

Revisiting the 'fallacy of meaningfulness'

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Joke Hermes, Inholland University, Amsterdam/Diemen, Netherlands

In media audience research we tend to assume that media are engaged with when they are used, however 'light' such engagement might be. Once 'passive media use' was banned as a reference to media use, being a media audience member became synonymous with being a meaning producer. In audience research however I find that media are not always the object of meaning making in daily life and that media texts can be hardly meaningful. Thinking about media and *engagement*, there is a threefold challenge in relation to audience research. The coming into being of platform media and hence of new forms of media production on a micro level that come out of and are woven into practices of media use, suggests that we need to redraft the repertoire of terms used in *audience* research (and maybe start calling it something else). Material and immaterial media production, the unpaid labour on the part of otherwise audience members should for instance be taken into account. Then, secondly, there is the continuing challenge to further develop heuristically strong ways of linking media use and meaning making, and most of all to do justice, thirdly, to those moments and ways in which audiences truly *engage* with media texts without identifying them with those texts.

This threefold venture (taking into account the producerly mode media use can take; further develop tools to understand the relationship between texts, users, producers and the politics of these links, to understand what engagement 'means' and what engagement can 'do' for audience research) I want to start by discussing my own 'engagement' with audience studies. This will include discussion of what the 'fallacy' of assuming media use always to be meaningful. I will go on to discuss criticism of newer forms of optimistic interpretation of what is accomplished in everyday media interactions. To then come to a case study of what for some in the Netherlands is a great national embarrassment and for others a test of the right to a national identity in an era of globalization. I am referring to the national stand-off between those who want to abolish Black Pete (Zwarte Piet), or at least Black Pete as a racist stereotype and those who argue that Black Pete is part of the Dutch Sinterklaas tradition, a yearly festive event organized for children akin to Christmas's Santa. United Nations expert Verene Sheperd's call for a public debate in the Netherlands and the abolishment of this racist stereotype in 2013 was met with disbelief and rejection, certainly not the smooth consciousness raising trajectory she seems to have expected (NRC, 4 July 2014).

Sheperd's exhortation that the Dutch government do something against this form of blatant racism was answered by, among other things, a facebook petition in support of 'our Black Pete', including black face, exaggerated red lips and huge golden earrings. The petition (wordplay on piet and petition) was liked 2 million times in a mere couple of days, in a country of 16 million Dutch, and attests to the sensitive chord that was struck. It strengthened ongoing local opposition to Black Pete as a racist stereotype as well as defense of what was termed a tradition and part of Dutch national heritage. As a case study it will allow me to make my argument in favor of nuanced understanding of everyday media use that highlights how audiences and practices of meaning making have been understood in media and cultural studies (partly as protest against the traditions of effects and of uses and gratifications

research that were dominant – and in some ways still are). It will also allow me to use ‘engagement’ as one of a series of terms that can help do justice to audience practice as we know it and the new everyday media production practices that have become part of it (liking, linking, commenting on media content and spreading it further). The idea is to come to a framework that combines political sensitivity with reflection on the political responsibility inherent in knowledge production.

Engagement will figure here as the commitment of intellectuals on behalf of audiences, and as the link felt by audiences with specific texts and genres. There will also be engagement in its older definition of doing battle: both by media critics and, indeed by audience members themselves. Engagement will provide depth to the other terms that might be useful for researching media-as-used: affordance, appraisal, curation and cooptation.

*Fallacy of meaningfulness: contesting the fan paradigm and reflecting on the position of the researcher

The backdrop of my argument is early media and cultural studies audience research. Some of you may remember the early days of critical qualitative audience research in the 1980s. The underdog was championed against the dominant effects paradigm in media and communication research. This was a combined political, theoretical and practical-empirical undertaking. David Morley’s work on *Nationwide* and his *Family Television*, Ien Ang’s *Watching Dallas* and Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance* were part of a call to arms to inquire into what made media use worthwhile from the perspective of audiences. It was definitely my personal moment of engagement with the media, in engagement’s definition of going to battle, as a researcher and as a media user and lover of various ‘cheap’ genres including romance novels, action movies and police series. While difficult to fathom today popular media were denigrated as a matter of course, as you were yourself if you were a user.

In some cases an interest in popular culture had less to do with its inherent quality (or lack thereof) but with what popular culture accomplished. The ‘affordance’ if you will of popular culture – before that term was used. There was critical theoretical inquiry regarding the role, place and function of popular culture in such journals as *Social Text*, such as Fredric Jameson’s treatise on reification and utopia in mass culture (1979), feminist film studies that queried the representation of women (Mellencamp, Petro, Mulvey) and also the -in some ways populist- work of John Fiske. Writing about television, Fiske suggested we understand television from the perspective of the meanings and pleasures the medium offered. While clearly audience research would seem to be the way to do this (to me at least), Fiske opted for a perspective that can be criticized on two counts. He took the overwhelming popularity of television as enough proof that audiences cared and studied popular genres and series using text analytical means combined with the occasional introduction of a portrait of individual users. Anecdotal rather than systematic evidence of his claim that television viewing could and should be understood as cultural or semiotic democracy. Secondly, Fiske appeared to assume that everyday use was simply a slightly less intense form of fan use.

As Fiske’s work met with far more criticism and less appreciation than he was due, let me state, for the record that Fiske’s *Television Culture* (1987) is a landmark publication that

engaged not just with the low status of popular culture but also with issues raised by feminism. I have greatly liked reading and teaching Fiske's work. Sometimes because and sometimes in spite of its populist upbeat approach to popular genres. Fiske, moreover effectively proposed that audience engagement with popular media needed to be studied urgently. His call to arms met with success even though what came out of the newfound interest in audiences and popular culture research in the 1980s was open to critical assessment. Meaghan Morris quotes Judith Williamson in her well-known 'Banality in Cultural Studies' article (*Block* 1988) with approval that "left-wing academics (were) picking up strands of 'subversion' in every piece of pop culture from Street Style to Soap Opera". In fighting the then dominant stereotype of docile audiences as cultural dopes, there was, according to some, a danger of resistance becoming the new dogma. Doing battle on behalf of audiences required, to Morris's mind, at the very least that contradictions and what Martha Nussbaum called 'tragic choices' (in the *Fragility of Goodness*, 2001) are taken into account. Morris refers to text interpretative research by Patricia Mellencamp that showed the dilemmas facing female spectators and comedians. While comedy gave women a voice, it also contained that voice and was an instrument in disciplining them. An argument Jameson would immediately recognize. When referring to the utopian dimension in popular culture (*Jaws*, in the 1979 article I am referring to), he speaks of 'horse trading': in exchange for a view of a better world, as individual subjects and audience members we also of necessity align with the dominant order.

While notions such as 'the active audience', and indeed 'semiotic democracy' took root, there was rather less actual research being done than you would assume, given that the meanings and pleasures of popular media had become a worthy subject. There can be little doubt about the engagement of *intellectuals* with popular texts, witness, eventually, Buffy studies conferences and many an interesting paper on other popular television series. What we know far less about is the actual engagement of audiences in everyday media use. Although it was presumed audiences were deeply invested in the content they viewed in great numbers, I want to question that that was actually the case. There is not that much research of everyday media use to support this idea. Also audiences were studied from a mistaken point of view, namely that media use can generally be thought to scale one-dimensionally from less to more intense, with incidental viewing at one end and fandom at the other. Implied in this continuum is that the larger or smaller degree in which audiences supposedly took up forms of co-ownership of mediatexts is politically significant. I want to put forward that media use in itself is of interest, not only or especially as a reflection of the media text.

The fan argument runs as follows. As a 1992 collection that focuses on fans and fandom (Lisa Lewis (ed) *The adoring audience. Fan culture and popular media*, 1992) suggests: fans are no different from other media users, only slightly more focused and intense. While trying to rescue fans and fandom from pathologization, an honorable and worthwhile goal (Joli Jensen's and John Fiske's chapters), this line of argument has the perverse effect of suggesting that all media use is highly meaningful (or we would not do it).

Extract Reading women's magazines (1995):

Studying the reading of women's magazines in that same period, I more or less expected to find lay experts. Readers might not use academic terms, they would surely explain and defend

their reading. They did not. Readers of women's magazines had relatively little to say about them, in stark contrast to the romance readers interviewed by Janice Radway (1984), or the girls Angela McRobbie had spoken with in her reconstruction of girl culture (1978, 1991). It is entirely possible that women's magazines are very different from romances or girl magazines. At least in the 1980s they did not develop strong narrative interest or cult followings. They do not, or at least did not, have 'fans'. They are often read in a distracted mode, with little concentration, whether they are domestic weeklies, glossies or feminist magazines. To assume in such a case that general everyday media use can be identified with attentive and meaningful reading of specific texts makes little sense. Media use simply is not always meaningful. Morley's 1986 analysis of everyday television viewing and gendered family dynamics made the point years before I did. As one of his respondents says: 'Sometimes I intend to look at it, but ... at the end of it I've seen everything but I've heard nothing (1986:56).' Likewise magazines are leafed through, their availability a standard option to pass 'empty' time in a break at work, waiting for children to end their swimming lesson, or to be called in for a medical consultation. Like television, women's magazines are a standard part of our lives with unquestioned (fairly low) status.

My disappointment in these early interviews about women's magazines had the fortunate effect of alerting me to the danger of being drawn to 'fans', to knowledgeable readers and viewers who easily express themselves. As a result I disagree with John Fiske's assertion that fandom is a heightened form of popular culture and that fans are simply excessive readers who differ from ordinary readers in degree rather than in kind (Fiske in Lewis, 1992: 46). We have to accept that mundane everyday media use may be something else than fan use. This is not to go back to a general notion of passivity or the idea that media users are cultural dopes the moment they do not engage in fan use. It is simply to say that we need a wider repertoire of terms to deal with media use in its various modes and valences that is not exclusively locked in to the media text.

That we tend to exaggerate the meaningfulness of media use as researchers and fall prey to a fallacy of meaningfulness (of assuming media texts to be far more important to users [including ourselves] than they actually are) in itself is not surprising. It is hard for a professional to see that what we as media researchers invest our working time in may not matter greatly outside of the academy. While our engagement with media is not at stake, there is the question of legitimating our salaries and social status as media researchers and critics. In the eyes of many I suspect our contribution to understanding of the world is predicated on the very effects paradigm that we criticize for its implicit politics: its paternalism and suggestion of passivity of audiences. It is the accepted common sense assumption that the media do have social, political and psychological effects that spawns many a grant and chair to study the media. Clearly the study of the media becomes less urgent if audiences are not at risk from media texts, or, alternatively, if media texts are not a 'tool' to get to audiences' hearts and minds. Hopefully, foregrounding engagement will not strengthen that very paradigm on which I suppose we are free-riders but provide an opening to a politically more open understanding of media use. By open I mean: that such a politics is critical, that it questions the status quo and social inequality, that it engages with emancipation and helps create a more level playing field for all.

What defines everyday media use most perhaps, it its overall sense of the interchangeability of media texts. While some are definitely better programs, authors, musicians than others, there is an abundance of choice and acceptance of the fact that the ultimate best is not always available (or necessary). In as far as there is everyday media criticism it can be recognized in such statements as that ‘there is nothing on television today’, which does not mean there is nothing to watch but perhaps that nothing at that very moment appeals, that such a statement communicates well one’s general state of mind or may make the right impression of the speaker being a discerning individual. Such a statements can also be taken as everyday media criticism: further evidence that generally media audiences are aware of the fact that media products are mostly made to be the best possible value for the lowest possible cost, that is to say bottom line acceptable to a sizable group. Savvy viewers that audiences are, as Mark Andrejevic put it (2004 in *Reality TV. The work of being watched*), they are generally knowledgeable without feeling the need to translate that knowledge into further criticism.

Given that this is what everyday media us is like, we may not as yet use the perfect set of concepts to understand it and gauge its multiple values and irritants. This choice of concepts ultimately depend on what we want media audience research to do. For my part, I would like everyday media use research to provide insight in some of the *mechanisms* at play in media use: such as the *expectation of distraction* and being transported to a wholly different world; including the *expectation of identity formation*, however imaginary those identities might be, as well as, thirdly, what help the media are in making the world meaningful. Not only do expectations feed into media use, so does a sense of obligation, fear or hope that fears will be laid to rest (news studies). Notions such as Schudson’s term ‘monitorial citizen’ are of great use in that regard: they help study processes and flux rather than of fixed identities and states of being. If subversion of the dominant order is part of the pleasure of media use than so is the reassuring realignment with one’s perception of that order. Likewise, it is entirely possible to find convincing examples of alignment and acceptance of the dominant order that lead to a sense of disquiet and in some cases to outspoken protest and resistance. Audience studies cannot and should not presume to find one or the other, or to expect merely one mechanism or development to be taking place at any one time.

All in all then media use as a distinct set of activities cannot and should not be contained in the mold of degrees of fandom even though fandom is a part of it. Instead such terms as expectation, monitoring, the wish to abate anxiety or the felt need for distraction come closer to what might be happening most of the time. It is of interest whether we are able to reconstruct or even model these motivations and states as a definitive set of practices that are ‘media use’, the more so now that media use and media production have been defined as overlapping. There is a further real danger of losing critical energy and drive if we were to decide that there is no real distinction between media production and media use, as there is. The world of production has to do with status, sometimes money and closure (both in media production’s formal and informal modes) in contrast to the endless world of media consumption. In as far as everyday media consumption and production have to do with reproduction (of our shared interpretation of the world as we know it, of who we are, including -in a Marxist frame-, as workers) this is usually not the production of *new* worlds or world views but, mostly, of minor and incidental adjustments and the defense of old positions. Jose van Dijck and David Nieborg have argued this far more cogently in a discussion of the

newspeak involved in ‘wikinomics’, in which co-creation, mass creativity and convergence culture are often repeated key terms. I will turn to their argument now, as this is reminiscent of how ‘fans’ were and are overused in audience research.

*Media convergence and the 1-9-90 divide:

When it comes to the more recent discussion of media audiences as producers, a similar picture emerges of the reduction of everyday media production either to products made, or to the sheer fact of amateur productivity and the political significance accorded to that activity. Although enthusiasm over amateur media producers (Jenkins, 2006 *Media Convergence* is an example as is his earlier *Textual Poachers*, 1992) is sympathetic, I find such reductionism worrying. The producer (with an s, the conflation of producer and user) and the prosumer, the producer/consumer appear to be the fan’s twin sisters. The spectrum of possible interpretations of everyday media use as a consumer and a producer thus goes full circle going from fans as the most active meaning makers to ordinary media use, to ordinary media production such as liking on Facebook, to writing software code for games or producing mash up videos for YouTube, the type of critical fan activity which of course by the same Henry Jenkins was dubbed ‘textual poaching’ for the predecessors of these producers working from outside rather than inside media institutions and corporations. In discussion of co-creation, Van Dijck and Nieborg (2009) discern this similar slide of meaning occurring that values ‘creativity’ above all. It is the return of audience studies’ fallacy of meaningfulness in studies of everyday media productivity. Van Dijck and Nieborg’s argument bears summarizing for it makes clear how strong the drive is to label everyday interaction with the media in terms of reductionist notion of engagement – that is quite possibly often wildly overstating the case.

Van Dijck and Nieborg take wikinomics and the unproblematized use of terms such as co-creation in web 2.0 business manifestos to task that suggest partnerships, equal weight, reach and rights of individual media users compared to the giant media corporations that Facebook and Google, to name just two, are. I quote: “Allegedly, peer production models will replace opaque, top-down business models, yielding to transparent, democratic structures where power is in the shared hands of responsible companies and skilled, qualified users. Manifestos such as *Wikinomics* (Tapscott and Williams) and ‘We-Think’ (Leadbeater) argue collective culture to be the basis for digital commerce. (2009: 855)” Henry Jenkins too is taken to task for his overly optimistic view of collaborative culture. Summarizing their critique of *Convergence Culture*, Van Dijck and Nieborg say:

“Much as Tapscott, Williams and Leadbeater, Jenkins’ belief in communal action and collective intelligence overrides every argument rooted in political economy. In the interplay between two kinds of media power, the new digital environment of Web 2.0 assumedly renders the ‘old rhetoric of opposition and co-optation’ (2006: 215) irrelevant because consumers

are given more power to shape media content. Examples to back up these claims are the Abu Ghraib photographs, bloggers who promote campaigns of minority candidates (Move on; www.moveon.org) and many other grass roots media which mobilize mainstream media to include their views. However, the proven ‘success’ of these instances of participatory culture does not warrant their extension to culture in general and neither does it excuse cultural theorists from exploring the profound socioeconomic consequences of this presumed paradigm shift towards an all-encompassing idea of culture.” (idem 869)

Van Dijck and Nieborg advocate critical rethinking and deconstruction of the ‘hidden magic’ of web-based media culture in that the sudden coming together of capitalist business interests and communal spirit offers grounds for suspicion even for the not otherwise paranoid. “We think that new models of convergence culture demand new modes of divergent criticism, unraveling the strategies of cooptation.” (870) Old-fashioned audiencehood like the newer forms of ‘prosumerhood’ of the digital age can be understood in terms of engagement. Arguably there are many forms and modes of engagement for ‘non-professional media interaction,’ including cooptation, co-creation, amateur production as well as ‘being an audience.’ The challenge is to not flatten that range of modes and see them as either passive or active; or rewrite the range to include only one half of the former spectrum, as in from dope-crossed-out to all possible intensities of fandom. There is fandom and cooptation, there are the pleasures, responsibilities and irritations of amateur media production as well as of mass media consumption and they all touch on audiencehood.

Even Jay Rosen of ‘the people formerly known as the audience’ (June 2006 blog) agrees. While his famous blog starts with

The people formerly known as the audience wish to inform media people of our existence, and of a shift in power that goes with the platform shift you’ve all heard about.

Think of passengers on your ship who got a boat of their own. The writing readers. The viewers who picked up a camera. The formerly atomized listeners who with modest effort can connect with each other and gain the means to speak— to the world, as it were.

.... (A range of examples, instances, champions and definitions follows)...

he also says:

Look, media people. We are still perfectly content to listen to our radios while driving, sit passively in the darkness of the local multiplex, watch TV while motionless and glassy-eyed in bed, and read silently to ourselves as we always have.

Should we attend the theatre, we are unlikely to storm the stage for purposes of putting on our own production. We feel there is nothing wrong with old style, one-way, top-down media consumption. Big Media pleasures will not be denied us. You provide them, we’ll consume them and you can have yourselves a nice little business.

Whether and how everyday media productivity will ultimately dramatically change what Rosen calls ‘big media pleasures’ remains to be seen. While digitalization has changed the world, changed how we do our work and changed our media use, it has not obliterated audiencehood nor has it alleviated the need to further develop a critical framework everyday media interaction that does justice to its complexity, the meanings it generates and its political significance without assuming that any of those three will always necessarily manifest themselves nor that, when they do, they would do so in a politically or socially sympathetic form.

The very same Henry Jenkins criticized by Van Dijck and Nieborg for the position he takes in *Convergence culture* may yet offer useful further concepts to help get beyond the related fallacies of meaningfulness and mass-creativity. -With Sam Ford and Joshua Green- Jenkins

published *Spreadable Media. Creating value and meaning in a networked culture* in 2013. A slightly earlier chapter in *The Handbook of Media Audiences* (Nightingale ed, 2011) suggests that both the fan and the media user as cultural producer have been ‘pushed to do too much work’. Quoting Matt Hills’ work on fans, they put forward that this is the result of the older political agenda that sought to underline that media audiences were not dopes. This refers back to the debate referenced by Meaghan Morris in *Block*, which suggests that we have yet to come to terms with the linking of consumption with passivity and hence femininity. For now, it needs to be clear that Green and Jenkins (authors of the 2011 chapter summarizing the book that I am quoting from here) are well aware that there is a risk

‘of making DIY media making the be-all and end-all of participatory culture, reducing other kinds of participation –those involving evaluating, appraising, critiquing, and recirculating content – to “consumptive behavior by another name” (2011: 111).

Their goal meanwhile is to understand how value and worth get appraised and ascribed in and by circulation. Interestingly, they try to reach that goal by *including* human agency *without* returning to individuals as autonomous meaning makers. (That is the individual who is always threatened by the lure of mass media in the media effects paradigm). Giddens’ duality of structures, gets rewritten here to understand the mix of platform and broadcast media in terms of affordance and agency. The logic of spreadability positions audiences as

‘grassroot intermediaries, unauthorized and self-appointed parties who actively shape the flow of messages within their community’ (Green and Jenkins, 117) –

and of course as those to whom media content comes.

Grassroots appraisal is a highly useful notion for my argument. It does not suggest that media texts are always meaningful, but that they are the subject of a process of valuation – and therefore can be deemed useless or even, for all practical purposes, meaningless without such an outcome suggesting that media use or DIY media production are themselves useless or meaningless. Grassroots appraisal also leans away from a notion of degrees of participation, it is as it were a threshold activity. Neither, as a result, does it assume the media text involved as the source of any meanings that might come into circulation around it.

“The meaning of a cultural transaction cannot be reduced to the exchange of value between producer and consumer but also has to do with what the cultural good allows them to say about themselves and what it allows them to say to the world (idem, 119).”

Today’s networked culture, moreover, allows consumers to reappraise what corporate owners (or for that matter governments or the United Nations) may otherwise consider as worthless: unexpected residual value is discovered and circulated (121). What was known before as media consumption now can be rewritten as acts of *curation, conversation and circulation*. ‘We see consumption as participation, with the understanding that participation carries multiple and perhaps even contradictory valances’ (125). In a networked culture it makes even less sense to speak of ‘just consumption’ than it did before, precisely because media use is many things at the same time. It is in uneven parts ritual behavior, dependent on other rituals; the taking on of commitments and responsibilities; a primary activity; part of conversations; the result of chance encounters as well as the material that in all its unevenness and incidental, unplanned entry into our lives helps us build and rebuild a sense of identity and community.

This, gets me back to engagement, to how engagement can be understood from the perspective of audience research, as well as to what researching everyday media use can do for our understanding of engagement. At this point I want to show you images from the Dutch media to do with our yearly Sinterklaas festivities.

Case study Black Pete (or Peter), Zwarte Piet in Dutch

I am rather hoping none of you are familiar with this case. That hope will likely prove false as the Black Pete or Zwarte Piet dispute in the Netherlands was reported on in such international media as *Time* magazine, *the Guardian*, *the Independent*, *the New York Times* and *the Economist* mostly as an example of incredible and outrageous racism on the part of the Dutch.

Zwarte Piet, Black Pete, since the mid 19th century has been depicted as the helper of Sinterklaas. Sinterklaas is dressed as a Roman Catholic prelate, arrives each year in November from Spain where he purportedly lives to celebrate his birthday on December 5 by presenting gifts to all the children. These gifts are delivered via the chimney. The usual explanation for the blackface the Petes wear is that they are chimney sweeps and that the black signifies soot. Interestingly, the Petes are nothing like their alleged Italian forebears who were hired in earlier ages. They wear colourful medieval court costumes and berets, sport chunky gold earrings and full red lips and all in all are reminiscent of the colonial image of African slaves. This is further confirmed by childlike behavior, pranks and outright simple-mindedness.

While an older tradition, celebrated locally, with someone acting the part of Sinterklaas arriving in a nearby harbor all over the country, the tradition was given a boost from the moment it was televised by Dutch national broadcasting from 1952 onwards. The arrival of Sinterklaas today is staged for a massive audience of parents and children and reported live. The arrival is part of a yearly produced children's drama series that is formatted as a news broadcast: the Sinterklaasjournaal (2002 – present). The key intrigue each year is whether the presents brought from Spain will be delivered to the children. Some years they are misplaced, or lost, or the Pieten are busy trying to solve a mystery. Sinterklaas in all of this is the fatherly, helpful figure.

When I was a child the Pieten were quite fearful characters. The same bags holding candy that the Pieten throw around when they arrive were to be used, we were told, to take naughty children back to Spain. To this end the Pieten also carried brush rods, short brooms really (strengthening the chimney sweep explanation) to punish us. The rods have long gone. In 1986 it was decided there should be one national Sinterklaas (even though many Sinterklases are still arriving by boat and train in various Dutch cities), and that Zwarte Piet should no longer carry his brush rod. From a headmaster type figure of authority Sinterklaas has become all friendliness, while the Pieten, supposedly became less stereotypically stupid.

Zwarte Piet recently became an even more contested figure than before. While ethnologists report on early objections against the racist characteristics of the Pieten in the 1960s and more so after the independence of Surinam in 1975 (Helsloot, in *Aphasia* 2012), this was hardly an issue for the early children's television coverage. Nor was it an issue when the arrival of Sinterklaas and the Sinterklaasjournaal became real media event (from 1986 and 2002

onwards). There was some protest from the Surinamese-Dutch community but it is only in the mid 20 zeroes that anti-black-pete activism catches on. This happens when a poet and activist called Quinsy Gario starts a campaign wearing a t-shirt that says: Zwarte Piet is racism. Although Gario and a friend (rapper Kno-ledge Cesare) tried to claim the right to their freedom of expression, they were hauled away when Sinterklaas arrived in 2011 in Dordrecht. This did not stop a growing mixed group of demonstrators in 2012. In 2013 UN consultant Verene Shepherd admonished the Netherlands and a group around Gario take the Amsterdam city administration to court for encouraging racial discrimination. 2014 saw real riots in Gouda, 60 are arrested for disturbing the peace, protesters were arrested by special police units. Meanwhile several major department store chains decided to order their seasonal wrapping paper without images of Black Pete.

UN expert Verene Shepard's exhortation to stop the racist custom of having Sinterklaas accompanied by a group of slaves in 2013, was answered by an unexpected action on Facebook called Pietitie. The page could be liked by anyone who felt that nothing was wrong with 'our' Zwarte Piet. Nearly two million Dutch did so in a matter of days. To suggest that Zwarte Piet was racist was to undercut Dutch immaterial heritage and to spoil what should be the most festive period of the year for children.

This is definitely engagement: not just as commitment to a mediated ritual festivity but also to its defense in and via the media. This is engagement as going to battle. Pietitie and the abolish-Piet websites that were also created are, in Green and Jenkins' terms, everyday acts of curation, conversation and circulation. In its affordance (as technology allowing for a particular type of communication) Facebook was used to signal appreciation of Zwarte Piet precisely by circulating and appraising images.

How to understand Pietitie and those who liked the page? Going back to the text whether the Pietitie text or the mass of Black Pete images does not concord with the sentiment expressed in the 2 million likes or the comments. Neither does it seem really right to gauge Pietitie for its political claim and effects. Both of these strategies are obvious choices for straightforward audience research. It would result in for instance the identification of a small number of key themes or topic areas that could be dubbed: naiveté (sinterklaas is for children), racist nationalism (if you don't like it here, go back to your own country) and aggressive humour aimed at disqualifying the anti-Pete protesters: Snow men need to be forbidden. I take offense as a white person, my nose is nothing like a carrot. Or: Our cat does not mind when we eat a Tom Puss pastry. While a legitimate reading, it reduces Pietitie to Sinterklaas-as-text, and leads into denouncing all those who signed (or liked) as racists. Not a very surprising conclusion or a highly productive one.

What happens when we take the affordance of Facebook into account and the making and liking of Pietitie as acts of appraisal: of the curation and circulation of a particular message, as the minutes of a wide-ranging conversation? There are still a great many racist remarks, and an amazing number of disqualifying statements (both in favour of Pietitie and against it). The disqualifiers however come fairly late. Facebook is designed as interrelated friends' networks where you leave a personal trail attesting to the fact that you are an interesting person, worth the friendship signified by your facebook links. This is a place where you can be excused a

little political incorrectness, you are, after all, among friends. You are allowed to utter a heartfelt sense of bereavement when the very best memories of your childhood (allegedly) are threatened from the outside.

The Facebook likes and comments are appraisal, undertaken to curate content in which 2 million Dutch express a wish for a world of innocence: this is a children's festive event. While they, as grown-ups, may have fallen from paradise, no need for their children to do so as well. (I so wish to give my children this magic experience). The claim that this is racism simply has no place in the idealized world of Sinterklaas (a complete stranger after all who brings gifts, and often the very things you have asked for). As several comments claim: children know no racism. This is patently untrue but that cannot be the criterium when trying to understand everyday media interaction. Related to the wish to salvage Sinterklaas as a domain of innocence, joy and togetherness, are the angry complaints that 'this is our tradition, keep your hands off!'. The comments suggest a deep sense of loss. 'We just have to take it'. It is as if two million Dutch just woke up to the fact of globalization. There is no such thing any more as an unproblematically Dutch piece of the world. Others come there, feel they co-own it, suggest we accord to their rules. It is disenchantment and shared grief over a double idolization or reification (childhood as paradise and the nation state as a sovereign entity that can be owned) that is being circulated much more than racism.

Of course it is *also* racist, the jokes, the threats and some of the images that circulate are downright disgusting. Examples are the unfortunate action of the local populist party in Rotterdam to strap small black Pete dolls to lantern posts suggesting the terrible practice of lynching, or jokes figuring aggressive dogs to be set on those who keep raising black Pete as a racist issue. Simply focusing on Pietitie as a key text however is useless: the Pete is racism sites are as relevant (if less enormously big) as are a slew of newspaper articles on the subject. What is important to understand that the image of Pete spreads in a wide variety of interpretations, colourings (literally) and discursive contexts. To understand everyday media interactivity we need to start from the variety of images and messages (cf Wetherell and Potter on everyday talk, 1988). We need to trace the different streams and understand how particular inflections are afforded by the media that bring them across: Facebook's friends network offering a relatively safe space to show feelings and emotions that might, in other contexts be too easily dismissed as politically incorrect or even racist (which they were in the end, but certainly not initially: it was 'just' about Zwarte Piet). The Piet is racism groups used websites, much more a protesters medium: a space where one has full editorial control, and where a group can have control rather than individual spokespeople. The newspapers reconstructed the history of Sinterklaas as a ritual, quoting experts and actual fact. An academic paper, this conference, affords me to signal these limits, to argue that in this instance the Dutch may be less racist than they would seem to be. Most of all it allows me to suggest we do not allow this instance of conversation to be an overall assessment of the Dutch in general. In favour of this argument I can only refer to the very Sinterklaasjournaal itself. The public broadcaster's children dramaserie that is formatted as a daily news broadcast, a Journaal – playfully introducing children to good citizenship.

The sinterklaasjournaal newsroom, or editors, or writers or what shall we call them decided to take on board the public debate in 2014. Sinterklaas's steamship first was hit by a rainbow. In

itself a friendly storm it coloured the Pieten in all the shades of the rainbow itself (later on they mostly return to blackface again), and, most remarkably, the resolution of the 2014 story line with the introduction of a second, black Sinterklaas. In its imagery the Sinterklaasjournaal restructures the old master-slave dichotomy, one of the reasons Black Pete is seen as a racist figure. Old Piet, the new black Sint is a colleague, and the other Pieten co-workers in a friendly collective. We'll see what next year's Sinterklaasfeest brings. The newspapers predict a further round of upheaval but then that is in their best interest: without upheaval and to do, there is news to print.

In as far as audience research for this new era is concerned: we do not need to assume meaningfulness, nor relate meaning production to an original text. Neither is there a pre-given political premium on productivity (or a problem with mere consumption, with not further circulating the texts one has appraised and found to one's liking). We can do with a new set of labels: media interaction research, would that be a good one? For myself I really like how text and context can be merged in research by using the vocabulary introduced by Green and Jenkins and others: affordance, appraisal, curation, conversation and circulation all help get us away from sizing up individual people or groups of people. Like engagement they help focus on how meanings come into being, change and disappear in everyday processes of media use and media production, on how media studies is both personal and a systematic analysis of the human condition.