

# Exploring What Audience Engagement Means for Media Companies

## Estudio exploratorio sobre qué significa 'engagement' en las empresas de comunicación

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**ABSTRACT:** In recent times researchers and industry have paid special attention to the concept of engagement and the academic literature on this topic is abundant. Although audience loyalty and engagement are the cornerstone of the media business, not all companies have developed strategies to further engage the audience. Taking audiences' opinions and ideas into account beyond consumption has two main risks: the first has to do with the fact that users are not necessarily experts in the topic as they do not follow the narrative structure of media contents; and the second is that audience reaction cannot be planned because it is unpredictable. A third dilemma arises, namely should such actions be considered part of a global strategy on the part of the company or simply as a marketing action to reach new audiences and retain existing ones? Therefore, some reflection is needed in order to analyze to what extent strategies aimed at increasing engagement contribute to extending the value of media brands and content properties. With this dilemma in mind and after a review of the most recent literature, we developed a questionnaire to find out how professionals and managers of media companies from different sectors define and measure engagement<sup>1</sup>. At the end of the study, we conclude that for companies whose core business is linked to the digital environment, proximity with the audiences is greater than that of the traditional media or those companies, such as audiovisual producers, whose business is directed at other companies rather than, fundamentally, at the public.

**Keywords:** audience engagement; engagement metrics; content production; digital media.

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**RESUMEN:** En los últimos tiempos, la investigación y la industria han puesto un énfasis especial en el concepto de engagement y la literatura académica al respecto es extensa. A pesar de que la lealtad y el compromiso son la piedra angular de los medios de comunicación, no todas las empresas han desarrollado estrategias para involucrar aún más a la audiencia en los contenidos. Para las compañías de medios contar con la participación de la audiencia plantea un doble dilema. El reto de garantizar su propuesta de valor basada en sus principios configuradores o acoger pareceres y criterios de personas ajenas a las compañías y sin cualificación. Por tanto, hace falta una reflexión para analizar en qué medida estrategias encaminadas a aumentar el engagement contribuyen a extender el valor de la marca de las empresas de comunicación. Con este dilema y tras un repaso de la literatura más reciente, elaboramos un cuestionario para conocer cómo definían y cómo medían el engagement profesionales y gestores de compañías de comunicación de sectores diferentes. Tras el estudio realizado, concluimos que para las compañías cuyo core business está vinculado al entorno digital, la cercanía con las audiencias es mayor que los medios tradicionales o aquellas compañías como las productoras audiovisuales, cuyo negocio se dirige a otras empresas en lugar del público final.

**Palabras clave:** audience engagement; medios digitales; métricas de engagement; producción de contenidos.

## 1. Introduction

Increasingly intense digital and social transformation has further driven audience fragmentation and media content consumption across multiple screens and platforms over the last years, to such an extent that some publics no longer consume media in the conventional ways. Recent research suggests that the difficulty involved in attracting the attention of distracted audiences, who are comfortable migrating between different screens and platforms, has prompted growing concern over finding ways to enhance audience engagement levels and seeking emotional connection (Berguillo, 2017; Chan-Olmsted & Wolter, 2018; Edlom, 2022; Gajardo & Costera, 2022; Kleer & Kunz, 2021).

Media contents are experience goods; that is, their use and/or quality only become evident after they have been experienced (Arrese, 2004). To a certain degree, audience expectations depend on the confidence that media brands are capable of inspiring in their consumers. While the audience is often unaware of the precise content they will receive – they do not know the news of the day, nor the way it may influence their lives; they do not know how a videogame may unfold, nor the ending of a series they are watching – consumption and subscription decisions are made on the basis of the satisfaction they expect to receive, and such satisfaction is reflected in particular actions that consumers take in relation to media contents.

The impact of digital technology has been a game-changer in the media sector. Some of these changes relate to how media companies may access and use big data on user preferences, consumption habits and behaviour so as to align their offer more closely with consumer interests and needs. Moreover, the variety of available delivery (smartphones, tablets, computers, TV sets) also affects media consumption. Content appeal may vary depending on the screen or device in use (Guerrero, Diego, & Kimber, 2017). Furthermore, media users are no longer passive consumers. The audience does not passively consume media contents; rather, they rate, share and viral-spread them, so that even they have become content creators. Media brands are now more exposed than ever to user ratings and comments on social media.

Given the higher number and wider range of choices available, users are more likely to be ‘flight risks’: that is, they may migrate to alternative options they see as being cheaper, more closely aligned with specific audience preferences, or of higher quality. Thus, public engagement is a key goal, and, to this end, user commitment levels must be measured and fostered via different modes of audience rating and participation enabled by the media companies involved.

Despite its significance for today’s marketing practices, little is known about how to exploit the potential of big data for media companies (Kleer & Kunz, 2021). Other industries have developed

new technologies capable of automating and simplifying their data analysis processes by hiring and training large numbers of data analysts to meet their needs in this area (Stone, 2014). In general, media companies have not yet developed strategies and tools to take advantage of the potential of big data relating to audience consumption (Kumar & Pansari, 2016; Neira, Clares-Gavilán, & Sánchez-Navarro, 2021). As Picone, Courtois & Paulussen (2015) outlined, there is a challenge that media managers have to face: this is the disconnect between doing what the company wants (fulfillment of its editorial mission) and being liked by its audience, on the one hand, and, on the other, the challenge of identifying what the audience likes (implicit and explicit demands) and shaping production accordingly. These contrasting approaches both have advantages and disadvantages. For instance, the former facilitates a greater competitive edge, whereas the latter encourages the production of appealing contents.

The research is framed within audience studies, considered an essential part of the discipline of media management, and aims to examine the practical dimensions and consequences of audience engagement in media companies. Our research approach is exploratory and is based on a survey of media executives and practitioners. The aim is to explore both the implementation of engagement strategies in the media and their implications.

The structure of the paper is as follows: first, a comprehensive literature review on the issue of media audience engagement allows us to extract the various dimensions of engagement which, in turn, serve as the basis for designing the questionnaire. Secondly, we present the methodology, findings, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

## 2. Literature Review

Literature on audience engagement has notably increased in the last few years (Broersma, 2019). After a thorough review, we will distinguish three definitions of engagement that are very much connected: engagement as enjoyable consumption; engagement as an extended consumption of goods and services that are related to the original product; and engagement as the experience of participating in the content-creation process.

According to the entertainment industry literature, engagement involves a positive assessment of the content on the part of consumers. As intangible goods, media products connect with the audience's minds; the stronger the connection, the closer the identification (Mayer, 2011). In this sense, engagement is defined as the aesthetic experience produced by media products when audiences really enjoy consuming them (Evans, 2019; O'Brien & Toms, 2008; Urgellés, 2017). This pleasant experience enables users to participate in events and experiences beyond the passive consumption of contents, such as the acquisition of by-products or participation in communications with like-minded people (Fossen & Schweidel, 2019; O'Brien & Toms, 2008; Stephen & Galak, 2012).

Emotional attachment to content leads users to share such content with others, thanks to its quality as public goods (Arrese, 2004); this in turn generates loyal consumption based on the positive experience of previous consumption (Chan-Olmsted & Shay, 2015; Picard, 2010). Digital technology also allows interacting with content by the possibility of offering one's own opinion and adding content and value to the original content (García-Aviles, 2012; Jenkins et al., 2013; Napoli, 2012; Papí-Gálvez & Perlado-Lamo-de-Espinosa, 2020; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Saavedra-Llamas; Saavedra-Llamas & Rodríguez-Fernández, 2018). As a result, consumers actively process the role of the media brand in their lives or participate in various forms of co-creation (Mersey, Malthouse, & Calder, 2010; Sixto-García, López-García, & Toural-Bran, 2020).

However, in the face of these possibilities offered by technology that empower audiences (Piller, Ihl, & Vossen, 2011), media professionals face the dilemma of whether they should follow their

own professional criteria or, on the contrary, follow the interests and tastes of users (Andrejevic, 2008). In short, should they take on the challenge of guaranteeing their value proposition based on their original principles (Manovich, 2018; Vaz-Alvarez, 2021) or should they welcome the opinions and criteria of outsiders and unqualified people (Carlsson & Nilsson, 2016; Sixto-García, López-García, & Toural-Bran, 2020; Steensen, Ferrer-Conill, & Peters, 2020; Steemers, 2019; te Walvaart, Dhoest, & van den Bulck, 2019). Taking audiences' opinions and ideas into account beyond consumption has two main risks: the first has to do with the fact that users are not necessarily experts in the topic as they do not follow the narrative structure of media contents; the second is that audience reaction cannot be planned because it is unpredictable (Domingo et al., 2008; Engelke, 2020). The third dilemma arises when considering whether these actions should be part of a company's global strategy or simply a marketing action to reach new audiences and retain existing ones (Atarama-Rojas et al., 2020).

Therefore, it is necessary to reflect on and to analyse to what extent strategies aimed at increasing engagement contribute to extending the value of media brands and content properties (Carpentier, 2011; Chan-Olmsted & Wolter, 2018; Guo, 2018; Guo & Chan-Olmsted, 2015; Grueskin, Seave, & Graves, 2011; Noual, 2019). Furthermore, for engagement-furthering actions to be effective and to add value, it is necessary to find measurements that make them operational (Chan-Olmsted & Wolter, 2018; Nelson & Webster, 2016). As such, some researchers utilise social media analytics to measure audience engagement as a supplementary source of market information (Boyd & Crawford, 2012; Hill, 2014; Huertas, Setó-Pàmies, & Míguez-González, 2015; Kosterich & Napoli, 2016; Saavedra-Llamas & Rodríguez-Fernández, 2018; Summer, et al. 2018). In the present study, we will also focus on the measures used.

Companies that specialise in audience research provide a range of actions that can be considered indicators of audience engagement. According to the Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB), engagement is the relationship between interactions – the number of likes, comments, retweets, and shares – and community – the total volume of fans, followers, and subscriptions to certain media companies, rather than advertising. For Parrot Analytics, television's digital footprint is measured through numbers of discussions on social media; searches for and time spent reading additional information online, such as tweets, likes, shares and comments; views of online promotional videos; and illegal peer-to-peer downloading of episodes. Kantar Social TV Ratings includes activity on Twitter as a complement to TV audience ratings.

Some media, such as the BBC (Łódzki, 2022) or Sacramento Bee (Rassameeroj & Wu, 2021), have started to use audience insights to produce more personalised content and engage the audience in co-creation activities. In the case of newspapers, the success of actions of this sort is reflected in an increase in the number of subscribers and conversion rates. These media have employed resources and appointed recent staff, such as the head of audience engagement, the audience engagement producer and the project coordinator, to manage feedback and audience engagement.

Following the conclusions of Kleer & Kunz (2021) who found a gap in audience engagement research and subsequent practical applications across the entire media landscape, in the present research we want to find out how media practitioners in Spain define audience engagement and how they have implemented actions to involve audiences in editorial decisions. Therefore, we will look at the media industry as a whole; not a sector-by-sector analysis, but a mapping of the characteristics common to all media. The methods used and rationale for the sample are defined in the following section.

### 3. Research Questions and Methodology

Keeping in mind the challenges relating to the foundational principles and value propositions of each media company and to how to take into account and manage the inputs coming from

audiences outlined above, the purpose of this research is to find out what strategies media companies are using to increase audience engagement, how media executives are using audience feedback and participation to add value to media contents and what the consequences of these strategies are.

To that end, a questionnaire was sent out to fourteen media practitioners in Spain; in some cases they were accompanied by interviews to fully understand the answers of the responders. The function of the questionnaire and of the interviews with media executives was twofold: to gather information on actual professional practices and, at the same time, to offer the posed questions as opportunities for reflection in case the concerns they raised have not yet been addressed. For the purpose of speeding up responses and making it easy to track respondents, we used an online survey (Malhotra, 2019). Moreover, historical circumstances obliged us to use an online survey even though the quality of the data was at times moderate; we finished the survey during the COVID-19 pandemic and the only way to speak with interviewees was via email or telephone.

We compiled a list of actions used to engage audiences from the literature. We selected 17 engagement actions for our analysis; they are reflected in Table 1. The actions selected by Harlow and Salaverria (2016) proved particularly helpful. In terms of the social media interactions we, too, like those researchers, included subscribing, paying, or donating money as forms of engagement action because we felt that they are clear ways of supporting media contents once the user trusts and enjoys the media brand. Reader donations and subscriptions enable many media outlets to remain independent and to act as whistleblowers. A number of newspapers, such as *The Guardian*, *Chequeado*, *ProPublica* and *El Faro*, encourage their readers to make donations so as to safeguard their editorial prerogative (Medina, Sánchez-Taberner, & Breiner, 2021).

**Table 1.** Engagement Actions

- |   |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Funding</li> <li>• Donating</li> <li>• Paying/subscribing</li> <li>• Viewing/reading</li> <li>• Repeating</li> <li>• Liking</li> <li>• Sharing (Twitter, FB, YouTube)</li> <li>• Creating and/or sending related content</li> <li>• Commenting</li> <li>• Mentioning (tagging)</li> <li>• Following (Instagram, Twitter, FB)</li> <li>• Rating contents</li> <li>• Responding to surveys</li> <li>• Reporting errors</li> <li>• Participating in interactive contents</li> <li>• Taking part in a fan club</li> <li>• Acquiring merchandise</li> </ul> |
|---|

In line with our research objective, we distributed a questionnaire to ascertain the level of focus media practitioners placed on audience engagement and the implementation of strategies that support the core business of media companies. For the purpose of knowing what engagement means to media practitioners and managers, and based on the list provided in Table 1, we asked the participants the following questions:

- How do you define engagement?
- Which of these actions do you regard as forms of engagement?
- What engagement actions were used in your company in relation to content creation?

Regarding monetizing engagement, we sought to understand how the impact of these actions was measured. Along these lines, we specifically asked participants to identify the key performance indicators (KPIs) they utilize.

The sample was selected from a group of fourteen professionals whose email addresses were already known or provided by some of the other practitioners. Moreover, in some cases, a one-hour follow-up interview was conducted with the participants in order to clarify their feedback, thus improving the quality of the information obtained. The study enabled us to come to some conclusions regarding how an audience listening strategy may enhance content development and commercialization.

The fieldwork was carried out between September of 2019 and March of 2020. The final sample included fourteen media company practitioners and executives from different media sectors (see Table 2). Among the interviewees were journalists, content producers, marketing managers and CEOs of the companies. Personal names are omitted to preserve the anonymity of the sources and are substituted by codes. The sampling methods applied were convenience and snowball. They are non-probability techniques, so they are not recommended for descriptive research; however, they are useful in exploratory studies (Malhotra, 2019), such as the one presented in this paper.

**Table 2.** Media Sector and Company of Survey Participants

Sector	Name of the company	Respondent code	Company position
Film producer	Bambú	R1	CEO
Film and TV director	Freelancer	R2	Marketing Manager
Production company	Onza Partners	R3	CEO
Production company	Secuoya	R4	R&D Manager
Radio station	COPE	R5	Marketing manager
Radio station	SER	R6	Digital manager
Radio station	RNE	R7	Journalist
Media group	Vocento	R8	Marketing manager
Media group	Henneo	R9	CEO
Multi Channel Network (MCN)	2btube	R10	CEO
Multi Channel Network (MCN)	Viewin Secuoya Nexus	R11	Community manager
Brand narrative company	VillaMacLuhan	R12	CEO
Broadcasting company	Atresmedia	R13	Content manager
Content creator	LuzuVlogs	R14	CEO

The approach focuses on a holistic view in the sense that the study includes all the media sectors in which audiences potentially play a role. This preliminary study was designed to explore a range of media, including information and entertainment channels, digital media and legacy media, radio stations and television channels and media that distribute and/or produce content, so as to establish whether common factors may be traced across the media landscape and to identify favorable conditions for the implementation of engagement practices. Most were Spanish companies, except for the YouTube channel aimed at a Latino audience, where the CEO is Spanish.

## 4. Findings

The actions that are most closely identified with engagement are sharing contents through social media and creating and sending related content; these are followed by likes and reporting errors; following that come repeat viewing or reading. Following social media and rating contents are considered engagement by half of them and less than half consider that engagement has to do with responding to surveys, mentions, viewing, listening or reading the media contents and making comments related to them. However, the economic link, namely making donations, subscribing or funding are not considered actions leading to increased engagement with audiences.

The following table (Table 3) summarizes the actions carried out by the companies included in this study. The last column shows the number of companies that implement the list of actions included, and the last row shows the number of actions used by each company, organised according to the media sector they belong to. Those companies in which no engagement action has been implemented are excluded. When the film producers (R1 & R2) and the journalist from the public radio network (R7) were asked, they expressed skepticism and no knowledge about the survey topic. When asked what they considered audience 'engagement' to be one of their responses (R1) was, 'Nice to collaborate, but here I will show you my absolute ignorance: What do you call engagement? We, as a production company, do not use that concept.' Another answered (R2): 'As for the survey, I have looked at it and nothing makes sense to me. I don't even know what engagement is.' That is why the table includes only eleven cases.

**Table 3.** What Engagement Actions Are Used in Your Company in Relation to Content Creation? \*

Actions	AVP*	AVP*	Radio	Radio	TV	YT**	MCN	MCN	Brand agency	Media group	Media group	More used actions
	R3	R4	R5	R6	R13	R14	R10	R11	R12	R8	R9	
Funding							1		1			2
Donations			1			1		1	1			4
Payment			1		1	1		1	1			5
View/read			1	1		1	1	1	1	1	1	8
Repeats		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	10
Likes	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			9
Sharing	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	11
Creating and/or sending related content	1	1	1		1	1	1	1	1			8
Comments	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			9
Mention	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			9
Followers	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	11
Rating contents			1	1		1		1	1			5
Responding to surveys	1		1		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	9
Reporting errors			1		1		1	1	1	1	1	7
Participate in interactive contents	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1			9
Fan club member			1			1	1	1	1			5
Acquiring merchandising goods	1		1			1	1	1	1	1	1	8
<b>Total actions implemented by company</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6</b>	

\*AVP: audiovisual producer; \*\*YT: YouTube

The engagement actions most frequently implemented for most of the companies, according to the survey, have to do with sharing, following social accounts, repeat consumption and participating in media contents. Next come the use of social media with comments, mentions, and likes, followed by responding to surveys and participating in interactive contents. Hence, most engagement is developed through activity in social media. Funding and donations are least often implemented for the purpose of engagement. Other actions, depending on the media sector, are not implemented.

The degree of knowledge about engagement and implementation of actions differs depending on the media sector. The sectors that employ most actions to engage audiences are the brand agency and the commercial radio companies, followed by the multichannel network, the YouTube creator and the digital marketing agency. The media sector that is least likely to develop engagement actions are the newspaper media groups.

For the managing director of one of the local media groups (R8), the problem for newspapers is that they remain at a distance from the audience. They did not apply any particular engagement strategy apart from tracking heavy users as potential subscribers and attractive targets for advertisers. To engage their readers, they try to bring relevant journalistic content to their audiences (R9). Hence, they focus on producing content rather than developing other kinds of engagement actions.

For the marketing manager of the other media group (R8), opening up content for the audience to participate in and engage with is a complex activity. To accept and integrate audience feedback as part of media brand content delivery requires editorial control. They had begun filtering comments, but after a while, they decided to close user access to comments.

In the audiovisual sector, neither the television channel nor the production companies selected many of the actions to engage audiences. However, audiovisual producers said that sharing content and user-generated content (UGC) helped them develop transmedia content (R1). They recognized that script, characters, and story can vary according to the viral sharing of content and the audience's comments. They also developed social media accounts for their shows' characters in line with audience interaction. For the television channel, 'likes' are used to trace the social significance of their contents (R13).

For the rest of the companies (radio stations, MCN, YouTube channels), the usual engagement practices they engage in are as follows: content sharing on social media, creating and delivering related content, and participating in interactive content. At multi-channel networks (MCN), interactions with the community comprise the basis for how the channel is configured and commercialized. Respondent 10 outlined the following tips for success on social media as a content creator: define one's identity and be transparent, talk to the audience as friends, deliver live and real contents, create a calendar and a schedule, and be on time. Premium communities and subscribers are key for YouTubers' business; they develop and create the content according to likes, views, viral sharing, comments, and interactions. They introduce UGC in their contents, and merchandising is an important secondary business that targets fans. YouTubers' business depends directly on the number of registered users (R14). YouTube channels get funding when they have 1,000 subscribers and more than 4,000 hours of viewing. Content is created from the conversation generated by donors and *ad hoc*, in line with donors' interests. Designs, like fan art, are sometimes created based on viewers' creations.

Since its inception, radio has included audience participation as a fundamental part of its content. One of the journalists (R5) said that they have tried to establish a parallel communication channel through WhatsApp, but the users of this social network do not represent the diversity of the radio audience and project a distorted image of the listener profile. The CEO of the brand narrative company (R12) added quizzes as an action geared toward engaging audiences with brands.

Hence, digital media and radio are the sectors that seem most keen on developing strategies to increase audience engagement and to consider audience feedback as part of their core business. According to the survey, audiovisual producers and television channels are more content- and viewing-oriented than audience-engagement-oriented.

The question about KPIs was more complicated and did not provide clear answers. Apart from the number of likes, followers, views, time spent, pages visited, comments, mentions, subscribers, members, responses and donations and respondent profiles, most of the participants found it somewhat difficult to answer this question.

Having studied what Spanish companies understand engagement to mean, how they measure and capitalize on related information for the purposes of content development and commercialization, some conclusions were raised after the findings in order to help companies design effective engagement strategies.

## 5. Conclusions

Based on the survey results, it can be inferred that audience engagement is strongly linked to social media interactions that are connected to the consumption of media content. However, with the exception of native digital media companies, traditional media companies are not extensively exploring various channels to enhance engagement with their audiences. As highlighted by Napoli (2012), engaging audiences is primarily a consequence of the interactive capabilities facilitated by the digital ecosystem. Native digital media companies integrate content created by the audience into their primary offerings. Legacy media companies, on the other hand, need to embrace digital orientation to facilitate interaction and engagement with their audiences.

After exploring practices regarding engagement in different media companies in Spain, we found that actions that favor engagement are not a priority for the advertising-funded media companies. We have not found any example beyond Multi Channel Networks representing youtubers and influencers, where increasing audience engagement contributes to increasing revenue; nor is there a direct connection between funding or audience payment with audience engagement. That could be the reason that most media managers do not promote engagement actions as a priority strategy and why they do not link engagement with donations or subscriptions.

Based on the interviews with media practitioners we conclude that for most of them, promoting audience engagement is more likely to be associated with the marketing department or research companies such as KantarMedia, Talkwalker or Parrot Analytics, rather than as a strategy to add value to content production or increasing revenues. In the survey, we discovered that our participants continue to think of the audience in terms of numbers of readers or viewers, but not in their capacity as collaborators to improve content or attract revenue.

Most of our respondents did not seem to have figured out how to monetize such listening to audiences. Some commit to engagement as a way of consolidating their brand, promoting contents, personalizing content delivery or improving audience satisfaction by creating participation channels, as pointed out by Chan-Olmsted & Shay (2015) and O'Brien & Toms (2008), but have not yet developed strategies to attract and engage advertisers. As Nelson & Webster (2016) have pointed out, the question about KPIs produced more bewilderment than constructive responses.

Certainly, the relationship with users is also related to the position of the media company in the value chain. For companies whose core business is not developed in the digital environment, generation of engagement is based on the search for satisfaction in the content that the audience consumes. We agree with Edlom (2022) that one of the keys to generating engagement in the media industry is that the content be relevant and close to audiences. In our survey, both

Youtubers and multichannel network practitioners saw engagement grow when the content was interesting to users. That content that does not interest the audience will fail to engage user attention or prompt interaction other than criticism by linking or sharing it makes clear sense. Listening to the audience may lead to content enhancement if the media company sees such input as relevant.

Thus, audiovisual production companies will continue to ensure that the stories engage the audience and that they identify with characters and plots (Urgellés, 2017) or, in the case of news media, seek stories or cover topics that are close and relevant to the readers. In this case, perhaps knowing their opinions on the topics covered can be a way to increase engagement (Kujur & Singh, 2017).

Media managers must decide how the audience can contribute to their business strategy, determine what their unique and irreplaceable role is, and take advantage of this resource to improve their performance. However, for some activities, such as audiovisual production, script writing and journalistic work, collaboration with non-expert audiences adds little value to the content, and therefore audience participation is limited.

As for the discussion on whether the media should be faithful to companies' foundational principles (Fuentes, 2007; Iglesias & Blanco, 2003) or open to the interests of their audiences, it seems sensible to recognize that they are not incompatible. Audiences are loyal to media outlets that have published editorial principles with which they feel identified, and which justify their choice. While respecting these principles, the media must develop strategies for listening to the audience in order to meet their interests and needs, taking advantage of the interactivity that digital technology allows (Macnamara, 2019; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). If they do so, it seems that it will be necessary to establish positions such as audience engagement editor and manager whose role is to develop accurate metrics to take certain data into account in the content production process and to commercialize media products to advertisers – thus going beyond social media activity.

In addition, users should know the risks involved in collaborating and co-creating. These risks require effective and updated systems that allow them to choose in which medium they wish to participate and evaluate the corresponding advantages and disadvantages. In addition to the benefits users receive – such as merchandise, deep insights, exclusive information, being a member of a community – following selection and screening by professionals (Gordon et al., 2018), the media must protect their users' intellectual property rights. Likewise, as pointed out by Walvaart et al. (2019), media companies should not discontinue their work as curators or simply leave the conversations. Tasks like monitoring and analyzing messages become part of the engagement editor's work, since user participation in content should reinforce the media company's curatorial task. Finally, it is necessary to make available the tools to analyze audience behavior and turn it into useful information for advertisers. According to Bijmolt et al. (2010), there is lingering difficulty in appropriating the data necessary for measuring customer engagement that is useful to advertisers. Engagement depends on the attention users pay to content, and attention is a value demanded by advertisers to measure the effectiveness of their actions. There is still a lot of research pending on how to measure attention.

In summary, producing and delivering content that is relevant and close to the audience, developing a digital ecosystem, and allocating economic, technological, and human resources to make operational audience focus are all actions that media companies must insert into their core business practices.

## 6. Limitations and Further Research

Research fieldwork conducted in 2020 may not capture the latest developments and practices implemented by media companies to increase engagement. As time passes, companies often

develop new strategies and techniques to adapt to changing trends and technologies. Therefore, in the future, conducting research in each sector can provide valuable insight into the specific practices and peculiarities that different media companies and industries have adopted. It might allow researchers to stay up to date with the latest advancements and understand the evolving landscape of audience engagement strategies.

Digital technology will continue to transform companies and we will see audiences experience greater involvement in media content, which advertisers will perceive with interest. Therefore, it should be acknowledged, as some previous research have (Carlsson & Nilsson, 2016; García-Aviles, 2012; Mersey, Malthouse, & Calder, 2010; Napoli, 2011), that this will continue to be a topic for research in the coming years. In this sense, observation of paradigmatic examples will continue to inspire anyone who wants to innovate. In further research, case studies focusing on a few cases from the same media sector may yield precise conclusions and thus help companies address different users in different environments.

Finally, engagement has been defined as the autonomy and empowerment of audiences, but it must not be forgotten that they continue to be the end-recipients of the media. Critically falling audience rates in recent years is due in part to their remoteness from user interests and tastes. In light of this preliminary exploratory research in Spain, a further aim is to develop strategies to raise awareness among media executives of the importance of engagement for building better media brands, preventing user apathy, and discovering how to produce relevant and attractive content. As Picone, Courtois & Paulussen (2015) concluded, commitment to engage audiences should be the focus of media company management for the near future.

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