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ENGAGING THE AUDIENCE IN A DIGITISED TELEVISION PRODUCTION PROCESS:

A 'Hierarchy of Influences' Approach

*This article discusses producer practices and the reasons why they engage their audience in the production process. In a digitised media context, audiences have become more visible, mainly through social media, and have more means to participate. Our research deconstructs the production process of a particular television programme by means of the 'hierarchy of influences' model, which separates micro and macro levels that influence production. It draws on in depth interviews with all editors of Flemish current affairs programme *De Afspraak* (The Appointment) and on a three-month participatory observation. We conclude that immersive ways of engaging the audience are applied in our specific case. More broadly, we argue that although practices change, pre-existing norms and values about the television audience remain central to how producers engage their audience through digital and social media.*

KEYWORDS audience; digitisation; engagement; hierarchy of influences model; interviews; participatory observation; producers; television production.

Introduction

This article analyses producer¹ practices and the reasons they engage their audience in the production process. While a digitised media context provides audiences with opportunities to participate in the production process, including (but not solely) through social media, the question remains how professional producers value such ways to engage the audience and how they integrate these in the production process.

Scholarship on participation has discussed the input of audiences, focusing on power questions and the potential democratization of the production process. This contribution aims to capture the various ways in which producers value the role of audiences more fully, starting from the broader concept of engagement. The reasons for engaging the audience are analysed by means of the 'hierarchy of influences' (HOI) model, that was developed and updated by Shoemaker and Reese (1996, 2016), and that deconstructs the production process of (news) content into micro and macro levels, from individuals and routines to organisation and social systems. We argue that this model is well-suited to understand how producers engage audiences in a digitised production culture.

We focus on the genre of current affairs programmes, which go beyond factual news to provide interpretation, i.e. provide constructed representations, giving added relevance to a study of its production process (Hall, Connell, and Curti 2007). We study this by means of a case study, examining producer-audience relationships in a specific current affairs programme developed in the context of public service media, which have the explicit duty to inform and to play a key role in digitisation processes and in engaging audiences in the digital media age (Enli 2008). This raises the question how these aims translate into actual audience engagement by producers.

In particular, we analyse Flemish current affairs programme *De Afspraak* (*The Appointment*), which was introduced in 2015 as a flagship of the digital rebranding of Canvas, a channel aimed at audiences looking for 'added value'. It is part of Flemish public service media VRT, catering to the northern, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. VRT's most recent management contract prioritises news and current affairs (Van den Bulck and Donders 2016). In 2015, VRT rebranded Canvas to strengthen its digital profile, resulting in new formats, including *De Afspraak*.

¹ With producers we refer to people working in the production process of television in the broad sense.

This article provides an empirical analysis of the role of audiences in the production process of *De Afspraak* during its first season (October 2015-January 2016). Drawing on in-depth interviews, complemented by participatory observation in the editorial office, we examine how editors deal with the push to digitise their programme through social media, how they engage their audience and the reasons behind these production practices. Building on the HOI model, our analysis focuses on daily practices while taking the broader context into account. While a specific case study of a single programme in a specific genre, broadcasting institution and country emphasises the importance of particular contexts for audience engagement, the framework of the HOI model allows for the identification of structuring mechanisms and logics that have wider significance.

From audience participation to engagement

Research on the role of the audience in a digital media environment often focuses on the concept of audience participation. Over the past decades, this has led to an extensive body of scholarship on participation, which we do not aim to summarise here. Instead, we briefly discuss some of its aspects to explain why this article chooses to further explore the concept of audience engagement.

Audience participation has been defined in various ways, but often considers the democratising potential of digitisation for audiences and the consequential shift of power between producers and audiences (Carpentier and De Cleen 2008). Many scholars argue that digitisation changes the role of audiences, since they can participate more easily online (through social media, blogs, forums, etcetera) which may change the power dynamics between professionals and their audiences, giving the latter a more active role. Rosen (2008) famously appealed to media industry personnel stating that: “The people formerly known as the audience are simply the public made realer, less fictional, more able, less predictable. You should welcome that, media people” (165). For Deuze (2009), this is already happening as he maintains that we live in a new media ecology, where participation, interactivity and co-creation move towards the centre of media production, enabling audiences to be visible.

However, many scholars question whether participation really implies a shift in power, instead arguing that participatory practices mostly confirm producer perspectives (Andrejevic 2009; Carah and Louw 2015; Hermes 2013; Turner 2010). Thus, Coleman and Ross (2010) maintain that in a digitised context audiences remains highly managed and controlled by producers. Peters and Witschge (2015) even object to link participation to democracy, as participation is centered around individual possibilities instead of collective democratic functions that have always been important in journalism.

Based on empirical findings, production and newsroom studies add that participation is hardly a central concept to producers, certainly not in a manner that increases democratic possibilities and shifts in power balance. In this regard, Usher (2014) observes: “When journalists heard the message about participation, they translated this as a practical imperative to be on social networks, but they did not, for the most part, take part in a genuine conversation with their audience” (188). In these cases, participation tends to become normalised to fit into existing logics without real audience interaction. Likewise, Domingo (2008) and Hermida and Thurman (2007) conclude that journalists are aware of ideals of audience interaction and participation, but are cautious in implementing participation in practice because of their deeply engrained professional culture, including organisational structures, working routines and ideals such as immediacy: “The fact that interactivity is counter-intuitive with the principles of traditional journalistic culture, tended to diminish the willingness to explore audience participation” (698). Heise et al. (2014) add that producers are not negative towards participation per se, but that producers and audiences agree on the key importance of traditional journalistic tasks and requirements. Interestingly, while policy analysis (Enli 2008) shows that public service media emphasise active audience participation,

there are no indications that this results in a more open or diverse response to audience engagement by public service producers.

To more fully capture producer practices and their reasons to involve the audience in the production process, this article explores the notion of engagement instead of participation, as the latter term seems too narrow and too strongly related to power questions to grasp the various ways in which producers value audience input. Moreover, as indicated above participation hardly seems to be a central concept to producers. However, this does not have to imply that they exclude the audience from the production process. Heinonen (2011) explains that producers value engagement which does not require a shift in control: “Professionals are simultaneously encouraging users to engage in as many ways as possible with their news sites *and* holding the hard core of news production as sanctuary of professionalism” (53). A focus on engagement allows us to study all audience activities in the production process, not only those considered participatory.

Even though ours is a production study, recent studies into engagement from an audience perspective offer useful insights to define the concept. Drawing on Evans (2016), we start from a broad conceptualisation of engagement that is threefold. “Immersive engagement” is an “intense focus on a text” (13), which includes watching a television programme or Facebook post and feeling engaged with the content. Barnes (2016) emphasises the need to acknowledge the ‘silent majority’ of the audience, who feel engaged but do not visibly provide input. She explains they are often ignored in studies, but that the ability to participate is as important as actual participation. “Interactive engagement” is a direct response to the content, such as sharing content on Facebook posted by a television programme or participating in a discussion initiated by producers. “Para-active engagement”, finally, implies engagement related to a television programme, “activities that happen *around* the content rather than in direct relation to it” (Evans, 13). Examples of this are scrolling through audience comments on Facebook and perhaps adding or ‘liking’ a comment or visiting a related event.

Based on this triple distinction, participation is a particular way of interactive and para-active engagement in which a shift in control occurs as part of a broader range of ways in which producers can engage audiences. However, it is hard to distinguish engagement from participation in existing writing on the topic, because a narrow concept of engagement, e.g. political engagement, also discusses issues of power and democracy in media (Dahlgren 2009; Livingstone 2005) or concentrates on visible activities (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013; van Dijck and Poell 2015). This article aims to apply the definition of engagement as developed in audience studies in a production study. Looking more closely into the reasons why producers assign certain roles to audiences, it appears that few studies apply the concept of engagement. However, useful insights can be obtained from studies that analyse how producers digitise their production process. Both media studies (Müller 2009; Spigel 2006) and journalism studies (Heinonen 2011; Paulussen 2016) emphasise that technological possibilities as such do not provide the key explanation for production practices, whereas social and cultural values concerning technological possibilities have a stronger explanatory power. For instance, O’Sullivan and Heinonen (2008) surveyed journalists in eleven European countries and found the importance of social and cultural values among journalists. Journalists are often enthusiastic about using digital opportunities and interacting with the audience, as long as it adds to their current role as a journalist. They are hesitant to change conventional norms and values and to reconsider the status of their profession. Ryfe’s (2012) ethnographic fieldwork similarly shows that journalists are reluctant to change their current practices and role perceptions because these are valued and have been chosen for good reasons.

What seems to be important are the goals that producers have in mind when engaging audiences, which may differ between commercial and public service media but also within public service media (Van Dijck and Poell 2015). Brants and De Haan (2010) distinguish

three ideal-typical categories of response. With “civic responsiveness”, producers aim to listen to ideas and interests of the public “to bridge the gap with the public” (416), which is most closely linked to the democratising ideal of participation. “Strategic responsiveness” has a commercial goal to tie the audience to the programme as consumers, whereas “empathic responsiveness” aims for bonding with the public, which often results in a populist tone in the programme’s content. Brants and De Haan (2010) emphasise that these ideal-typical categories overlap in actual production processes and that more approaches may exist. Nevertheless, they rightfully point out that not all producers have the same goal and approach, resulting in the question if and how these goals develop with the digitisation of the production process (Van Dijk and Poell 2015).

~~Most practitioners’ approaches towards digitization are based in common sense norms and values in the production culture. Havens and Lotz (2012) describe how these can become ‘industry lores’, particular ways of ‘common sense’ thinking in the industry that are based on former experiences, best practices and expectations. Among these are ways in which producers think about engaging the audience. Such ‘common sense’ thoughts are hard to change, even if they turn out to be wrong (Havens and Lotz 2012). This is confounded by the fact that Industry lores are often integrated in routines, which are necessary for an efficient workflow but at the same time potentially blind to the need for changes and improvements (Born 2000; Cottle 2003).~~

The ‘Hierarchy of Influences’ Model

To better understand how and why producers engage audiences in a digital production context, this article studies the production process from within, as a form of culture. As far back as the 1970s, Cantor (1971), among others, studied how television producers were positioned within a culture. The production of media such as television programmes is not only seen as a process in which a product is made (Schudson 1989), but also as a specific context within which producers work and share certain norms and values (Caldwell 2008; Havens and Lotz 2012; Jensen 1984). As such, the relationship between producers and audiences is not isolated, but functions within a specific context and hierarchies.

Drawing on this tradition, Shoemaker and Reese (1996) developed the ‘hierarchy of influences’ (HOI) model, which attempts to unravel the complexity of the production process by distinguishing five levels in production cultures: the individual, routines, organisation, ‘extra media’ and ideology, which will be explained below. The model is based on Shoemakers work on gatekeeping (1991) and is mostly applied in journalism studies (Bro and Wallberg 2015; Hermida and Thurman 2008). However, in collaboration with Reese (Shoemaker and Reese 1996), it was elaborated to be applicable more widely to the production of media content (e.g. Hanitzsch and Mellado 2011; Reul et al. 2016). Reese (2001) further emphasised the necessity to take into account both micro and macro levels of hierarchical influences to understand journalism in a globalised context. The current article uses that broad interpretation of the model and employs it to better understand audience engagement in production processes.

The pre-internet HOI model has been criticised for failing to capture the dynamics and fluidity of today’s media landscape, as questions about digitisation, convergence and participation are not discussed (e.g. Keith 2011). Recently, Reese and Shoemaker (2016) re-evaluated their model and pointed out its remaining usefulness to understand media production in a networked society. While they agree that technology has become increasingly important and that media are being produced in more hybrid ways, which requires adaptations, they confirm the model’s importance to disentangle the different micro and macro factors at play in media production. They emphasise the dynamic nature of the hierarchies especially in the current media landscape: “The hierarchical model makes it easy to think of power as flowing in one direction, from one level to another, but this need not be

case, as dynamic structures form across levels” (2016, 406). So, even though the levels are explained separately, they are dynamically intertwined.

The lowest micro level considers the relative autonomy of the *individual*. Next to the personal background that may influence the production process, it takes into account how producers perceive their professional role, which is closely related to other levels (Shoemaker and Reese 1996, 2016). At this level, O’Sullivan and Heinonen (2008) and Ryfe (2012) point out how producers value digital possibilities and explore new ways to approach the audience, as long as these confirm their role perceptions. This level involves the study of producers’ individual motivations to engage audiences and, if possible, note differences between them.

The next level is concerned with *routines*, i.e. the repetitive structural practices in a production process, which are not necessarily a matter of conscious decisions (Shoemaker and Reese 1996, 2016). Next to practices, these include “those unstated rules and ritualized enactments that are not always made explicit” (2016, 399). This level involves scrutinizing how engaging the audience is routinised in the production process.

The individual and routines levels are contextualised in the broader level of the *organisation*, to study the wider production culture. This level has become more fluid in contemporary media production, yet it remains important to understand the organisational structures and goals (Reese and Shoemaker 2016). These include the goals for audience responsiveness, as discussed by Brants and De Haan (2010). This level allows analysis of how the role of the audience in a digital context is reflected in the goals and structure of the production company.

Next, the broader context of media in society is a factor, originally called *extra media* (1996) but reconceptualised as the *social institutions level* (2016). This considers the media organisation in relation to everything beyond it, i.e. other media companies and society as a whole (Reese and Shoemaker 2016). It includes policy agreements with government which may collide with production practices (Enli, 2008). For this study, it mainly involves looking at the government agreement between the Flemish public service media institution and government.

Finally, to analyse the macro cultural impact of production, Shoemaker and Reese identified the *ideology* (1996) or *social system level* (2016). It considers how cultural and societal power and expectations in a larger social system play a role in media production. For instance, the social system level questions how a set of journalistic paradigms is maintained within a continuously changing media landscape. In relation to digitised media productions, Hermida and Thurman (2007) and Domingo (2008) explain that audience participation is limited because of this engrained journalistic paradigm, or as O’Sullivan and Heinonen (2008) explain, their social and cultural values. In our study, the social system level allows to analyse how journalists deal with these paradigms while engaging the audience in a digitised media context.

In sum, the HOI model emphasises how the production process is a form of culture, in which different micro and macro levels play a role. While we focus on practices mostly at the routines level, this model allows us to contextualise and explain these within the other levels of the HOI model, i.e. its wider production culture.

Methodology

To get a thorough understanding of the ways in which and reasons why producers engage audiences in a digitizing context, we focus on a particular case – *De Afspraak* – by means of an empirical production study. We used in-depth interviews to gain the interviewee’s point of view and explanations behind production practices (Bryman 2016). These in-depth interviews were contextualised by a participant observation, to get to know the microsocial cultural practices ‘from-the-ground-up’ (Caldwell 2009). This combination allows to take into account what Thomsen (2014) noted in her newsroom study observation: “What people *say* they do could very well differ from what they actually do” (7). This particular mixed methods

approach further gives us a good grasp of the producers' viewpoints and the complexities of the production process (Born 2000).

Interviews were conducted with all fourteen editors of *De Afspraak*, including four editors in chief, nine editors and one intern. They constitute a very young (25-35 years old), highly educated team, holding MA degrees in journalism, linguistics and literature, communication studies, international politics and law. Prior to working on *De Afspraak*, most editors were already working at VRT in various departments, including sports, documentary and news related radio and television programmes. The first interviews covered quite broad topics in order to explore the motivations behind editorial choices such as the new format, the audience, the selection of topics and guests. Follow-up interviews with seven of the editors addressed audience engagement in a digitizing context, the specific topic of this study. The interviews were conducted during the second half of the participant observations in the editorial office, after gaining an understanding of its daily routines and organisation.

Participant observation by the first author of this paper took place from October 2015 until January 2016 in order to see patterns and behaviour over time and to understand the language of communication between producers. Participant observation was set up as a working assignment, as the researcher was introduced in a position similar to an intern, being there to learn as much as possible about the work in the editorial office. This allowed the researcher to immerse herself into the work environment but made it impossible to become completely 'invisible' as a researcher and fully become 'one of them', as all editors were aware of the research project. Field notes were kept on a daily basis but had no pre-described format, comprising of short notes during the day and more reflective elaborate reports afterwards. The latter ranged from reflections on the atmosphere in the office, to notes on the kind of discussions that took place during meetings.

The interviews were transcribed and analysed together with the field notes using qualitative data analysis software NVivo. An open coding and inductive approach was used to search for key topics in the data, to further categorise and analyse the data (Mortelmans 2007). Key topics were: the role of the audience and the use of social media, reasons for engaging the audience, and difficulties during the development phase and first season.

Analysing *De Afspraak*

This analysis explores how producers of public service media current affairs programme *De Afspraak* engage their audience in a digitizing context. First, the goals concerning digitisation of public service institution VRT and the programme are discussed as part of the contextualisation. Then, the production process during the developing stages and the first broadcasting season are examined. Each part goes into the particular type(s) of engagement we identified, referring to the threefold distinction developed by Evans (2016). To further understand the reasons for these types of engagement, the producer goals are examined and their practices are situated within the different HOI levels. The level of routines takes up a central position in our analysis, while the other HOI levels serve to contextualise and explain the different production practices as a culture. Therefore, in the analysis these levels are not discussed separately but intertwined. In the conclusion, the levels are discussed separately to point out how each played a particular role.

At the social institution level lies the relationship between public service media institution VRT and the Flemish government. The goals and aims of VRT are regulated by a five-year management contract. For the period 2016-2020, one of VRT's central strategic goals is to be "future oriented, digital and innovative" (VRT Management Contract 2015, 2). While linear remains crucial (8), VRT must step up the production of online media content (14), give "a more important role to the media user" (29) - who, today, has more alternative venues to actively share content (8, 27) - and "improve audience participation and co-creation" (29). Thus, the management contract aims for both immersive and interactive

engagement, which includes participation. The contract does not elaborate on how these concepts are interpreted and how VRT should do this, but it points out that audience feedback “has the potential of an interesting dialogue between media users and professional media producers” (8).

As a result, at the organisational level, VRT decided to rebrand Canvas, the channel for audiences looking for added value, with an aim to reach a bigger and younger audience and create a strong digital brand (*De Standaard* April 13, 2015). In light of this renewal, the news department developed a range of programmes, of which *De Afspraak* was to be the main current affairs programme. Every week day, *De Afspraak* discusses three current affairs and daily news topics, by means of interviews by a single presenter in the studio, beside a number of short daily reports. The aim is to contribute to a better understanding and a more complex view of news topics, including economics and politics, art, culture and science. *De Afspraak* is broadcast live on tape every weekday evening, without a studio audience. We examine how these ambitious goals formulated at the social institution and organisational level, play out in the daily production practice.

Developing the Format

At the organisational level, Canvas set up an editorial office with people from different existing departments to develop the new current affairs format that would become *De Afspraak*. During the development stage, a web editor from the digital department was to attend the meetings to ensure development of the digital goals. The web editor started out with a wide range of ideas to digitally expand the television programme, yet the time he could invest in *De Afspraak* structurally declined for practical reasons as he was assigned various tasks outside of the programme. Eventually, the web editor’s main task regarding *De Afspraak* was limited to promoting the programme through social media.

However, the editors themselves decided on several experiments with regards to audience input, mainly aimed at creating a feeling of engagement, such as adding a live audience in the studio, but also interactive engagement to collect potentially interesting material to use in the programme, such as showing tweets live during the programme. The outcome of these experiments, combined with previous experiences in similar formats, led editors to the decision not to integrate such audience input. With regards to the HOI model, a main reason behind this decision is situated at the most macro social system level. In the interviews, they emphasised that it is their job to be a journalist, by which they mean to inform people on important and complex topics in society. They referred to their responsibility in the newsroom regarding the way topics and ideas are represented, as this can have an impact on how people think about certain subjects. They find it very important to bring complexity and nuance to a story, despite the limited time frame. At the level of routines, the journalistic values made it difficult for editors to engage the audience directly through participatory practices in the production process:

The newsroom has the assignment to stay neutral and objective. When you let in audience voices directly into your news programmes, I think this would be very difficult. It does not mean that the idea of participation should be thrown away, but we have to think about it really well. I think people are working on it within the VRT, but it is not an evident choice. (Editor 5)

In addition, one of the editors in chief explained that when the editors evaluated how audience input could improve the quality of the programme, they critically scrutinised the surplus value of audience input on television. They decided that in order to interact with the audience, digital platforms and television do not necessarily have to converge:

We used to have the idea that showing tweets is good because that would be interactive. But that kind of... Now we think, when you want to do something digitally, do that on digital platforms and when you want to do something on TV, do that on TV. You should not combine those. (Editor in chief 1)

These rationalisations show that producers value engaging audiences in more participatory ways, but consider it as very difficult to combine with other intrinsic journalistic values. This reflects the social and cultural values of a journalistic paradigm found in previous studies (Muller 2009; Heinonen 2011; O'Sullivan and Heinonen 2008).

This resulted in a production process which, from the start, excluded audiences from interactively engaging at the level of routines. The reasons for this are situated both at the organisational and the social systems level. How then do producers engage their audience during the production process once the programme was broadcast?

Approaching the Digital

During the first few months, editors in the editorial office were highly occupied with producing television content, paying little attention to the associated digital platforms. An editor from the web department took care of publishing marketing content about the programme online. This is remarkable considering the channel's and broadcasters' goal to emphasise digitisation. This gap between objectives and practice is recognised by the television editors, who point out that this has been a structural problem: "It seems to be the ever-lasting story of digitisation. It is very important, but everybody has to do extra work and did not get any education for it. With what result? It stops at 'Oh, we will post another clip on Facebook'. [...] It has been like this for years" (Editor 5). One of the editors in chief explains that the different focus and priorities of the television and web departments cause the problem. The level of organisational structure seems to prevent people with different skills to work together:

In terms of digitisation I think we are far from there, Canvas is not a digital brand yet. We are slowly trying to change that, but both in terms of content and organisation that is still insufficient. The web department mostly focusses on their own content and our priority is the television programme. [...] These are still too much two separate worlds, which will slowly need to come together. It would have been ideal to have a few editors with digital profiles in our editorial office, but that was impossible to organise. (Editor in chief 1)

This gap prevented building a strong digital brand, which was seen as necessary by this editor in chief to gain more information about their audience and to attract a younger audience that no longer watches linear television. To bridge the gap, a few months into production, the editor in chief appointed two editors to set up a social media plan. Even though this choice cannot be separated from the goals towards digitisation at more macro levels of the organisation and government, it mainly results from a decision at the individual level: one editor pushed this initiative despite organisational mind sets and structures with separate departments.

The plan aimed to produce content for social media platforms on a daily basis. As the management contract did not specify how digitisation had to be construed, the editors were able to interpret it as chiefly producing content for social media alongside, but without affecting, television content. A social media plan at the level of routines enabled the editorial office to integrate an enhanced digital approach within the structure of daily practices. It included disseminating content on the programme's Twitter and Facebook pages, introducing programme guests, quoting tweets, and summarizing the programme after it was broadcast with a link to the full episode.

The reasons for designing the social media plan mostly show a strategic goal (Brants and De Haan 2010). The editors want immersive audience engagement with the content of the programme, which ideally results in watching and reading online content and watching the full programme on TV: “People need to be triggered to watch the programme” (Editor 3). The editors feel that the consumption behaviour of part of the audience is changing, which creates the need to strengthen the brand online as well. Related to the HOI model, these reasons are very much reactions upon audience behaviour which, as Keith (2011) argued, does not fit within one of the HOI levels, but goes across.

Nevertheless, one reason to structurally start spending more time on social media was that producers of *De Afspraak* felt they could not stay behind other television programmes that produce content for social media. Indeed, the social media plan was very much based on assumptions about and perceptions of what other television programmes were doing on social media: “I also watched all those American shows, you do not have to reinvent the wheel by yourself. You have to take a look at what others do and look at what works and what doesn’t” (Editor 10). Arguments such as this are mainly concerned with producing extra content for social media platforms that summarizes or complements the broadcasted programme.

As the first season progressed, some editors perceived the plan as an opportunity to further develop the production of social media into offering unique online content, to expand the space to tell a story. However, production of additional content was obstructed by practical limitations such as insufficient staff, the television mind set of staff, and a lack of technological skills: “It would be nice to offer stories in another way, but that is an ambitious plan, because we are not getting extra people to do that” (Editor 4).

In addition, there were some initiatives to engage the audience in an interactive way through direct questions or polls on Facebook. The editors initiated this to make the audience feel attached and to get a sense of the popularity of a topic, which is in line with the strategic approach they already had (Brants and De Haan 2010). Still, it was difficult to combine such initiatives with the production of the television programme:

We have tried something with a question by a reporter, to post that on Facebook and to ask people what they think the answer would be. So, we tried that once and that turned out quite nice, if I’m not mistaken, but then we forgot about it, because we are too busy with the television programme. (...) We can really engage people that way, but let’s be honest, it is not for the results (Editor 4).

These initiatives show the agency of editors at the individual level to try out new ways of engaging the audience in the production process that are not common sense within existing routines. However, practical reasons at more macro levels mostly explain the limitations of such initiatives. What is more, the initiatives were not valued enough to become integrated more fully into the production process.

In short, even though digitisation allows to approach audiences as more active participants (Rosen 2008; Deuze 2009) and the government agreement stimulates participation through social media, the social media plan did not aim for more interaction between audiences and editors. Instead, having experimented with and evaluated different ways of engaging the audience during the development and production process, the social media plan aimed for an immersive way of audience engagement.

Furthermore, the reasons for this approach fit within the pre-existing mind set of editors about engaging audiences. The production of content for social media added to the daily practices, next to what was considered as the chief business of producing television content with an immersive approach to the audience. This coincides with the observations of Usher (2014), who also found production for social media without the aim to start interactions. In the HOI model, this very much reflects certain expectations about journalism at the social systems level. These are similar to the reasons found in production studies into

participation and digitisation (Domingo 2008; Heise et al. 2014; Hermida and Thurman 2007; O’Sullivan and Heinonen 2008; Ryfe 2012): journalists are enthusiastic about digital opportunities and changing their practices, as long as it adds to their current role as a journalist and does not affect their pre-existing social and cultural values.

Audience Reactions

The focus on immersive engagement, however, did not exclude other types of engagement. The audience engaged itself in more interactive and para-active ways by using the programme hashtag on Twitter as well as sharing, liking and posting messages on the programmes Facebook page. The extent to which editors listened to and used this input depended on the type of input, as it became clear that private messages are dealt with differently than public messages.

Private messages were mostly sent through Facebook’s private messaging option or via e-mail, and generally contained suggestions and compliments for the editorial team. Dealing with these private messages had become part of routines, as two editors had been appointed to answer questions and suggestions. Most editors do this as a favour to the audience, but remain strategic: “People like it if you answer, but we should not start a discussion, we should not have to answer everyone. However, we can create a kind of reciprocity so they know we have heard them and think: I will watch tomorrow” (Editor 2). This editor showed an appreciation for an engaged audience, but also emphasised that dialogue beyond answering a question is not necessary, thus linking engagement to a strategic goal (Brants and De Haan 2010).

Another reason to respond to private messages was to give a voice to audiences, which some saw as their duty as a public service broadcaster: “There are so many opinions and that is exhausting sometimes, but, if the questions are fair, I think we have the duty to formulate an answer as a public broadcaster” (Editor 1). In this case, editors referred to the broader social system HOI level of public service media responsibilities in society, with a more civic goal (Brants and De Haan 2010). There was one moment in the first season where someone from the audience gave a suggestion that editors valued, so they decided to develop the idea into a story. Many editors considered this an opportunity to actively engage the audience in the production process. However, editors explained that such input is rare, which limits the chances to engage the audience more actively in the production process:

Sometimes people send suggestions that are good, ideas that we can use. Then we call that person. So, in that sense people... But of course, that doesn’t happen very often. [...] But I will read suggestions for sure, and I will take them into account if I think they are good. (Editor 3)

The editors’ goal when handling such private messages seems strategic as they mainly replied because people want a response, but they also considered the civic value of messages when a good suggestion is made. This confirms Brants and De Haan’s (2010) suggestion that approaches often overlap. At the social institutions level, this is in line with VRT’s government agreement which explains that digitisation creates a focus on producing content online, but also points to the potential for interesting dialogues with audiences.

The editors noted that this interactive engagement through responding to audience feedback was not necessarily prompted by digitisation or regarded as participation, because the audience has always been able to reach the editorial office, by letter or phone, with similar suggestions: “I am a journalist in the age of internet. Back in the day the audience wrote letters instead” (Editor in chief 4). So, the way editors valued this input fits within pre-existing production values about audience engagement. This reconfirms the point made by former research (Domingo 2008; Heise et al 2014; Hermida and Thurman 2007; O’Sullivan

and Heinonen 2008; Ryfe 2012) that digital opportunities are used and valued as long as they fit pre-existing norms and values.

Unlike private messages, public messages usually were not addressed directly to editors. These public communications encompassed the majority of audience input through social media platforms. Public messages were explicitly not integrated at the level of routines, yet almost every editor reads them individually. Interestingly, this type of interactive and para-active engagement was ignored as much as possible. In the editors' views, the criticism was too severe. During the first season of *De Afspraak* two specific episodes caused much controversy, not only on social media by the audience, but also by other journalists in different news outlets:

I did not expect criticism would be so harsh. I felt like people were really looking up close trying to attack us. But I think we handled it well. We didn't really take it into account in the editorial office. Well, of course, it sounds very negative not to take it into account, of course we read everything, but I didn't want that to influence my work. My idea is to make the best possible journalism, the best possible TV in the evening, journalistic TV. Independently from all that, we have to just keep on doing the best we can. (Editor 3)

The arguments of the editors explain that they felt the need to distance themselves from audience reactions to be able to produce a good programme befitting their own journalistic standards. With regards to the HOI model, this again refers to their concern with their professional role as journalists at the social system level and it also links to the individual level. This argument has been identified frequently in our analysis and is also a central conclusion of former research (Domingo 2008; Heise et al 2014; Hermida and Thurman 2007; O'Sullivan and Heinonen 2008; Ryfe 2012). At the level of routines, these public messages demotivate editors to engage audiences in the production process in a more interactive way, even if this type of audience engagement occurs most often. Instead, digital media in which the audience engages more visibly appear to create an even bigger distance between audiences and producers.

Incident of More Direct Audience Engagement

So far, our analysis showed that the way producers engage their audience is mostly immersive and strongly related to existing journalistic norms and values. However, the first season of *De Afspraak* showed an interesting example of more direct audience engagement involving a different logic. There was an instance where the presenter addressed the audience directly, live on television, suggesting that they could pose questions on Facebook to one of his guests who would answer them right after the show. This was initiated at the level of the individual, as this was a decision of the presenter and not planned beforehand by the editorial team. The event started as a 'joke', as he explained:

That was something, it is a funny guy with whom I get along well, and I thought, I can kind of prank him, it was for fun, but it was not a strategy, no. But apparently, those are things that can work, because we had many friend requests in a couple of minutes. I like it, but it was not strategic, but I like that we were able to do something like that. (Presenter)

The presenter explained that it resulted in many interesting questions from the audience that were answered by the guest. Viewed through the lens of the HOI model, this example shows that policies and goals held by the organisation at the social institution and organisational levels, and established editorial practices and formats on the level of routines, are not always key in how production decisions are made. It shows the importance of the individual level, as

the role of the audience can incidentally be changed by individuals within the team, suggesting a level of agency among individual editors when they act outside of established production norms. In this case, the presenter ignored the commonly held belief that direct audience response would not be useful. However, it seems that it has to be normalised at more levels of the HOI model, so in more parts of the production culture, to structurally change; it was not taken serious and therefore not further developed. This confirms that the editors fundamentally are not aiming for structural interactive engagement.

Conclusion

Many scholars argue that digitisation changes the role of audiences in media production. Audiences are assumed to be able to participate in various ways and to be more actively involved in production than before, both in digital media and in legacy media such as television (Deuze 2009; Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013; Puijk 2008; Rosen 2008). Others point to the deeply ingrained professional culture which hampers audience engagement through interaction and participation in the production process (Coleman and Ross 2010; Domingo 2008; Heinonen 2011; Ryfe 2012; Usher 2014). On that basis, as these former studies focused on participation, it was difficult to clarify how audience members, who do not participate, do play a role in the production process.

By focussing on audience engagement, this article empirically explored how the audience is engaged in the production process of a Flemish public service media's current affairs programme, *De Afspraak*, which explicitly aimed for advanced digitisation of production practices. Even though their initial plans created different expectations, *De Afspraak* mainly acknowledges the audience through immersive audience engagement, which implies no visible input of the audience (Evans 2016). Our hierarchy of influences analysis showed that the reasons for immersive engagement are mostly situated at macro levels in the production process. Interestingly, a few exceptions of initiatives geared towards more interactive engagement are best explained at the individual level. These levels were intertwined in the analysis to explain their interaction in the production process, but here we discuss them separately to highlight their respective role and importance.

The social systems level shows that an already existing journalistic paradigm is a central reason for mainly immersive engagement of the audience. It is impossible to see this separately from the other levels, as it is carried out through the other levels. This very much confirms empirical production and newsroom studies into digitisation and participation, which explain that social and cultural reasons, which refer to existing logics and journalistic norms and values, limit audience input (Domingo 2008; Heise et al 2014; Hermida and Thurman 2007; O'Sullivan and Heinonen 2008; Ryfe 2012).

At the social institutions level, the 2016-2020 management agreement between the Flemish government and VRT focuses on digitisation as one of its fundamental goals. Its primary goal is to produce content for social media and it is less concerned with interactively engaging the audience. Consequently, this resulted in a focus on the production of content through social media aiming for immersive engagement and to a much lesser extent for interactive audience engagement.

At the organisational level, collaboration between the web and television department was difficult, because of the way the departments were structured and separated. Together with different job obligations and mind sets this prevented a more interactive approach.

At the level of routines, the editors set up a social media plan aiming for immersive engagement, but mainly using social media to circulate existing content so the audience was conceived quite similarly to television. A more interactive approach is considered difficult as the daily routines focus on producing a television programme in the evening. In addition, the results suggest that stronger audience engagement through social media may even decrease the role of audiences in the production process, because of the negative appreciation by editors of the criticism of many social media comments.

Finally, at the individual level, the role perceptions mostly coincide with the journalistic paradigm at the social system level. However, some editors considered different ways of engaging audiences interactively and continuously tried to integrate these in their daily practices. Interestingly, a single instance during the production process ignored the commonplace industry belief by approaching the audience more directly live in the programme. This was prompted by an individual which shows the importance of agency to act outside of the industry norms that dominate most levels of the HOI model. However, the fact that this remained a singular case shows that to structurally change current practices, such an alternative approach has to be normalised and valued at various hierarchical levels.

While limited in focusing on one empirical case in a specific cultural (Flemish) and broadcasting (public service) context, we believe that our analysis has broader relevance for two reasons. First, applying the widely used hierarchy of influences model to a less obvious topic, audience engagement in the production process, allowed us to study the intricate interplay between different levels in explaining audience engagement. Second, using the concept of engagement instead of participation gave us a more inclusive view as it includes different potential audience roles beyond participation. So far, the notion was mostly conceptualised and operationalised in audience studies, and at times it was hard to reflect on it from a production perspective. Therefore, we believe that it would be useful to further theoretically explore engagement from a production studies perspective, while at the same time an audience study would be useful to complement our production study.

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