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# Designing for deeper audience engagement panel.

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# Designing for Deep Audience Engagement

'Scholars meet practitioners' session proposal

The notion of engagement has evolved from the embodiment of civic involvement and political participation to a measurement of interactivity with digital journalistic products and a key performance indicator. This development, which we believe is far too reductionist (Steenen, Ferrer-Conill, and Peters, 2020) has its roots in the industry and it is closely followed by journalism studies scholarship. The proposed session seeks to challenge this perspective by problematizing and expanding the concept of “deep audience engagement”, examining its dimensions and impact potential, and finding avenues for scholars and journalism practitioners working together towards more meaningful and relational engagement. To do so, this panel aims to foster a dialogue between journalism practitioners and academics in our shared goal to better understand, and improve, the relationship between journalism and audiences (and also between journalism research and practice).

This session will focus on the changing dynamics between journalists and audiences, and particularly how journalism design and other audience-centered engagement practices shape this relationship. The proposed presentations have been written collaboratively by teams of academics and practitioners to reflect pressing academic and industry concerns related to audience engagement and will be followed by a joint discussion encompassing both perspectives. The panel considers four themes: 1) the challenges with metrics-oriented engagement evaluations (Nelson, 2018), 2) the potentials and problems with interactivity (van der Nat, Bakker & Müller, 2021), 3) the tensions between audience-centered engagement strategies and traditional journalistic norms (Vos & Perreault, 2020), and 4) the balance between participation and engagement (Lawrence, Radcliffe & Schmidt, 2017). Each themed presentation will be delivered by a practitioner and an academic, while the other contributors to the theme will participate in the subsequent discussion.

The session's ultimate objective is to put forward a practice-based research agenda that is mutually beneficial to journalism research, practice, and indeed, audiences and the wider public.

## List of participants:

*Anonymous | Decât o Revistă, Romania*

*Anonymous | University of Stirling, Scotland, UK*

*Anonymous | Södertörn University, Sweden*

*Anonymous | Northwestern University, Qatar*

*Anonymous | University of Stavanger, Norway; Karlstad University, Sweden*

*Anonymous | Bureau Local, UK*

*Anonymous | Wall Street Journal, UK/US*

*Anonymous | University of Applied Sciences Utrecht, the Netherlands*

*Anonymous | Utrecht School of the Arts, the Netherlands*

*Anonymous | Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway*

## **Moving past the metrics: The politics of assessing engagement through technical-behavioral parameters**

In the last decade, news media has adopted audience engagement as a new form of symbolic currency. But despite its apparent power and the continued onslaught for more engagement, few practitioners and academics truly understand how to accurately measure and assess engagement. This is, we argue, because the industry has followed the trend of measuring engagement primarily through metrics that capture the audience's behavior. News organizations seem to operate under the impression that more interactivity designed into narratives will unequivocally lead to more and deeper audience engagement.

This discussion challenges the technical closed systems of engagement evaluation used in newsrooms (such as A/B testing and advanced behavioral metrics), and we argue that the affordances on these systems are shaping the design itself. Alternatively, we propose methods for the evaluation of audience engagement that include the audience to avoid basing the design process on an imagined audience.

## **(Beyond) interactive design: Relational, experiential, and transformative potential of new journalism form(at)s**

Interactivity remains a thorny concept in journalism practice and research. Originally hailed for its promise of empowering audiences by giving them more agency, interactivity has recently experienced a period of disenchantment for failing to deliver on that early promise. Consequently, there is growing reluctance in newsrooms to create complex, open, exploratory informational experiences due to low engagement, resource pressures, and the need to design at scale. We argue that, for the potential of interactive narrative design to be harnessed, we need to problematize the concept of interactivity and its role in the journalist-audience relationship. How much agency is it right to afford journalism audiences?

This presentation revisits definitions and dimensions of interactivity by exploring three cases of interactive experiences: 1) highly exploratory narratives (using game design mechanics), 2) explanatory, minimalistic formats (modular journalism), and 3) forms of engagement that go beyond the story interface (open newsrooms, story circles) where interaction happens at the community level.

## **The case for audience-centered news products: Finding the balance between designing for engagement and journalistic principles**

A holistic, user-centered approach towards 'news products' leads naturally into designing with the audiences' emotions and motivation in mind: What are we trying to make readers feel at each stage of their 'experience' with this piece of journalism? What motivates them to continue until the end?

Placing the audience first, however, often lies in conflict with traditional approaches to journalism. On one hand, writers and editors of long-form journalism have long considered the 'arc' of a story, its momentum, and its cadence. On the other hand, most journalists would balk at the idea that they are emotionally manipulating their readers instead of just 'presenting the facts' in an 'objective' manner. In this presentation we outline how design-centric strands of journalism such as newsgames, speculative journalism, or solutions journalism increase the tension between new forms of engagement and traditional journalism norms.

### **The endgame of engagement: Finding the balance in the audience-journalist participation**

As contemporary journalism continues its attempt to maximize audience engagement, there is a challenge of what type of audience engagement is sought, and how that engagement could be assessed. There is a risk of overwhelming the audience and the journalists and pushing people to disengagement. Considering that engagement is a scarce resource, news organizations need to find a balance of what is realistic in the search for deeper audience engagement.

Using longform journalism as a case, this discussion focuses on questions about whether there is too much engagement, or when engagement is deep enough. Is there a sweet spot in which the audience is compelled to participate, and the journalists can cope with such participation? In a media environment in which the norm is to always aspire for more audience engagement, do news organizations have the capacity to deal with such a need?

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