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# **Small acts of engagement: Reconnecting productive audience practices with everyday agency**

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## **Abstract**

In this article, we develop the concept of small acts of engagement (SAOE) in a networked media environment as a conceptual framework to study specific audience practices and as an agenda for research on these practices. We define SAOE, such as liking, sharing, and commenting, as productive audience practices that require little investment and are

intentionally more casual than the structural and laborious practices examined as types of produsage and convergence culture. We further elaborate on the interpretive and productive aspects of SAOE, which allow us to reconnect the notions of a participatory culture and a culture of everyday agency. Our central argument is that audience studies' perspective allows viewing SAOE as practices of everyday audience agency, which, on an aggregate level, have the potential to become powerful acts of resistance.

### **Keywords**

Audience agency, audience studies, convergence, engagement, everyday media use, participation, productive practices, produsage, resistance

## **Introduction: the origins of small acts of engagement**

The concept of small acts of productive engagement we propose in this article emerged from a large-scale, collaborative, systematic literature review and foresight analysis performed under the framework of the Consortium of Emerging Directions of Audience Research (CEDAR) (Das and Ytre-Arne, 2018). At different stages of the work within CEDAR (Das et al., 2018), the project provided a fruitful framework to engage deeply with and exchange thoughts on the pasts and futures of audiences, audience agency, and audience scholarship. Bringing together our different approaches to audiences—in their sense-making activities, intimate and personal storytelling, news participation, and engagement with platforms and interfaces—we continue the work sparked by CEDAR in an attempt to provide theoretical elaboration of productive audience practices that we label *small acts of engagement* (SAOE). This dialogue took the shape of a hermeneutic analysis through which we refined our understanding of SAOE as phenomena, practices, and acts of resistance.

Our work started from the observation that interest among scholars—and consequently the transformative narratives—centers on audiences' increased potential to contribute to media production, often discussed as the blurring boundaries between producers and audiences (Graham, 2018). The extent to which digital media have changed communication patterns and shifted power to citizens has been a central contemporary debate in communication studies (Karlsson et al., 2015). Especially in journalism studies, citizens have on many occasions been noted to occupy the role of journalists (Bowman and Willis, 2003; Canter, 2013), informing local communities and global publics. Blogging, for example, has been amply discussed in media studies as a form of self-publication (Papacharissi, 2011), user empowerment, and a threat to professional expertise (Domingo et al., 2008).

While we acknowledge that the media landscape has become more participatory for media audiences, we are critical of a too linear, celebratory, or fragmentary comprehension of this shift. A linear conception would lead us to believe that we are on a straight path toward an ever more participatory media system where every media consumer eventually becomes a media producer. Here, we share the argument of many authors (Bird, 2011; Carpentier, 2011; Couldry, 2011b) that the promise of technology to turn

“readers” into “writers” has not been fulfilled. Regarding participation in the news, for example, figures of the 2016 Digital news report (Newman et al., 2016: 100) show that across the 26 countries surveyed worldwide, 46% of respondents qualify as passive consumers, talking online or offline with friends about news or not engaging in any form whatsoever. While 21% are reactive participants, sharing or commenting on news online, only 31% are considered proactive participators commenting, sharing pictures, or writing a news-related blog post. Clearly, even now, well beyond the early days of interactive technologies, a large number of news users choose not to engage in content production.

These observations not only show the limits of the “everyone is a producer” logic underlying many views on participatory media, but also nuance their often celebratory feel. Participation is not recommended over consumption *by definition*. Media users are aware of this. For example, research shows that many young people are cautious about providing personal information or pictures of themselves on social media, being afraid of misuse of this material (Marwick et al., 2017). Others develop “social media burnout” through addiction, envy, and anxiety (Liu and Ma, 2018). Even those who built a successful enterprise out of their personal meanderings, like so-called *influencers* or *YouTube stars*, can sometimes succumb to the pressure to regularly produce content and other unwritten rules of professional content production (Parkin, 2018).

Admittedly, while not everyone started blogging, many media users now engage in more casual practices of content production. With the tremendous uptake of social media over the past decade, liking, sharing, and commenting have become audiences’ dominant modes of productive engagement. According to the Reuters Digital News Report 2017 (Newman et al., 2017: 44), sharing news stories, albeit varying greatly by country, is done weekly by more than 60% of Internet users in Chile, Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico, 40% in the United States, and 22% in the United Kingdom. But here too, the authors saw the use of social media for news falter in key markets in 2018 after years of continuous growth, and attribute it for the most part “to a specific decline in the discovery, posting, and sharing of news in Facebook” (Newman et al., 2018: 9).

Liking, sharing, and commenting are widely studied but mostly as a form of “affective rewards” within a consumerist neoliberal discourse of choice (Graham, 2018), only rarely from audience studies’ perspective, leading to a fragmentary conception of participatory media. On one hand, studies of participatory culture (see, for example, Bruns, 2008; Jenkins, 2006) have broadened their gaze beyond fan productions or collaborative media to include these forms of “spreadable” content production (Jenkins et al., 2013). Yet, the conceptual frameworks developed to make sense of these participatory practices are not necessarily adequate to understand practices such as liking, sharing, and commenting, which stay firmly rooted in the sphere of everyday media consumption. On the other hand, the transformative power of such “small” acts in a connected media environment makes them increasingly significant, but mainly as data traces to be processed. When these practices get attention in media studies, they are commonly investigated for the (big) data on citizens they reveal, assuming a “self-evident relationship between data and people” (Van Dijck, 2014: 199), rather than for their agentic value as audience practices.

Hence, in this article, we propose to look at these occurrences through the lens of everyday agency as conceptualized in audience studies. Media uses have always led to a

variety of reactive activities—from private casual chats about last night’s TV programs (Gillespie, 1995; Livingstone and Lunt, 2002) and letters to the editor to the dedicated creations of fanzines (Gray et al., 2007; Reijnders et al., 2014)—all equally important for understanding media as texts and objects in everyday life. From this perspective, the seemingly effortless, casual, random, and SAOE with existing content (e.g. likes, shares, and comments) and content creation (e.g. witness accounts and spontaneous posts) are empirically and anthropologically studied (boyd, 2014; Jenkins et al., 2016; Lange, 2014). These acts of engagement that we conceptualized as small are inarguably recognized by researchers as significant and central to online interactions, yet they are not studied explicitly and lack a theoretical framework accounting for their substantial difference from other forms of online participation.

We will first consider recent conceptualizations of audience participation to pave the way for our main question: how can we further conceptualize SAOE and how can such more advanced conceptualization help us to reconnect audiences’ productive practices with everyday agency? The boundaries of which practices qualify as SAOE have been rather blurry in our conceptualization so far (Kleut et al., 2018). In the second part of this article, therefore, we elaborate our conceptualization through the notions of *investment* and *intention*. Our aim is not to offer a concrete operationalization of the notion, or a classification of specific emanations of such acts, but we do take a prospective look at how SAOE could inform possible empirical avenues in audience studies. In doing so, we pay particular attention to SAOE as both productive and interpretative practices. We conclude by connecting the notion of SAOE with everyday agency, paying attention to audience empowerment, resistance, and co-optation.

## Identifying SAOE within the emerging terminology on audiences

The overview of recent literature in audience studies (Kleut et al., 2018) revealed that increasing user involvement in digital media is most frequently described through concepts such as *produsage* (Bruns, 2006) and *convergence culture* (Jenkins, 2006). Produsage refers to “the collaborative, iterative, and user-led production of content by participants in a hybrid user-producer, produser role” (Bruns, 2006: 1). Convergence culture is described as the “flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences” (Jenkins, 2006: 2). Produsage accentuates a new type of large, heterarchically organized communities. Convergence culture focuses on collaboration with and among audiences based on high motivation, dedication, and resources, including time and skills.

Work on both produsage and convergence culture has been criticized for easily jumping to conclusions about the participatory potential of new practices. One line of argument is that involvement in entertainment is too easily transferred into the political realm (Carpentier, 2011; Couldry, 2011a), while the second questions the power attributed to producers in the context of democratic participation (Bird, 2011). Couldry (2011b: 222) further draws attention to the need to focus on the audiences and their practices, claiming that convergence has “potentially altered the dynamics of engagement, too.”

In response to this criticism and the increasing adoption of social media, Jenkins et al. (2013) introduced the term *spreadable media*. The move from convergence culture to spreadable media can be summarized as the shift from user-generated to user-circulated content as social media's affordances and people's circumstances and motives for sharing have gained attention in the literature. Audience agency and the social embeddedness of spreading practices, indeed, have been recognized, but the focus largely remains on the value and meaning attached to these practices by diverse socioeconomic actors and not the audiences themselves. Thus, this approach does acknowledge the importance of SAOE, but it views them predominantly from a macro-perspective, mostly with shifting media economies in mind.

Beyond the strong models of produsage, convergence, and spreadability (here, strength refers to not only these models' academic popularity but also the range of phenomena they aim to encompass), audience studies scholars (Papacharissi, 2011; Pavlíčková and Kleut, 2016; Picone, 2011) have called for including questions about identities, interpretations, and individual social practices in the discussion. Picone (2011) identified this gap while studying news users who casually produce content and are still primarily audience members because their consumption outweighs their production. Calling this practice "casual produsage" or "personal productive use of information," Picone (2011: 105) was interested in the factors that shape personal investment, or connecting with content, social context, and personal motives, attitudes, and skills. Discussing audiences' practices of productive news use rather than produsage, he argued that these should be understood as alternative ways of using, not producing, information.

Presenting a similar argument regarding celebrity gossip bloggers, Meyers (2012) suggested the term *audience/produser*. Her study showed that users who blog do not see themselves as producers but, instead, "act as a public mouthpiece for certain audience segments" (Meyers, 2012: 1036). This activity stems from pre-existing audiencehood, which has gained new, more public forms with the possibilities of digital technology. Laughey (2010) proposed *productive consumption*, and, researching eBay users, he described it as "a type of work born and embedded in contexts of consumption" (p. 110).

Such studies on casual audience engagements with content flows are still relatively rare. Liking, sharing, commenting, and occasional posting are mostly viewed as interruptions of established mass communication models, and empirically studied as content or as data traces left by the users (Møller Hartley et al., 2018). Reviewing a decade of news sharing studies, Kümpel et al. (2015) show that the majority of research is using content analysis and surveys, theoretically informed by diffusion of innovation theory, and concepts such as social influence, interactivity, and political participation. Some studies, particularly within journalism studies, have looked at sharing and commenting news from a Uses and Gratifications perspective, for example, focusing on how the use of news on social media platforms is connected to commenting on news on SNS and beyond (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2017). Others have been examining the relation between active use of social media and the links to political participation (Boulianne, 2015), or how credibility affects what we choose to click on while scrolling Facebook (Sülflow et al., 2019) and what kinds of news we share on SNS (Kalsnes and Larsson, 2018).

However, as Kümpel et al. (2015) rightly claim, there is a lack of theory-building and of understanding of the cultural and situational contexts in which audience members share information. In sum, while “we are not all producers” (Bird, 2011), we do not question the fact that smaller scale user engagement has been widely adopted. We are, however, critical of the promise of data mining and metrics to shed light on what people do in the digital world, as these risk-obscuring individuals in their everyday life (Unwin, 2017: 170). Studies of sharing and commenting have mainly been approached from a macro level. We argue for a need to examine these practices from a micro-perspective and suggest that an audience perspective can inform such a microlevel analysis. For this reason, we are introducing SAOE as a concept that accounts for the personally motivated, socially situated practices of people participating in content flows, appropriating this content in everyday life, and forming individual and group identities.

## Conceptualizing SAOE

In this section, we clarify the concept of SAOE, building on attempts to conceptualize everyday productive audience practices. Aware that *engagement* has been used in relation to audiences to refer to aspects other than productive media use, we first explicate our understanding of the concept. To that end, we introduce two aforementioned dimensions of engagement—investment and intention—and show how both help define what we consider to be SAOE.

### *Acts of engagement*

Engagement is defined very differently in various fields of study, and even fluidly in media studies. Political science, for example, has since long stressed the cognitive processes of engagement (e.g. remembering) and the more physical behavior of accessing and discussing media content with others (Berger, 2011; Pattie et al., 2004). However, the concept has also become valuable for market researchers and media organizations that work with customer engagement, often referring to clicks and shares. Engagement in this perspective can refer to the myriad ways people access and interact with media products, but reduces engagement to those activities that can be captured and analyzed in measurable ways and with measurable market value (Ørmen, 2015: 26). Audience research has a specific interest in the cognitive (i.e. critical reflection) and the affective dimensions of how relationships with others are enacted through media (Kozel et al., 2018). The audience research perspective stresses the role of participation in the processes of media use, more precisely practices of creating, distributing, and commenting on content and establishing affinity with brands, content, and other users.

The concept of engagement encompasses all of these different dimensions, and in this article, we use the concept to refer specifically to a more active way of using media content that nevertheless does not qualify as participatory (in the strict sense of Carpentier, 2011) nor as a practice outside everyday media use. This understanding of engagement connects with the description of engagement by Couldry et al. (2010) as a meaningful, mundane practice in everyday life, which serves as an important way of connecting to politics and the public world. Following this definition, engagement can thus be seen as

a practice in itself, engaging with media, and as a possible outcome of various media practices, what Couldry et al. (2010) define as “public connection.”

In our conceptualization of SAOE, we focus on engagement as productive practices, and these might be political, cultural, or both, situated in between the sense-making of content (the focus of many cultural studies) and the public or civic connection (the focus of much political communication research). Moreover, engagement signifies more active use of media than *consumption* or *reception*, which implies a solitary process of sense-making. With engagement, we instead want to shed light on the processual and responsive acts, which are especially prevalent in a digital media environment. Following Berger, acts of engagement entail a combination of “activity and energy” (Berger, 2011: 3), which in this article, we describe as *investment*. Hence, engagement captures how people both pay attention to how we act (or choose not to act) upon that attention (whether as objects or symbolic messages) and involve ourselves cognitively and affectively with media content.

As audience studies have demonstrated, cognitive and affective engagement in acts of reception often occurs in the private sphere of the household (Gillespie, 1995; Livingstone and Lunt, 2002). In this sense, everyday talk about news and favorite TV series shares many features with our conceptualization of SAOE. What is different, however, is that mediation of social life (Livingstone, 2009) leads to mediation of everyday interactions about media content, happens on social media platforms, and transcends the private domain. Distinction of engagement in media and engagement via media has been transformed with the proliferation of ready-to-use web affordances (Dahlgren, 2013). As audience members become increasingly cross-media (Schröder, 2011), combining different entry points to content, they more frequently act upon content using digital media. That said, it should be stressed that our conceptualization of SAOE envisages practices that, in terms of attention, cognitive, and affective response, start from both online and offline content, but acting upon this content occurs primarily in the digital, hence more public, environment.

### *Acts small in investment and intention*

*Investment.* The first dimension we conceive as central to SAOE is *investment*. The notion of investment introduces a sense of scalability into “engagement”: both liking a news article and writing a news story can be considered forms of productive engagement, but they do not require the same level of investment. At the same time, investment is explicitly considered to be distinct from *input*. Discussing input can allow us to single out acts (e.g. liking an Instagram post and sharing live game footage) that require less input (a click) than, for example, comments (a few sentences), a blog post (a few paragraphs), or citizen journalism (a few paragraphs based on a form of reporting). From users’ perspective though, the investment needed for the same act can vary significantly based on their dispositions (Picone, 2011). While the input required for a comment is small, a person without much writing experience might find it to be a larger investment than a person familiar with writing blog posts. Talking about investment, therefore, allows us to take people’s experiences and dispositions as a starting point of analysis. Input is the objective category, while investment requires empirical analysis of audiences’ subjective experiences and their dispositions.



SAOE then are acts that require a small investment relative to one's capacities. Conceived as such, the notion does not refer to acts with small input. This means that comments, for example, are not necessarily SAOE because they could require substantial investment from some people. Furthermore, people's interactions with media depend on the local context. Engagement can be radically different in conflict and war zones, for example, due to the influence political instability has on local media ecologies. We are aware that in this article, we are discussing audience engagement in the Western context, or, as some authors prefer, the perspective of the North (McEwan, 2009) or Global North (e.g. Brooks, 2017; Scott, 2014). The claims we make should be further examined in the contexts where an act as effortless as a click can pose risk. Clearly, Western audiences are not a homogeneous category, but we set this limitation to contend that the ubiquity of personal media devices contributes to a certain level of media literacy, especially among younger users (Eurostat, 2016).

What unites acts small in terms of investment is the role they can assume in everyday life. The limited investment needed makes incorporating them into daily routines more habitual and intuitive. This everydayness is exactly what we seek to grasp—an aspect central to our notion of media consumption but, as discussed, less explored in relation to productive practices. When, though, is an investment small enough to qualify its corresponding act as small? We aim to understand subjective experiences rather than develop objective categories, so a possible answer is “the right amount of investment to achieve a state of flow.” SAOE are those digital and non-digital practices that we do not think about.

The notion of flow was introduced in media studies decades ago, most notably by Williams (1975: 86) to describe watching television: it is not a matter of watching separate shows but more a stream of programs through which stations try to keep viewers on board for the whole evening. Here, we do not perceive flow as a fragile, momentary state of “optimal functioning of consciousness” (Elkington, 2010: 327), as is often conceived from a psychological perspective. Instead, in relation to “investment,” Jensen's (1994: 291) conceptualization is more interesting and distinguishes between channel flow, closely linked to Williams' (1975) idea, and viewer flow, or the way viewers compose their own personalized flows of content consumption across channels (see also Caldwell, 2003: 133–137). Being absorbed and carried on in a viewing experience, therefore, does not preclude a more active attitude toward directing that experience.

Discussing interactivity, Rettie (2001) and McMillan (2006) linked the notion of flow to individuals' personal skills. These can be conceived broadly, following Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998: 119–120), as technical, analytical, and interpretative skills. When people perceive their skills as insufficient to tackle a certain task, they become reluctant to engage in it. When they perceive a task as too easy or irrelevant, boredom looms. Flow then is the mental state in which the required effort and the available skills correspond, and a person's investment is balanced, resulting in a satisfying experience. The study shows how lean-forward experiences, such as writing comments, can be straightforward to the point of becoming routine activities (Burnett and Marshall, 2003: 72).

In sum, the concept of flow helps us conceive of a notion of investment relative to media users' engagement rather than the product resulting from that engagement. In line with flow as conceived by Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2014), an act of productive

engagement requires a small investment when exactly the right amount of investment occurs, and the productive activity can be performed frictionless. SAOE, therefore, are those productive acts that we feel comfortable performing and do not require us stepping out of the comfort zone of our daily routines. For example, writing a journalistic piece or a fan fiction story is a demanding task for most people, regardless of how pleasant these activities might be in their own right.

*Intention.* The second dimension we see as important in understanding SAOE is *intention*. We initially conceived the ends of this dimension as consisting of casual and structural intentions. We wanted to take into consideration a fundamental difference in the drivers of productive activities. This reflection emerged from the concern, as discussed, that more casual acts of productive activity seem to have enjoyed less attention than the more consistent or high-level acts, such as blogging and citizen journalism. A good illustration of the differences in intention we seek to grasp is what Lasica (2003: 73) called “random acts of journalism.” When looking at user-generated news content, he acknowledged the importance of content generated by people who do not practice amateur journalism but happen to witness an event or have a piece of information they deem worth sharing. Lasica (2003) pointed out that certain acts of citizen journalism are not premeditated. They do not come from a sustained interest in engaging in citizen journalism. Even simply sharing a news article might be considered to be a random act of journalism. In any of these cases, the actor is unlikely to be driven by a desire to produce journalistic content, which makes the intention behind casual and structural acts different.

We first devised this dimension not in terms of the quality but the intensity of intention, suggesting that casual acts of productive engagement are less intentional than more structural ones (Kleut et al., 2018). This view is problematic. It contradicts a fundamental idea in audience studies: everyday practices of media consumption can be used in highly strategic ways, for example, as acts of resistance against mainstream ideologies (Fiske, 1989). We, therefore, suggest it might be more fruitful to conceive the intention dimension as determined by its *kind* rather than its *intensity*. This view invites us to consider content- and identity-driven intentions as the two ends of the dimension.

Indeed, studies of motivations to share, comment, and blog seem to largely agree that most of these actions are first and foremost ways to engage in self-presentation (Papacharissi, 2011). It has been suggested (Pavličková and Kleut, 2016; Picone, 2011) that the blurring of the distinction between content consumption and production has been too narrowly approached as a shift in the production of media content. In contrast, from an audience perspective, various studies have suggested that many casual contributors see their actions as a way of connecting with others or presenting their identity rather than producing content (Kümpel et al., 2015; Meyers, 2012; Picone, 2011).

When conceiving intention as such, acts of engagement are small when they are driven by the ambition not to create content but to either present oneself to others, or as a traceability tool for a digital *flâneur*—this is particularly true for the strategic use of “likes” to form a repository of personally significant digital objects (videos, shopping items, etc.). Through these brief, casual interventions, users negotiate personal media interactions, including future ones—the example is YouTube’s “Not interested” button

that removes the unwanted content from recommendations. These simple steering mechanisms display users' awareness of their own digital journey.

These actions can be strategic, intended, for example, to present a specific image of oneself, forge connections, trace personal trajectories, or help others. They can become more focused on content production itself, such as keeping up a blog with expert insights into a specific topic or making daily podcasts or YouTube videos. Especially done with the intent to earn money or profile oneself as a content producer, these acts leave the realm of the small. Admittedly, these larger acts can also be motivated by the willingness to maintain social contact or present oneself, but they explicitly do so through the systematic production of content, adopting close-to-professional logics and standards.

Thus, SAOE are acts of productive activity that require relatively little investment to be integrated seamlessly into daily routines and are driven primarily by an intuitive willingness to present oneself and forge one's identity rather than produce information. But this does in no way reduce these acts to merely manifestations of audience preferences through clicks, ready to be aggregated and analyzed by media producers and platforms for the sake of better conversion rates through content-optimization (Tandoc and Thomas, 2015: 247).

## **Looking at everyday media use through the lens of SAOE**

We developed the notion of SAOE out of a presentiment that a concept delineating everyday productive practices was missing, yet justifiable and useful when thinking about audiences' productive engagement with media. SAOE allow us to move beyond the "quantified audience" (Tandoc and Thomas, 2015: 247) by drawing attention to those practices in their own right, and the diversity and nuances hidden behind something seemingly small, as well as their potential for resistance. Aware that the concept is still in need of further theoretical elaboration and empirical validation, we neither aim nor pretend to offer a full-fledged operationalization of SAOE at this point. Rather, we invite media scholars to further scrutinize the variations, interconnectedness, and contextualization of intention and investment. In the final part of this article, we present the ways in which SAOE have informed both our theoretical and empirical research so far, trusting that these could offer starting points for researchers to further explore SAOE.

### ***Informing empirical avenues in audience studies***

On an abstract-theoretical level we seek first of all to offer high-level audience studies inspired and thus agentic understanding of acts such as liking, sharing, and commenting. How should we conceive of these practices? Thinking about SAOE in terms of investment and intention allows audience researchers to theorize and study the productive practices as forms of media consumption rather than forms of media production, content, or data traces. Regarding investment, SAOE are productive acts audiences feel comfortable performing. They easily fit in the daily routines of media use and do not require people to step out of their comfort zone. This approach provides a way of acknowledging that productive audience practices are not necessarily practices through which people transcend their role as audience members to become producers (as opposed to the

argument of Naab and Sehl, 2017). SAOE practices intrinsic to audiencehood. Considering intention, SAOE are driven by the ambition not to create content but to present oneself to others and maintain relational and social ties. Contrast a user uploading a skit from a live concert they attended to a celebrity vlogger regularly covering concerts on a YouTube channel or a single eyewitness photo to a current affairs blog. While vloggers and bloggers also engage in self-presentation, they have a stronger affinity with content production and perfect their art accordingly.

Looking at practices such as liking, sharing, and commenting through these two dimensions allows us to envision ‘tipping points’: when is someone willing or able to invest more into these practices, possibly with the intention to produce more or more elaborate content that he or she comes to the point of leaving the sphere of media consumption into the sphere of more high-level practices of professional amateurs (Leadbeater and Miller, 2004). It gives us a way to scrutinize these practices by asking what factors can affect these dimensions. Instead of categorizing a like or a comment as an act requiring little investment, we ask for whom this is the case or not, and why?

This brings forward a second key element: we conceive SAOE as subjective experiences, which implies that they are shaped in articulation with the context in which they take place (Courtois et al., 2012). What contextual factors affect media users’ investment and intention to engage with media content, and how does this shape their media experiences. This would allow us to assess who considers certain practices “small” and who does not? Who are the people for whom commenting online still requires a lot of effort? What structural inequalities in terms of sociodemographics, media use patterns, levels of media literacy, or cultural elements could explain these subjective differences among media users? Surfacing these inequalities can inform policies aimed at strengthening citizens in light of the possible perverse effects of their actions.

But also, the very situational context, the times and spaces in which the acts of engagement take place, become of particular interest for SAOE. Examining how users access the news on mobile phones, Dimmick et al. (2011) used the term “interstices” to label the tiny periods between our daily activities where we often glance at our mobile devices for micro-information or micro-entertainment. Keightley and Downey (2018) wrote about “the intermediate audience,” relying on cultural approaches to “provide empirical tools for understanding how the temporalities of news consumption are imaginatively, socially and culturally produced in everyday encounters with the news” (p. 7). Closely linked to already existing content, SAOE should be (re)searched in those in-between times and spaces.”

Third, in applying these perspectives, SAOE can act as a sensitizing concept, shedding light on the more mundane emanations of productive media use. Likes and shares drive recommendations and distribution algorithms. On an aggregate level, these “small” acts can have a disruptive effect on content flows. Especially on the macro-level, this canalizes a lot of attention not so much on these actual practices, but rather on the traceable and quantifiable digital data traces they leave behind. Similarly, in stories about user metrics, echo-chambers, misinformation, and so on, the audience is easily reduced to “a set of monitored and recorded characteristics” (Carlson, 2018: 411). Once more, the audience is turned into a passive and uncritical actor in the process, being unknowingly datafied,

commodified, surveyed, or polarized. We argue that SAOE is useful in providing a micro-level analytical lens from which these changes on an aggregate level can be studied.

Talking about SAOE in this context is a way of drawing attention to these acts as audience practices in their own right, with their own dynamics and role within people's everyday media use. Next to being neglected, they also risk being dismissed as a purely negative force seen by the current backlash around these practices at many levels, ranging from the spread of sensational stories or misinformation to the use of online comments to polarize communities (Weeks et al., 2017). We could relapse in cultural pessimism where audience practices are driven by sensationalism, voyeurism, and malicious pleasure of a thrill-seeking public.

But, as Phillips and Milner (2017) convincingly argue, expressions of Internet culture can inspire divergent responses in divergent audiences, highlighting one of their fundamental characteristics:

they are ambivalent. Simultaneously antagonistic and social, creative and disruptive, humorous and barbed, the satirization of products, antagonization of celebrities, and creation of questionable fan art, along with countless other examples that permeate contemporary online participation, are too unwieldy, too variable across specific cases, to be essentialized as *this* as opposed to *that*. (p. 10)

Attention for the ambivalence of online participatory practices and the “divergent responses” they engender is exactly that which we seek to draw attention to through the notion of SAOE.

Finally, by conceiving SAOE as productive acts that are nonetheless firmly rooted in the sphere of everyday media consumption and by putting forward their identity-driven intentions, we acknowledge their connection with audiences' act of interpretation. In SAOE, the interpretive logic is central; that is to say, the production is a by-product of interpretation. What comments, eyewitness accounts, and funny videos have in common is that they are driven more by momentary opportunity and inspiration than sustained or systematic content creation. They originate in the sphere of everyday media consumption and are not intended to leave that sphere, even though they potentially might because they are public by default (see Jensen and Helles, 2017, on meta-communication).

Investigating SAOE goes hand in hand with advocating sensitivity toward the everyday dimension in productive audience practices and acknowledging the importance of everyday interpretive practices central to most people's everyday media use. This understanding connects the notion of SAOE to a core argument of audience studies: interpretation engenders the production of meaning. As Martin-Barbero (1993: 214) puts it, “in an interpretative reading, as in consumption, there is not just reproduction but also production, a production which questions the centrality of the dominating text.” In SAOE, there is not only production but also interpretation, which informs how one relates personal identity to the dominant text by producing one's own text.

### ***Reconnecting with everyday agency, resistance, and co-optation***

Considering SAOE as forms of interpretation embedded within people's everyday media use provides a way to connect these acts to everyday agency and resistance. Theoretically,

the notion of everyday agency is rooted in the 1980s and 1990s scholarly discussions on the agency of television audiences (Morley, 1992). These discussions took place in times when interactivity, user-generated content, and participatory journalism had not yet entered academic debates. Their focus was on interpretive practices. Drawing on semiotics, cultural studies argued that media texts are open to interpretation, conceptualized as an *interpretive resistance*. Resistance has been studied in the context of audiences' interpretations of (popular) media texts, aiming to understand the broader social and cultural significance of these resistant audience practices.

Fiske (1989) was a proponent of theorizing the *everyday agency of audiences*, specifically related to popular culture. Referring to the work of de Certeau (1984), Fiske (1989: 21) argued that popular culture is not about the commodities mass media produce but, instead, “the art of making do with what the system provides.” His work showed that popular culture consists of people’s creative engagements *with* media commodities, the “creative, discriminating use of the resources that capitalism provides” (Fiske, 1989: 23). These arguments have been widely adopted in audience studies and influenced many recent debates on the democratic affordances of participatory media (see Jenkins, 2006). It is exactly this dimension of everyday resistance we seek, to give more prominence in the study of productive audience practices by pointing to SAOE.

In doing this, of course, we have to not only acknowledge but also problematize aspects of empowerment and resistance, paying attention to co-optation from an audience perspective. As Morley (1992) discussed in detail, the focus on “resistance” in audience studies has been criticized for finding and celebrating traces of opposition everywhere. Morley (1992: 30) bluntly stated that “[t]he power of viewers to reinterpret meanings is hardly equivalent to the discursive power of centralized media institutions to construct the texts which the viewer then interprets; to imagine otherwise is simply foolish.”

The question we then pose is how SAOE connect to the decades of debates on everyday resistance in audience studies. Several aspects, both hopeful and disturbing, need to be considered. The first aspect emerges directly from the “net effect” from which tech titans, such as Google, Facebook, and Amazon, benefit (*Economist*, 2018: 11): large numbers of affected users, combined with social momentum may lead grassroots initiatives to become ineluctable and ultimately contribute to larger public discourses. Recent examples include the #MeToo social-media campaign (which started in 2017 as a collection of retweets), #TimesUp (2017), and #BlackLivesMatter (2014). They all illustrate the possible aggregate force of many SAOE.

Although this “aggregate power” might incite claims of a more empowered media audience, “‘liberated’ from both expert intermediaries and costs” (Athique, 2018: 60), a more critical reading acknowledges how these corporations co-opt this power. Athique (2018: 60) noted that “YouTube (as with other instances of YouMedia) is an exemplar of the digital economy precisely because it is a medium without any content of its own” and exploits the digital labor (Scholz, 2012) of its content-generating users for commercial benefit (Poell and van Dijck, 2014). As Scholz (2012) showed, users’ free digital labor provides these companies with content to fill their platforms. Moreover, engagement with content—especially through SAOE—are used to track, analyze, and predict people’s interests and habits—information highly valued by advertisers. Consequently, the

aggregate force for common good can all too easily be subverted into aggregate submission to commercial imperatives.

For example, the quantification of likes on social media contributes to higher visibility of content in users' news feeds, producing social and even economic capital. These social media dynamics can lead to perverse, disempowering effects, such as algorithmic-driven (Poell and van Dijck, 2014) and metrics-driven (Tandoc and Thomas, 2015) news curation and optimization of news stories for *clickability* (Blom and Hansen, 2015) and *shareability* (Harcup and O'Neill, 2017). These dynamics culminate in fake news discussions, where audience members are seen as ignorant spreaders or gullible believers of false information.

It is precisely by considering SAOE as a set of quantifiable user metrics that we lose the connection with everyday resistance. Audience members are becoming increasingly aware of the symbolic and strategic value of their engagement. They develop strategies to cope with the subversion of their data; take, for example, the idea of digital detox and the #LeaveFacebook campaign in response to the Cambridge Analytica revelations. On the other hand, industry actors continue adapting their communication practices to lure users to buy into their services. We cannot assume we know the ways in which users use their knowledge of old and new media to mitigate such perverse effects without empirically studying them.

This is even more so as every act of engagement (including small ones) is accompanied by the algorithmic "black box" of data. The thrill over the use of algorithms to comprehend if not to control people's use of media has been increasingly criticized (e.g. Hintz et al., 2018; Van Dijck, 2014) as reductive and decontextualized. This needs to be accompanied by questions of how people understand and respond to algorithms—the old audience question of what people do with media (e.g. Mathieu and Pavličková, 2017). What SAOE can add to the debate on user empowerment through digital media is a way of overcoming the binary approach opposing resistance to co-optation: reconnecting productive audience practices to everyday agency rather than reducing them to their big data aggregate, as well as calling upon audience researchers to empirically document, contextualize and nuance these practices.

### Concluding remarks

Connecting SAOE with the discussion on resistance and co-optation gives rise to an agenda for addressing user empowerment in relation to participatory media. SAOE, at their core, are about balancing a "processual model of hegemony" (Morley, 1992: 18) between *people's agency* and *centralized media power*, asking who gets to design and continuously adapt digital media affordances and thus determine the structures through which people *can* engage by using digital media. Today's participatory affordances allow people to "produce and circulate their own commodities" (Fiske, 1989: 23), which demands theoretical reconsideration of interpretive resistance. Theorizing and empirically understanding SAOE might mean understanding how the outcomes of resistant micro-processes may lead to rapidly changing macrostructures, for better or for worse. Such transformations are facilitated by the material infrastructures from which digital media are built; interpretive resistance is not limited to the symbolical level but is situated within the

close relationships between technological and human actors. Altogether, this evolution requires that we redefine people's agency for everyday resistance.

In conclusion, SAOE, by nature, do not connect with big ideologies (e.g. journalism might not fulfill its role as watchdog, or television series might not invest enough in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender [LGBT] characters) but can nonetheless become a field of agency and resistance. Talking about SAOE thus reconnects theories on productive audiences with the concerns of the everyday and forces us to consider the empowerment of audiences in terms not only of content production but also identity building and personal resistance—practices, indeed, much more connected with the ways audiences deal with interpreting messages than the ways producers make content. At the same time, the conceptualization acknowledges that, to a certain degree, new practices need to be as frictionless as possible to be incorporated in daily routines, explaining why SAOE might be adopted so broadly. Audience studies have long paid great attention to even the smallest forms of everyday engagement, resistance, and empowerment. Let us extend that concern well into the mediated future.

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