of attention and more of an attribute: media attention is increasingly characterized by (disjointed) seriality (Jackson, 2009). Pettman (2016) argues that the speed of social media also fragments us into ever-smaller micro-zones of attentive engagement, be it fandom or political tribes.

Media attention and engagement are entangled with various empirical and theoretical notions about consumption. Our focus on media engagement sets certain limits on the possible domains of relevance regarding consumption, yet consumption still offers an array of pertinent interfaces. Commercial logics are most obvious: engagement can point to market relations that offer us that which we need to survive and that which we might desire: the promise of satisfaction and pleasure. It is most commonly exemplified by the many forms of advertising, shopping and commercial variants of entertainment, from engaging TV ads to product-pushing online ‘influences’. Consumption intertwines with mediated popular culture, and – even if less obviously so – with politics as well, as work by Michelletti (2003) and Sassatelli (2007) has highlighted. There can be political and ethical motivations for consumption, and a commercial and civic mix intertwined in such modes of engagement.

Whilst work in attention economies, algorithmic logics, and citizen-consumer research are relevant to media industry definitions of engagement, we want to move beyond these meanings which tend to prioritise quantitative data and economic targets towards a sense of engagement as offering socio-cultural value. Recent work by Evans (2019) on engagement for transmedia content offers a promising line of

inquiry in the ways producers and audiences of screen devices value engagement. Our interest in experience is at the point where it shapes engagement:

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 (Corner, 2017: 5).

As Corner (2017: 5) has shown, by opening up the meaning of engagement as human experience we can use the term as a resource for living, a means to improve the conditions for social and cultural equality.

The vocabulary of emotions and feelings is slippery and problematic, as Frosh (2011), a psychologist well-versed in social theory, underscores. We use *emotion* and *experience* in largely descriptive, common-sense ways, while we see *affect* as a theoretically more ambitious notion. Media engagement is an emotional experience that can embody, for example, moral passion, resentment, pleasure, curiosity, fear, anxiety, anger, humour, and not least identity processes – which in turn relate to the subjectivity of the self, both individual and collective. For Frosh (2009) there are roughly speaking two kinds of experiences: the lived reality of the moment, and our thoughts, feelings and sensory responses within the experience itself; and then the memories of our experience, what stays with us, what we archive and talk about and reflect on after the experience itself. These ways of understanding experience intertwine with each other over time, so this becomes a process of experiencing reality and reflecting on our experience of reality, which sometimes can be in harmony and at other times in conflict with each other.

In recent years the notion of ‘affect’ has gained prominence; there has emerged an ‘affective turn’ in the humanities and social sciences, inspired by Spinoza, among others (see for example Massumi, 2002; Gregg and Seigworth, 2010). In media studies, Papacharissi (2014) has incorporated and mobilized the term for analyses of social media. She suggests that the term helps us to analyse modes of political engagement that hover beyond formalized expressions of opinion. Moreover, it indicates how unformed and spontaneous political sentiment may accumulate,

moving from the latent to the manifest, giving new shape to engagement and participation. In simple terms, if emotion is a ‘state’ one is in, affect has to do with the dynamics of how one got there.

The significance of affect can be understood if we think of engagement as shaped by something more powerful than just feelings inside the hearts of individuals, namely shared social experience. Thus, affect brings in the collective side of emotions, and derives from the work of several specific authors, as Papacharissi (2014) describes. One source that she emphasizes is Raymond Williams and his notion of ‘structures of feeling’. According to Sharma and Tygstrup (2015: 2) the idea of structures of feeling ‘compliments the analysis of the social and material infrastructure of reality with a third layer: that of affective infrastructure.’ They go on to suggest that affectivity is ‘what tinges or colours the way in which we take part in the environments we find ourselves placed into’ (2015: 14). For Williams (1978), structures of feeling give expression to prevailing cultural currents and moods of a given historical moment; they are implicit and inchoate, yet can still impact on people’s political horizons. Their political character can of course vary greatly; they can unfortunately even manifest unsavoury sentiments (e.g. populism). Affect, in sum, can be seen as dynamic, collective emotionality that connects with people’s shared social experiences; affect animates engagement and helps motivate participation.

If engagement is seen as a subjective disposition, participation can be treated as observable behaviour, i.e. forms of doing. Thus, the subjective state of engagement can be treated as a prerequisite for observable acts of participation (for further discussion see Dahlgren, 2009). Participation, basically, is comprised of forms of social practices. Shove, Pantzar & Watson (2012) theorize practices as consisting of the complex mobilization, coordination and not least transformation of pertinent elements that include materials (e.g. media devices), competences (skills) and social meaning. From this horizon, it is easy to see the role of subjective engagement in foregrounding participation.

It is of course very possible that any given state of engagement does not necessarily result in what would be considered political and cultural participation, or that the actors themselves may deem their engagement as constituting participation (while

others – for example, researchers – may not). While some citizens participate in the media with the aim of altering their policies, regulation, and/or financing – via various stakeholder organizations and regulatory bodies – such engagement is a slow and often frustrating investment of energy. Even in regard to the internet, despite the communicative freedom it affords, users remain, in structural terms, subordinate providers of data for the tech giants, with little potential for impact (Zuboff, 2019).

In sum, while engagement is largely seen as an affective experience, it always also incorporates some elements associated with the cognitive functions of the mind, such as forms of analysis, calculation, and argumentation, and so on. Indeed, the balance and dynamic between the affective and cognitive will vary, and often provide fruitful analytic insight on the affective and cognitive work of engagement (see Corner, 2011). For example, interviewees can express their engagement in emotional terms, but they also provide reasons for why they are engaged with a particular media phenomenon (regardless of how we might evaluate the quality of the reasoning). Emotion and reason are always, to varying degrees, co-present and active in human agency, not least concerning engagement.

Liberal democratic theory has long had a problem with emotion and affect, and strived to filter it out, leaving an analytic perspective of purely rational political actors (Hall, 2005). This attempt to return to a pre-Freudian model of the psyche has proven to be a dead-end, both in politics and culture. In the study of political communication and even in the voting process, some scholars have now come to underscore the importance of emotion (see, for example, Coleman, 2013; Wahl-Jorgensen 2019). Ultimately, politics and culture – as well as subjectivity itself – straddle the rational-emotional distinction, without safety nets, and engagement can be understood as in part predicated on the tensions between them. Trying to deny one side or the other merely hinders our understanding of human agency.

## **Political and Popular Cultural Spheres**

The notion of ‘spheres’ of course depicts not a geographic terrain (or some round-shaped entity), but rather sets of institutional structures, shared logics and prevailing practices that can be distinguished from each other. Within media studies, the couplet of public and private spheres, often informed by Habermasian theory, is



quite familiar. In keeping with what we said above, we would underscore the importance of understanding emotional and affective dynamics in this regard. We would also highlight the interweaving of the two: Berlant (2008; 2011), writing in the American context, argues cogently for what she calls ‘intimate public spheres’. These are manifested in affective structures within society, embedded in, for example, mediated storytelling. Such narratives can reproduce ideologies related to contemporary capitalism, with dominant aesthetic forms registering and articulating class, race, and gender inequalities, as hegemonically normative.

Our focus is on the political sphere, though we emphasize that it is inexorably shaped by such elements as aesthetics, affect, and intimacy. The political public sphere concerns collective contestations, and these may be of the organized form that we associate with politics generally, or of the more fundamental kind of contestation that can arise anywhere on the social field. This latter version invokes the Mouffian notion of ‘the political’ referred to earlier. In terms of specifying spheres of media engagement, we focus on politics and popular culture as key staging grounds for actors involved within these spheres, for example citizen groups, journalists, or policy makers within political spheres, and audiences and fans, producers and performers, within popular culture.

Media engagement in the political sphere is tied to the visions and requirements of a viable democracy and its need for civic participation. On a general level, this civic engagement is conceptualized as predicated on a sense of agency empowered to act meaningfully in political contexts. This civic identity in turn has been seen as dependent on supportive ‘civic cultures’ that can facilitate engagement and participation (Dahlgren, 2013) and the structural relations of power that shape them.

At the same time there are good reasons for not engaging in politics, as many authors have noted (for example, Hay, 2007), while with populism heightened affect is at risk of turning engagement into enagement and eroding key features of liberal democracy (Müller, 2016; Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018, Urninati 2019). Among the dimensions of civic culture are communicative spaces that are accessible to citizens, and in today’s world these spaces are often comprised of electronic media. These spaces, however, have become increasingly uncivil, and especially in the wake of extremist right-wing media practices even at times dangerous for the life of

democracy (Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018; Farkas and Schou, 2019; Pomerantsev, 2019).

We note also that in recent decades researchers are finding that the modes of political engagement are changing, as citizens find new ways to the political, ways that are often more personally meaningful and more focused than older (party) ideological mobilizations. Not least with the internet revolution, the rise of social media has altered the character and practices of engagement, allowing for more variety and individual- and group-definitional initiatives. Bennett and Sederberg (2013), for example, distinguish on the one hand between traditional collective action, which is characterized by formal organization and control, as well as the engendering of a collective identity, and on the other hand the newer, connective forms of engagement. Connective action, emergent in the internet age, is typified by digital linkages that afford fluid and weak networked relations and extensive self-organization (see also Anderson, et al 2018; Gerbaudo, 2019; Baym, 2015). Nevertheless, social media as a platform for democratic politics are not without serious problems, as many have argued (Bartlett, 2018; van Dijck, J., 2013; Phillips and Milner, 2017; Nagle, 2017, amongst others).

Engagement in the political sphere is dominated by contestation over concrete issues, but it is also about ideologies, identities, brands, and, at bottom, power. Engagement flows via traditional mainstream media, especially journalism, but also by many genres of content on the internet, not least on the terrain of social media. Not only is access to the political sphere rendered easier, but the capacity for people to generate cultural content – not least of political relevance – is immensely augmented. It is here where we witness newer forms of political expression and practice emerging, with citizens defining newer pathways to the political. The main focus of engagement remains contestation over resources, but this has been strongly complemented in recent decades by engagement in values, moral issues, identities, and life-style disputes.

Traditionally, politics and popular culture were perceived as quite separate spheres. Politics was the domain of rational thought, knowledge, and deliberation (with a decided masculine edge), while culture was seen as an arena of aesthetics, emotions (i.e. feminine), where satisfaction, play and pleasure were paramount. This sharp

distinction has given way in recent years, as scholars have shown that they cannot always be so clearly separated (see, for example, Hermes, 2005; van Zoonen, 2005). It has been underscored that politics and (especially popular) culture in the media are often discursively constructed in similar ways; they inform and feed off each other. Both mobilize rational as well as affective response, and manifest the blurring and hybridization of media genres. Popular culture offers access to symbolic communities and invites us to engage in personally important questions about how we should live (and live together), and what kind of society we want. It can help us process conflicting values, norms, and identities. This can readily open doors to political engagement.

The intersections across the political and cultural spheres can be a cause of concern precisely because of emotional connections to brands or other symbols. In the case of populism, political engagement is mobilized around perceived grievances that in fact often do have a degree of legitimacy, in that they are triggered by long-term failures of liberal democracy to universally fulfil its promises (Canovan, 1981). Emotionality is mobilized and galvanized, though the response and proposed solutions take on an illiberal, anti-democratic character. Core brands – or, more generally, symbols – evoke strong affective response, both positive and negative. Thus, for example, ‘the people’ of ‘the nation’ stand against ‘the elites’, ‘immigration’, and ‘multiculturalism’ (Alvares and Dahlgren, 2016; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Wodak, 2015).

The focus for our meaning of engagement concerns itself with problematizing power relations and hegemonies – often building on currents within cultural theory, critical political economy and critical neoliberalism which emphasise process and context as essential to empirical and theoretical modes of analysis (see Peck, 2010; Dawes and Lenormand, 2020). Media engagement can never be seen as an exclusively rational/cognitive phenomenon. An emotional investment often serves to launch and sustain people’s involvement, i.e. their engagement. Within the spheres of politics and popular cultural spheres, reason and the cognitive work of engagement connect with and are sometimes entangled within affect and the emotional work of engagement, often providing the energising force for actors who shape the circumstances for, and affective and material infrastructures of, media engagement.

## A Spectrum of Media Engagement

We argue that media engagement is best understood as a spectrum of phenomena that is protean. Our notion of engagement links the personal, the socio-cultural, and the political, and these elements serve as a horizon in parameters of media engagement. This spectrum addresses the cognitive and affective modes of engagement of citizens and publics, audiences and users, highlighting the different positions and intensities of engagement in various contexts. Thus, we see engagement as having a spectral character, which includes affective and cognitive modes, switching between positive and negative engagement, to disengagement. Positive engagement typically might include emotional identification with a politician, or a character in a television drama series for example, inviting sympathy and empathy, voting for the underdog, sending encouraging tweets. Negative engagement might involve emotional dis-identification with a politician, or a character in a television drama, closing down sympathy, trash-talking on Twitter. These affective modes often work in tandem, and professionals 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 and publics, fans, consumers and users who emotionally invest in a political campaign, or storytelling in popular culture (see Hill, 2018; 2017, for further discussion of the spectrum of engagement).

Disengagement as such is often under-researched. On a common sense level we can see disengagement as flowing from the same logics as engagement, but in reverse. For example, citizens may avoid following certain debates and political campaigns because these are *too* intensive, too emotionally upsetting. Or, as research has found, such political discourses may evoke feelings of powerlessness or frustration. In culture, we may speculate on possible grounds for media disengagement, from boredom to outrage, from a sense of having ‘moved on’ in one’s development to a feeling that the cultural artefact in question has now attained narrative resolution and feels ‘completed’. Yet analytically more could be derived from disengagement; research can take the form of an assessment of performative failure – for example, why did citizens not vote for a particular party, or 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 media experience.

Work by Karppi in *Disconnect* (2018) on the affective bonds of Facebook and fear of disengagement is one example of emerging work in this area; or Syvertsen (2020) on the politics of disconnection from pervasive and invasive media. Another is that of Keinonen et al (2018: 74) who consider reality talent shows in several European countries, noting that media industries have tended to ‘ignore the reasons and ways in which audiences resist engagement.’ Disengagement is a means of interpreting how citizens and audiences distance themselves from politics and popular culture on a regular basis, sometimes due to the simple fact that there isn’t enough time in the day and they need to make room for other content and experiences, but also due to disaffection and even anger with an ideology, a political party, or an entertainment brand.

A meaning of engagement as a spectrum of phenomena illuminates the myriad ways people engage and disengage with the media, and how this differs from person to person, or group to group, across varying political and popular cultural spheres. This enables us to understand the value and meaning of engagement as something played out in the contexts of political and cultural institutions, media and creative industries.

## **Analyzing Media Engagement: Five Parameters**

From this overarching discussion on our definition of media engagement we now turn to developing a toolbox that can help orient its empirical investigation. Our notion of engagement as a nexus informs the specific parameters of media engagement that we offer below. Each parameter seeks to highlight a definitive attribute about media engagement, offering an angle of approach, yet we assume that the parameters work in conjunction with each other. At the same time, in any specific instance of media engagement, some parameters will probably have greater relevance than others and relate to each other in differing configurations. Our parameters are: media contexts, motivations, modalities, forms, intensities and consequences.

### *1. Media contexts*

Here we have in mind the specific entry points that frame media engagement, as well as key features such as attention factors, pre-existing knowledge, skills and practices in regard to relevant genres, platforms and their logics. The significance of distribution and the global flow of content are important to the contexts of engagement. This includes formal media economies and recognised distribution pathways, such as public service media, official websites for news, or Netflix access in a particular region. This also includes informal media economies and piracy pathways, such as VPNs, friendly sharing of clouds and passwords, and websites such as Encodi with the latest films and TV shows on offer without windowing or regional barriers (see Lobato and Thomas, 2015).

The place and time of media engagement is significant. There is the location of a media production, such as a studio or outside event for television news, or the private home of an internet celebrity and their daily vlogs. The place in which we engage with content is also significant, including the physical place of our home, or our seat on the train from work, and also the region we live in and our access and social context to engagement. Such attention to the contexts of media engagement allow for transnational media and audiences, where local, regional and global contexts impact on the ways people engage and disengage with media in the spheres of politics and popular culture. Media contexts thus include features at both the sites of production and reception in local, national and transnational settings; today's complex and ever-evolving media landscape, not least in the online world, requires careful attention to understand how specific contexts impact on engagement. The time of media engagement matters, whether engagement is occurring with live news coverage, or a current social protest, or through catchup services and archival content on streaming platforms. The context of time connects with intensities in the parameters of media engagement.

Finally, we must also take into account what might be termed 'meta-contexts' – structural contingencies that make possible as well as delimit media engagement. On a highly meta-level, we highlight in the political sphere the emergence of what is sometimes called 'post-truth' (which was the Oxford English Dictionary named the word of the year in 2016). Strongly associated with the recent rise of radical right-

wing politics in Western democracies, this term signals how emotional appeals are becoming more influential than objective facts in forming public opinion. This is a growing trend, not the total reality, of course, but nonetheless points to an important attribute of what goes on in public spheres. It signals an emerging new epistemic regime, where emotional response prevails over factual evidence and reasoned analysis (Dahlgren, 2018). Accuracy and transparency give way to algorithmic analyses of what appeals to people's affect.

This is clearly a 'dark side' of affect: what is significant here is not just the growing disregard for traditional sources of knowledge, such as science and journalism, but also the role of emotionality in constructing and engaging with the political world. Truth becomes reconfigured as an inner subjective reality, an affective leap; the emotionally attractive becomes the foundation for validity claims about reality. Affect can lead people to find short-cuts to deal with the massive amounts of information that confront them; the role of the cognitive in political engagement becomes further reduced. Moreover, the gravitational pull of group identity reduces societal insecurity and promotes emotionality. Yet in the long run this becomes debilitating for the individual, it fosters cognitive closure of groups, and ultimately damages the critical role of public spheres.

From another angle we would theorize about society-wide hegemonic discourses, prevailing political climates, or economic constrictions. In our view the most compelling analytic frame is the critique of neoliberalism, i.e. the fundamentalist view that places market forces and commercial logic in the driver's seat of societal development, side-lining democratic accountability and concerns for the common good. Emerging ideationally between the world wars, becoming fully embodied in policies in the West during the 1980s, it today also reaches not just globally but also into the micro-meshes of everyday life (see Peck, 2010; Harvey, 2007, for insightful histories). The marketization of most values and practices has profound bearing on all facets of the social world, from democracy (Brown, 2015), and cultural policy (McGuigan, 2016) to not least the media themselves (Phelan, 2014). Neoliberalism, as the contemporary historical phase of capitalism, is processual – like media engagement itself (Dawes and Lenormand, 2020). Thus, elucidating the lines of impact of this meta-context requires detailed analysis, and involves critical reflection

on (often less visible) power relations; the notion of ‘the political’ remains ever potentially relevant.

## **2. Motivations**

This refers to the intentionality behind the engagement. All human action has some sort of intentionality behind it, even if this resides at an unconscious level. The subjective predispositions behind and/or evoked by engagement offer another significant parameter of analysis. It need not be psychologistic or reductionist in its approach, but can rather search for patterns of motivations and perceptions that are socially situated and specific to various categories of actors. Unravelling them from each other and tracking down their social origins may at times be a challenge, but the effort can tell us important things about the contingencies of engagement.

An analysis on the motivations behind media engagement takes into account interest, from basic curiosity to a drive for knowledge that draws upon reason and rationality (Dahlgren, 2013). For example, the motivations for engaging with a documentary about memory and genocide may arise from an interest in human rights, and a drive for better understanding of trauma, or information on amnesty. The motivations to engage with such a documentary shape the modes of engagement for such a genre, both in terms of the crafting of engagement by the filmmakers and how audiences actually engage with documentary (Hill et al, 2019). Other motivations behind engagement can take into account pleasure, such as relaxation, escapism, romance, or eroticism, which draws upon affect and emotionality. For example, the motivations for engaging with crime drama may arise from an interest in the genre, a particular writer or performer, and a love of solving the puzzle of crime, thus connecting the genre and storytelling with a prior knowledge of and interest in this kind of drama experience (Turnbull, 2014).

Another motivation relates to socialities that tell us something about the ways we are members of various communities, groups, and networks. This can connect the reasons for engaging with factuality or fictionality in television content, for example, with peer recommendations, or a sense of belonging in fan communities. Two further motivations include efficacy, relating to a confidence in one’s ability and a



sense that engagement can be successfully enacted. For example, in relation to political comedy, research suggests audiences need to feel confident in their ability to understand real world politics in order to get the humour, interlinking the motivation to engage with a pre-requisite of news and genre knowledge for satire (see Doona, 2018).

There is also the issue of duty where motivation has to do with a sense of obligation or solidarity, some kind of social value that resides beyond the self. For example with regard to news, citizens feel a duty to engage with real world events, but at the same time may feel a lack of efficacy in judging what news they can trust to present facts in ways they can understand. Thus, empirically we would try to illuminate how constraints and opportunities impact on each of these subjective grounds of engagement. Certainly, elucidating the motivations of citizens and audiences will enable an understanding of where engagement is coming from (industry, genre, narrative, settings, for example) and where it may have an impact on our lived realities (politics, society, communities of viewers, for example).

### **3. Modalities**

This points to the communicative character of that on which the engagement builds. One can foresee an extensive inventory of modalities but for starters it can be useful to make a simplistic duality of what is in fact a complex amalgam: referring to the discussion above, we can consider affective and cognitive modes of engagement. An affective mode of engagement builds upon the affective structures within a genre, particular narrative, or a live event, where through the crafting of engagement we are invited to engage with subjective and emotional issues, personae and characters, or moral dilemmas. Thus, the mood of a live experience will impact on the affective mode of engagement of the crowd; for a memorial the crowd may feel sad and be moved to tears, for a political rally the crowd may feel outrage and be moved by anger. Affective engagement is used to great effect in storytelling, inviting a range of emotions, from love, to hate, to indifference, with characters and settings.

Cognitive engagement is a mode that invites more critical thinking, perhaps drawing on the knowledge of citizens to cognitively engage with a political issue, or to ask

tough questions of a politician and their claims with regard to the environment, say, or public education. Thus, a cognitive mode of engagement can be crafted by producers to invite citizens and audiences to think through the media about a variety of social, political, and moral issues, or to understand more about a particular problem, reflect on the implications of the problem, and to potentially do something about it. Affective and cognitive modes of engagement are often intertwined, increasingly so with the use of artificial intelligence in digital media. They work together in people's experiences of media, at times with a clear invitation to engage with the head and/or the heart, at other times in ambiguous ways that mix these modes of engagement, generating a challenging, or ambivalent, media experience.

Modality is often related to form, such as genres, style and themes, visual and sound engagement, or physical and sensory engagement. Ways of engaging with fictional genres, like comedy or melodrama will shape our overall experience, drawing on genre knowledge about characters and storylines, relying on skills with regard to character identification; for example, typical narrative tropes, or transmedia storyworlds (Evans, 2019). Engaging with news, or documentary, relies on a different set of skills and genre knowledge, including referential integrity, assessing truth claims, and assessing factual evidence. Genre, then, is a key mode of engagement for much media content. We only have to look at mixed genres to understand how vital this is to shifting modalities of engagement; what is fake news and how ought we to affectively and cognitively engage with it?

For certain texts and artefacts sound engagement will be vital, such as Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) YouTube videos where soft sounds like whispering or tapping invite sensory modes of engagement. Other texts and artefacts draw on the primacy of the visual, asking us to read visual representations, such as the use of colour and national flags in a political campaign. We ought to be alert to the mixing of sound and visual engagement in the affective structures of content and the cognitive skills we apply to reading the visual and listening to sound. The way content moves us also includes our physical reactions, and a vital modality of engagement is that of the physical body, including the physicality of performances, the tactile ways stories are told, and the physical responses of people when engaging

with the media (see Hill, 2018 for further research on audience engagement and genre).

Thus, we have genre-based modalities of engagement, including varying styles in fiction and factuality, with a multitude of themes, and we also have multi-medial, visual, aural, textual variants within and across these forms. The truly interesting cases will of course be those that use mixed forms and mixed modes of engagement, and will require further empirical and theoretic development. The cognitive and affective dimensions that are embedded in text, or text plus sound, or text plus other visuals, plus sound and movement, and so on, may not be easily ascertained, but even if we may not fully disentangle the various modes of media engagement, our efforts can nonetheless be illuminating. Indeed, being attuned to mixed modes of engagement is perhaps one of the biggest challenges in researching media experiences and raises issues about multi-site and multi-methods for media and cultural studies.

#### 4. *Intensities*

How long the particular experience of engagement is sustained is of considerable significance, yet this aspect is often ignored. Intensities of engagement leads us to consider what John Corner calls *stages* (2011; 2017) of engagement, modelled with a continuum, subjective dimensions and time scales. This comprises both subjective elements of experience, as well as observable factors of usage and involvement. Stages can be conceived in terms of short form engagement, the kind of fleeting engagement that can happen for bite-sized content, paratexts and ephemeral media. For example, short, intense periods of binge watching crime drama can happen during a moment in one's life, perhaps during the break-up of a relationship, illness and rehabilitation, and then it can be over. We can characterise this as an intense engagement with a genre and cultural artefact, an energising force in everyday life that can become part of the life histories of an individual or collective group of fans.

There are also more sustained ways of engaging with media, where there are deeper connections that involve embedding particular media experiences into the spaces and places of regular routines, family rituals and cultural memories. This kind of intense

engagement can occur over a longer period of time, an embedded engagement in the life course of an individual or collective group (Hill, 2018). For example, football supporters can remain loyal in their engagement with a team over the course of their lifetime; this is an embedded engagement that becomes part of the identity and everyday practices of an individual or collective group of supporters for a long duration, sometimes passed on within families to future generations. Indeed our time bonds with media are vital to engagement, impacting on the duration and affective dimensions of engagement.

Some of the most intense experiences we have with media are in the past, embedded in our memory and linked to what Keightley and Pickering (2012) call the mnemonic imagination. For example, the fact that the comedy series *Friends* is the most watched series on Netflix tells us something about the significance of archival content on streaming services, the time we give for watching this comedy in our daily lives, and the time period of the comedy in the 1990s, tapping into trends in nostalgia, and the bond we form with the show, curled up on the sofa for a date with the convivial world of *Friends*. In other cases, the intensity of our engagement with media as connected to memory cultures is a site of contestation. For example, the creative production of drama documentaries can offer a performance of remembering that challenges official state-sanctioned histories, or calls for social justice and greater transparency in the criminal justice system, such as the *Chernobyl* (2019) series on HBO and related podcast, or *When They See Us* (2019) and the related Oprah Winfrey televised special on Netflix. We can see how intensities of engagement are strongly connected to temporal relations with media and memory cultures.

## 5. Consequences

This points to the upshot and implications of the particular instance of engagement. Clearly, consequences can be specific to relevant groups, e.g. engaged citizens, TV series viewers, media industry actors, etc. But further, consequences may or may not relate to possible pre-existing goals of engagement. Also, analyses must take into account the dimension of explicit agency manifested on the part of those who have become engaged. The consequences of engagement can take many forms – from a sense of empowerment, to the experience of pleasure, to the attainment of

satisfactory audience statistics for media organizations. We are aware that the consequences to engagement are not necessarily positive.

As Corner (2017: 5) notes, ‘dis-engagement has been seen for some time as a prevalent social problem...and 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.’ There are urgent reasons in the current media landscape for analysing both positive and negative engagement, and what we perceive as the intentional and unintentional consequences of political and cultural engagement.

## **The Case of Populism and Professional Wrestling**

In this final section, we offer a brief analysis of populism in professional wrestling in order to address the five parameters of media engagement across political and cultural spheres. We consider how professional wrestlers shape the affective structure of a live match through a spectrum of engagement that invites their audiences and fans to passionately engage in positive and negative ways with contemporary political culture and the rise of populism in Europe. Here, the sense of engagement as a nexus of relations is vital to understanding the connections between the political context of populism and the cultural context of professional wrestling; we will see how certain weight can be given to particular parameters of engagement, with strong ties for context, modalities and intensities of engagement that shape the motivations and consequences of engagement. This has implications for how we analyse this case as a means of seeing the energising internal force of engagement in the moment of a live media event, a raw and powerful modality in popular culture that is a counterweight to real world political participation and the contexts of neoliberalism.

### ***Populist Tensions***

‘Populism’ is a complex and contested concept, and it is sometimes used more in a pejorative rather than analytic manner. Though a difficult signifier to stabilize, it is

unavoidable in today's political world. In principle, populism can be politically on the left or the right, but in today's Europe, it is largely right-wing populism that is robustly on the march, often with an extremist profile. (Our view in general aligns itself with the work of such authors as Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Müller, 2016; Urninati, 2019. In particular we find Canovan's [1981] emphasis on the notion of 'the people' to be a useful anchoring.)

Canovan (1981) reminds us of a built-in force-field at the core of liberal democracy, two strands that are basically incompatible with each other yet also mutually entangled, complementing each other in convoluted ways. In simplified terms, on the one side there is an agenda that insists on popular sovereignty, 'power to the people' and government by, for and of the people. Confronting that is the other strand, that of liberal constitutionalism. Traditionally it has sought, via complicated institutions, laws, and practices, to maintain safeguards, checks and balances in the democratic system. At the same time it has served to maintain power elites and to modify the direct political impact of 'the people' through various mechanisms of exclusion. These practices inevitably foster social resentment, which can – and at times does – turn political.

Populists fail to appreciate the necessity for constitutional limits on direct democracy. At the same time they often (and with justification) react against seemingly impenetrable and unresponsive institutions and entrenched hierarchy. The constitutionalists, on the other hand, often fail to reflect on where the grounds of their authority ultimately derive from – i.e. 'the people', or more accurately, segments of it – are often dismissed precisely as 'populist'.

Much of this is being played out in the current neoliberal context, and the rise of populism must be seen in part as a response to liberal democracy's failure to deliver on its societal vision. Thus, populists will claim that they represent 'the people' – appealing often to a sense of collective identity perceived to be under threat – while in fact they usually only have the support of a fraction. Moreover, they veer towards authoritarianism, and generally reject pluralism, often in xenophobic and racist terms – thereby excluding many from their notion of 'the people'. Constitutionalists – usually embodied in the political, economic, and legal elites, and mainstream media – claim the prevailing order is the best arrangement for 'the people'. Yet at the same

time this order is also serving to deepen social divisions and deprivations. We need to keep this tension in mind, and avoid reductionist views such as ‘liberal’ (good) vs ‘populist’ (bad).

### ***Carnevalesque Wrestling***

As Castleberry et al (2018) note, professional wrestling can invert real world issues, using the carnivalesque to process the political in athletic performances. The research in this section explores wrestling and European politics, drawing on qualitative semi-structured interviews with professional wrestlers, videos of matches, and participant observations of live matches. In particular, the example of Marcus Shilling’s performance as Marcus of Man, with a Brexit storyline, exemplifies the spectrum of engagement where an explicitly political storyline is used to deliberately invite intense negative engagement from the live audience towards a right wing political persona.

Shilling is a British citizen who has made his home in Sweden. He joined Stockholm Wrestling (S’THLM) and, working with the company, created a ‘stereotypical English character, arrogant with no redeemable qualities’ (Shilling, 2018a). Marcus of Man is a persona based on his homeland of the Isle of Man and channelling the conventional traits of an upper class politician: elitist, egotistical, right wing, pro-royalty and power hungry. He is also very vain about his hair, a sign of his strength and weakness, referencing both classical mythology (think of Samson whose great physical strength was connected to his long hair) and celebrity politicians (think of the American President Donald Trump or British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and their distinctive hairstyles). The contest and motivations of engagement mix the professional wrestling industry and its commercial considerations with the character development of Marcus of Man, a villain who allows this professional wrestler to perform the part of a heel.

The context, and indeed meta-context, of engagement provides the real world backdrop to the character, and its broader storyline, thus shaping the modes of engagement from the live crowds. In terms of the meta-context of neoliberalism and European politics, Shilling and other professional wrestlers used the backdrop of rhetoric regarding free movement for migrants to shape the storytelling. The specific

political context of the referendum in which Britain voted to leave the European Union became a rich narrative vein for his character: ‘when Brexit happened I thought I could run with that all the way’ (Shilling, 2018a). As a former Celtic community and Viking stronghold, the Isle of Man is a self-governing crown dependency, similar to the island of Jersey. Although not part of the EU or the United Kingdom, its inhabitants are British citizens with limited rights. They – as a particular category of ‘the people’ – could not vote in the referendum and yet have been caught up in the outcome. Shilling incorporated the Brexit campaign into his performance: ‘I get the crowd to chant Brexit! Brexit! I have a chair with ‘Hard Brexit’ written on it. I have this move called Breakneck Brexit’ (Shilling, 2018a). In such a way, Shilling channels his own feelings of political disempowerment, using his lack of voice in one political setting as a narrative strategy for recognising power inequality and social injustice in a more overtly theatrical setting. For the audience, this interfaces with their motivations – these have obviously to do with pleasure, but also their political dispositions and even possible anger at the political contexts of Brexit and the rise of populism in Europe.

The live context and the theatrical space of the wrestling ring are vital. The live experience ensures a visceral and intense engagement from the crowd, one where physicality and spectacle are part of the event. The modality of affect is clearly overwhelming. Yet this also connects with politics and the news, where what is happening in British and Swedish politics is incorporated into the live performances. Shilling plays this heel in tandem with other wrestlers who also perform characters in the fictional populist party ‘Partiet’. With their menacing moves, dark blue arm bands (a conscious colour choice), and grab for power, their political drama parodies the right-wing Swedish Democrats who have been gaining votes and power in Sweden over the past few years. In the recent general election in the autumn of 2018, there was a deadlock in the number of votes, which has resulted in an uncertain future, with various factions refusing to work together, or join forces against this extreme right-wing party. STHLM Wrestling staged a live event around the time of the election with Partiet as a running element of the storyline during the evening.

Clearly the parallel contexts of the spectacle of the political in the ring, and the Brexit referendum, or the general election in Sweden, taking place at a similar moment in



time operate as a stark contrast, creating a form of cultural engagement that is different from the political reality of its live audience. The persona of Marcus of Man is explicitly political, and his fans love to hate him. Shilling spends time on the details of his character – his physical appearance, the way he enters the ring and speaks to the crowd, etc. – in order to build up negative emotional engagement. Here we see the modalities and forms of engagement are vital to this political storyline in professional wrestling. He wants his fans to feel outraged at the abuse of power. He achieves this outcome with verbal cues and physical props: ‘I refuse to speak Swedish. When I come out I look very arrogant, looking down at people, literally I look down my nose’ (Shilling, 2018c). The theatrical elements of his engagement profile are centre stage: ‘One time I sang my national anthem from the Isle of Man, I just took the microphone and started singing the anthem out of tune and it got a wonderful cacophony of boos from the audience’ (Shilling, 2018c). Note how the performance, singing, acting, and physicality, mix together in this characterisation of Marcus of Man. Such performance styles invite mixed modes of engagement, where affective engagement and an intensity of passionate energy shape the live experience. The basic form of the event – professional wrestling, with its (often comic and satirical) dramaturgy and caricatured roles of the antagonists – prefigures much of the engagement, while Marcus of Man and his audience add the particular political dimensions that distinguish his and the audience’s performance and add to the overall intensity of the live experience.

The Breakneck Brexit storyline includes an understanding of the parameters of engagement where the context of politics and popular culture shape the modes and intensities of audience engagement:

I know the crowd at the live matches in Stockholm are intelligent, liberal, in the mid-20s and 30s. It works well with them, they want to be in on the joke, they have more hate in them since Brexit. I push their buttons, play on fears of losing their Swedish identity, being influenced by Britain or America (Shilling 2018c).

Shilling knows how to generate such negative engagement from the crowd as fuel for his character and other wrestlers in the ring. It is clear to Shilling that his performance is part of a ‘visual representation of political culture’ (2018c). He

explains: 'If I am holding someone down or choking someone it can be a metaphor for choking out smaller countries or disempowering people, it can be a visual representation of political reality' (Shilling, 2018c).

With a character such as Marcus of Man, and the Partiet political storyline, nationalism and xenophobia are used to trigger intense negative engagement with populism. His persona channels the exaggerated rhetoric of right-wing politicians. He makes unfounded claims, spouts untruths about the benefits of breaking with the European Union, and effects a politics of blame on migrants, or socialism, for the decline of Great Britain. His representation of populism embraces the more absurd or surreal elements of political culture. Marcus of Man is a ridiculous character. His ego and arrogance crowd the ring, taking all the performance space, grabbing the microphone from the MC to shout the loudest and making a show of forcing his political opinions to be heard. By using the symbolic power of political comedy, Shilling presents his character as an object for ridicule. Marcus of Man is a despicable persona, whose performance demonstrates that populist rhetoric and right-wing politicians ought to be exposed and liberal democratic values defended in the current charged environment. In this, the parallel between the UK and Sweden is made visible in the form of a British-identified political persona in the fictional Partiet as a warning of what can happen when populism is given power and voice in democratic processes. Shilling's performance of Breakneck Brexit exploits and critiques the way the referendum to remain or leave the European Union has led to political mess and a crisis in British politics and society with long-term repercussions. What is also made visible is that Swedish socialism faces a similar threat from extreme right-wing groups who at present are denied recognition in national governance. As played out in the wrestlers' arena, the Partiet storyline shows how right-wing personas can be overcome, a visual representation of the choking out of populism, with the stark reminder that this is not the case in political reality.

Thus we see the various consequences of engagement for this case. There is of course the explicit consequences for returning fans and audiences, where the long-running political storyline of Marcus of Man and Partiet is a soap opera which has cliff-hangers that draw crowds back for more, thus ensuring engagement over a period of time and one which has commercial impact for the event company and the

professionals in the ring. There is no explicit outcome of political engagement; this is a theatrical spectacle after all. However there are implicit consequences that suggest broader social issues and spaces for reflection on political culture. Former wrestler and event manager Dan Ahtola notes: ‘politics is moving closer to wrestling’ in its spectacle of excess, the focus on emotions and the way politicians play assigned roles in seemingly intractable conflicts (2018). In such a political environment, the affective climate of live professional wrestling offers a space for political expression: ‘you are venting all the disappointment and anger. Everyone is frustrated, everyone is stressed, everyone is disappointed’ (Ahtola, 2018). As Ahtola notes, with a clear engagement profile ‘everyone knows what to do, you can express strong emotions that you are not allowed to do in everyday life. You don’t have to think, you know what to do’ (2018). Whilst modern-day politics is messy and full of conflicting emotions and opinions, the power of professional wrestling is that its theatricality and physicality work in ways that (at least potentially) serve to channel negative emotions and transform them into positive experiences. According to Ahtola, anger is not a form of expression that is encouraged in Swedish social life: ‘Where can you go and scream in anger? You focus anger in this direction. It is better to be angry than miserable, miserable stays inside you, anger you vent. I think you can act, as an audience you play a part and get into character. When you express yourself you show who you are’ (2018). In this case, liberal democracy triumphs: ‘The difference is that in wrestling the bad guy is always beaten. You create a conflict and then actually solve it. You win because you are in the right. This is something we do not see in politics’ (Ahtola, 2018).

## **Conclusion**

Our argument about the parameters of media engagement draws upon various scholarly research within political and social theory, media and cultural studies, which sees engagement ‘within a larger range of psychological orientations to the world and to the artefacts within it’ (Corner, 2017: 4). Media industry discourses of engagement fix engagement in time and space in the form of metrics or social media analytics, perhaps the most common means for capturing engagement behaviours. But, such a reductive meaning of the term misses the power of engagement as an energising

internal force. We argue for a definition of engagement that takes into account affective experience and sees engagement as a resource for living (Corner, 2017: 5).

The five parameters of engagement mapped in this article are a means to highlight engagement as a nexus of relations, offering empirical ports of entry for researching concrete manifestations of the phenomenon. The fact that the relative salience of each parameter is likely to vary from case to case also alerts us to the importance of being sensitive to context and contingencies in our analyses. Researching media engagement may well involve keeping several balls in the air at the same time, but such arduous conceptual and empirical juggling has the potential to elucidate it in ever new and significant ways. We suggest that to be engaged with the media means more than being taken up with, diverted by, or reactive to a cultural artefact or event. Engaging with the media, in the context of politics, society and culture is a significant psychological investment in something or someone that matters in that moment and/or over a longer period of time. This is why engagement matters; it tells us about the connections across reason and rationality, affect and emotion, and why people connect or disconnect with politics and popular culture.

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