

Web series, *Cancelled*, and the value of engagement

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Abstract:

As a type of short-form content made available on digital platforms, the web series is now twenty-five years old. Since the turn of the millennium and with the subsequent emergence of Web 2.0 and platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo, web series production across the world has grown exponentially. Web series are currently being independently produced and screened at more than 80 web series festivals across the world from Korea to Berlin pre Covid-19 with many festivals subsequently moving online, and web series themselves reflecting the lockdown situation as in the case of Luke Eve's series *Cancelled* filmed on an i-phone and published on Facebook. On a spectrum of engagement (Hill 2020) that begins with audiences helping to crowd fund a project, audience engagement in the web series space therefore offers an intriguing insight into how this can play out in the online environment in terms of co-creation. Through an exploration of the comments and reactions to the series' videos on Facebook, we were able to assess how viewers engaged with the web series *Cancelled* and its creators at a particular moment in time. This paper explores the kinds of cultural and social value that can derive from an affective encounter with content that reflected the viewers own lived reality of the Covid experience.

As a type of short-form content made available on digital platforms, the web series is now twenty-five years old. Since the turn of the millennium and with the subsequent emergence of Web 2.0 and platforms such as You Tube and Vimeo, web series production across the world has grown exponentially. Web series are currently being independently produced and screened at more than 80 web series festivals across the world from Korea to Berlin pre Covid-19 with many festivals subsequently moving online, and web series themselves reflecting the lockdown situation as in the case of Luke Eve's series *Cancelled* filmed on an i-phone and published on Facebook. On a spectrum of engagement (Hill 2020) that begins with audiences helping to crowd fund a project, audience engagement in the web series space therefore offers an intriguing insight into how this can play out in the online environment in terms of co-creation. Through an exploration of how viewers were encouraged to engage with the web series *Cancelled* and its creators at a particular moment

in time, this paper explores the kinds of cultural and social value that can derive from an affective encounter with content that reflected the viewers' own lived reality of the Covid experience.

Keywords: Web series, audience engagement, online engagement, Facebook, co-creation, Covid, value

'Engagement, it seems, has become the defining aim of the screen industries.

Where once getting eyeballs on content was sufficient, now a different kind of relationship between audience and screen is desired.'

Elizabeth Evans, *Understanding Engagement in Transmedia Culture*, Routledge, 2020

'It's really about engagement when you are talking about online.'

Web series producer Luke Eve, September 2, 2020.

The funny and often touching web series *Cancelled* dramatizes the experience of Australian web series creator, Luke Eve, and his Spanish fiancée, Maria Albiñana, following the cancellation of their wedding as a result of Covid-19 in Valencia in March 2020. Written and produced by Eve and Albiñana, the series was filmed on a mobile phone during lockdown in Maria's apartment, with the assistance of Karen, Eve's mother, who had just arrived in Spain for the wedding. Ten episodes were released to the Facebook platform on a weekly basis from May 11 to July 15, 2020 attracting a regular viewership of 208 to 216 thousand views per episode. At the time of writing, *Cancelled* has had over 2 million views on Facebook Watch according to Luke Eve's Wikipedia page.¹ If two million viewers is a relatively small figure when compared with the global success of other web series, such as the Australian soap operas featuring gay and lesbian communities in Sydney, *Horizon* (first season 2009) and *Starting from Now* (first season 2016) which have each garnered more than 100 million views over their various seasons, it is significant not only as a measure of interest generated by a single season, but also for the speed with which the producers were able to generate a significant viewership.

While *Cancelled* succeeded in attracting and holding an enthusiastic audience over the course of its duration, as the quotation from Elizabeth Evans suggests, media content is today judged by more than the size of its audience. Contemporary media companies aspire to engage their audiences in an experience that both Evans (2020) and Barker (2021) describe as a co-creation of the decisions and choices taken by producers and audience. In the analysis that follows, we explore what forms audience engagement with *Cancelled* took, how it was achieved and what it might mean for future research on web series' audiences.

As a type of scripted short-form content made available on a variety of digital platforms, the web series is now twenty-five years old, if we take the American episodic online soap opera *The Spot* as a starting point in 1995 (Christian 2018). Since the turn of the

millennium and with the subsequent emergence of Web 2.0 and platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo, web series production across the world has grown exponentially. In 2019, web series were independently produced and screened at more than 80 web series festivals across the world from Korea to Berlin. Following the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020, many of these festivals moved online with web series themselves reflecting the lockdown situation, as in the case of *Cancelled*.

Our examination of the ways the viewers responded to Luke Eve's web series sits within the context of a larger research project entitled *Valuing Web Series: Economic, Industrial, Cultural and Social Value* funded by the Australian Research Council.² The concept of 'total value' we employ in this project draws on a more nuanced understanding of value in the domain of environmental economics where 'total economic value' refers to the full range of benefits that producers, users and society in general may derive from what are often intangible and non-monetisable resources in the arts (Turnbull and McCutcheon 2019). In a paper produced for the New Zealand Ministry of Culture and Heritage (Allan, Grimes and Kerr 2013), the authors argue for the importance of models that can map the total economic value of culture. This includes the value derived from market and non-market sources, the value accruing to the creators and users of cultural goods, and to society as a whole. Modelling the value chain for screen content in general, and the web series in particular, is both complex and necessary within a digital streaming environment that has continued to disrupt more traditional modes of content production and distribution, with web series production being a prime example of this.

Our model maps the value of a web series across four dimensions. A web series may function as a calling card for creators demonstrating their capacity to work with serial formats. We would classify this as an example of the *industrial value of a web series*, since it may have a benefit not only for the careers of those involved, but also for the screen industry more generally in terms of the discovery and training of emergent talent. Web series may accrue *economic value* through advertising revenue or sales, although research on forms of social media entertainment more generally have detailed the difficulty creators experience in attempting to monetise the number of views or eyeballs that they command (Cunningham and Craig, 2019). Web series may also offer significant *cultural value* by breaking new aesthetic ground in their reimagining of traditional genres and narratives, while demonstrating that audiences are eager to engage with the kinds of content that the more traditional screen producers are reluctant to risk. Similarly, in terms of *social value*, because web series can circumvent the more conservative and cumbersome industry structures of production and distribution, they are often able to address more diverse themes and issues that cater to marginalised audiences and communities who scarcely ever see themselves, or their interests, represented on screen as identified by Christian in terms of race (2020) and Monaghan in terms of sexuality (2017: 84). In a recent article entitled 'The Parameters of Audience Engagement' (2020), Hill and Dahlgren echo three of the dimensions of total value outlined above when they suggest that the audience's relationship with the media is not solely about economic value but also about the cultural and social

values that may be derived from that experience (Dahlgren and Hill 2020). As they point out, while the media industries themselves may be primarily concerned with capturing ‘attention, user interaction, or brand loyalty’, it is possible that an audience encounter may at the same time constitute a ‘powerful subjective experience’ driven by an affect that may have significant repercussions for identity formation (Dahlgren and Hill 2020). This affect, they argue, may be both dynamic and collective as it connects people’s shared social experiences, motivating their participation and on-going engagement.

In this study of *Cancelled*, we are primarily interested in what an investigation of audience response to a web series can tell us about the kinds of social and cultural value that audiences appeared to enjoy through their viewing experience and how these values may add to our understanding of engagement in online contexts more broadly.

As Elizabeth Evans has convincingly argued in her ground-breaking book, *Understanding Engagement in Transmedia Culture*, there is a difference in the ways in which ‘engagement’ is understood by practitioners and by audiences across all media forms (Evans 2020, 11). While the practitioners Evans interviewed described engagement as metaphorically a ‘conversation’ around the core text, as viewers shift to social media sites to tweet, comment and create fan art based on the media content, building by this means a sense of community around the text, the audience focus groups that she consulted perceive engagement more in terms of their ‘captivation’ by some form of immersive content. As Evans observes, both forms of engagement involve expenditure of time, effort and (especially) emotion and the people she interviewed regularly defaulted to talking about long form narratives when describing their experiences of being engaged by media texts. As a relatively new type of media content consisting typically of episodes ten minutes or less, can web series inspire this kind of emotionally intensive investment in content? Or might a study of web series expand our sense of what engagement looks like in the context of short form narratives? Web series that are released on platforms such as YouTube and Facebook place their creators and viewers in closer proximity through the online spaces in which they cohabit. As we shall argue, web series are also well placed to tap into a temporality shared between creators and audiences, as in the case of web series about life in pandemic lockdowns that appeared while viewers were and are still undergoing these restrictions. Our analysis thus explores whether and how the temporal and spatial logics of engagement might differ in the case of short form narratives distributed online from the mostly long-form narratives discussed in Evans’ study.

One of the immediate differences is that for the creators of a web series, the pressure to find an audience is felt much earlier in the production process compared to those working in legacy media. Since web series can bypass traditional gatekeepers and distribution hurdles and can be uploaded directly to the Internet, creators are far freer in where they look for an audience and can move much faster towards a release date. But such freedom can also be intimidating when confronting the vast reaches of the Internet. Finding an audience online, has nevertheless become something of an imperative for web series producers seeking some form of financial support for their project.

For *Screen Australia*, as a government funding body that has played a significant role in the development of web series in Australia, locating an audience that will engage with a project, even at a very early stage in its development is essential. For example, *Wastelander Panda* (2014) is one of Australia's most successful web series both nationally and internationally as evidenced by its many festival wins and translation into a graphic novel, DVD, and broadcast on the streaming platform, iView, of the national public broadcaster, The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). The series first found its audience after launching a brief 'prologue' episode online alongside a crowd-funding Pozible campaign in 2012 (Collins 2015: 111). The A\$25,000 garnered through this endeavour enabled the producers to secure further funding for production from Screen Australia and the South Australian Film Corporation (SAFC), 'the first time the latter had supported a project based on a demonstrated online audience alone' (Collins 2015, 111).

While *Wastelander Panda's* budget may have been modest, its success with a range of audiences across different platforms and media enhanced the creative careers of many of those involved. This would include producer Kirsty Stark whose most recent success at time of writing includes the award-winning ABC series *Stateless* starring Cate Blanchett and Dominic West which was also released to Netflix in 2020.³ Stark herself is now regarded as something of an expert in the audience sphere as demonstrated by her contribution to the Pathways To An Audience panel at the 2020 Melbourne WebFest, her website and her self-published guide, *Your Epic Audience Building Workbook*.⁴ As Stark suggested during her Melbourne WebFest presentation, the difference between web series producers and students fresh out of film school, is that web series producers always have their audiences front of mind. In other words, they are thinking about engagement right from the start.

According to Alyce Adams and Lee Naimo, commissioning producers from Screen Australia, who also presented at the Melbourne WebFest in 2020, Screen Australia now requires evidence that the producers know who their audience is, where they hang out in the online space, and have a strategy to target them before they will offer any financial support to a web series production. This does not mean always mean a large audience. Adams and Naimo explain that, the most successful web series are considered those that tap into a 'niche audience' and 'cut through' to a small but passionate fan base. This is interesting because it points to the way in which the potential cultural and social value of the web series in addressing diverse audiences that are not catered to elsewhere is being recognised by the broader screen industry.

Cancelled

Luke Eve, the producer of *Cancelled* received funding from Screen Australia at an early stage in the series development on the basis of a track record within the screen industry of not only delivering fresh and original content addressing complex social issues but also a demonstrated capacity to find an audience for web series content.

As a graduate of the Australian Film, Television and Radio School's (AFTRS) program, Eve initially gravitated towards directing. When his graduation film, *Australian Summer*, won

at Tropfest in 2005, part of the prize package included a trip to the US and meetings with production companies. While these meetings didn't immediately convert to getting new projects off the ground, Eve deemed the experience invaluable in terms of 'demystifying' the American industry (Eve 2020). Back in Australia, Eve then spent much of the following decade making music videos, short films, TV commercials, and some directing for TV - including episodes of the documentary series *A Dave in the Life of* (2009) for the second Australian public broadcaster, the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) with its remit to reflect a multicultural Australia, ABC's *Great Southern Land* (2012), and two lifestyle series hosted by Julia Zemiro, *Sex: An Unnatural History* (SBS, 2011) and *Julia Zemiro's Home Delivery* (ABC, 2014). After obtaining a coveted green card, he travelled back to Los Angeles in 2015, with a 'hodgepodge body of work' aiming to work in scripted TV. However, Eve found breaking into this branch of the industry 'hard', with people telling him that what he really needed was 'heat'. As Luke ruefully acknowledged, 'I didn't have heat. I was lukewarm at best' (Eve 2020). So he decided to develop his first web series to achieve a 'mini version' of what he initially wanted to do in TV. This strategy born of frustration appears typical for many of the young creatives we have interviewed thus far in our study who have pivoted online to achieve their creative vision.

The result of Eve's first online venture was the web series *Low Life* (2014), a six-part dramedy centred on the character of Jef (played by Australian actor Henry Nixon) who is battling with depression. The series served to showcase Eve's evident talent and his ability to create high production values on a shoestring budget of approximately \$20,000 - more than half of which was raised through crowdfunding from 148 backers.⁵ The series also featured a title theme by Aussie pop stalwart, Darren Hanlon, and a soundtrack that included music from other notable international and Australian artists, such as *Ween* and *Mental as Anything* demonstrating the potential value of the web series more generally to the creative industries in the opportunities it may provide for showcasing a diverse range of talent in different fields of endeavour.

Eve describes *Low Life* as a highly personal and 'semi-autobiographical' story that enabled him to realise the potential social and cultural value of the web series and the ways in which it can connect with an audience in powerful ways:

... when you make something that is truthful, authentic, then people sense that. It connects with people much better. So it triggered in me a real love for those kinds of stories, I guess. And I've always been intrigued by stories of mental illness, or people on the fringes. I think that's the beauty of web series, is that you're able to shed a light and make stories that potentially are not being seen on everyday television. I think pretty much 90% of web series makers will say that. That they wanted to tell a story that they're not seeing on mainstream media or television or film (Eve 2020)

As Eve told us, in the beginning he had little idea how to distribute or monetize *Low Life*, or how to find an audience given that the web is a very crowded space (Eve 2020). His solution was to reach out to mental health organisations and support groups for people with mental illness:

I don't think the project is purely just about depression or about mental illness, but I thought that that was a great way to put it out there and get engagement ... And that worked great. We had so many people contacting us, and writing really beautiful personal stories and sharing their own stories with me. I have to say, that was one of the most joyful experiences (Eve 2020).

Subsequently Eve was encouraged to send *Low Life* to British media celebrity, Stephen Fry, by a friend who had recently interviewed Fry for a different project. Fry has long been a mental health advocate, outspoken about his own experiences and battles with bipolar disorder. Fry watched *Low Life*, liked it and during Mental Health Awareness Week in 2015, shared the series with his 12 million Twitter followers. While the connection to Fry may have been serendipitous, the story shows Eve's ability to identify a community predisposed to be interested in his content and to build on communication pathways to this audience that were already established.⁶

For his next web series, *High Life*, Stephen Fry was credited as an Executive Producer in a move intended to capitalise on Fry's public visibility⁷. Once again the series deals with mental illness, this time through the story of Gen, a 17 year old girl with a bipolar disorder. In a departure from his earlier online distribution model, the series was sold directly to platforms in a commercial move that inhibited Eve's direct contact with his audience. Although, he acknowledged:

... once individual people did see it in their particular territories or wherever they were, they would then often write, and I was able to engage that way, but it wasn't quite as immediate, which I missed [along with] building an audience as well, like branding and all of those kind of things. You start to connect with people that then continue following you and they want to see your next piece of work and things like that, and that's why web engagement I think is really, really crucial. Not just to finding an audience directly, but to building that audience and to building that brand to kind of carry along for the rest of your work (Eve 2020).

Having found an audience for *Low Life* and *High Life*, Eve's first feature film, *I Met a Girl* (2020) was also concerned with mental illness. Sadly, the much anticipated release of this film was held up in by the outbreak of Covid-19 in early 2020 which resulted in Eve, his fiancé and his mother together in lockdown in Valencia in March, an experience which they translated into the web series *Cancelled*.

Neither a straightforward documentary, nor an exercise in capturing the experience for reality TV (although there were some very ‘real’ moments), *Cancelled* was a carefully scripted, reworked and edited version of their lives that was released to Facebook even as it was still being made. As Eve explained:

We had to start so quickly. We wrote all the scripts in 8 days. Then we started filming and within two weeks had to release the first episode. So by that point we had only shot episodes one and two. We were also behind because I reshot many parts of episode one two or three times over because I wasn’t happy with it. So we were really chasing our tail at the beginning. By the time the second episode came out we had shot three and four and so on, so we gradually started pulling away and getting more in the can. But up front it was all happening so quickly that shooting, editing, release and marketing all happened at once. I remember taking a day out of our schedule after episode one to photograph our posters and concentrate on marketing and then we started shooting episode two. It was pretty crazy. (Eve personal correspondence with Steinar Ellingsen, January 14, 2020).

This time, however, Eve was even more considered in his choice of an appropriate platform on which to launch the series:

I knew that YouTubers weren’t going to give a shit about two people that couldn’t get married. How are they going to relate to that? And why should they? So I knew that the people who would connect with that would be people in their thirties and forties. People that would understand the emotional turmoil of a cancelled wedding (Eve 2020).

In order to locate his target older audience, Eve therefore chose the Facebook platform where users increased by 12% during the second quarter of 2020 as people arguably sought comfort, friendship, and connection with their families during lockdown.⁸ As Eve noted:

... our demographic was probably 35 and above, skewed female, and we knew that. And that was what we targeted, like any kind of Facebook advertising. I don’t think I even set up advertising geared at men. We pretty much just geared it straight towards women and then they would often share it, or watch it with their partners. And that’s not because I didn’t think that men would watch it. It was just that we were trying to be strategic about where we spent our money (Eve 2020).

Following the release of the first episode, Eve and his small team carefully tracked the feedback, and worked hard to engage their audience by reacting and replying to nearly

every comment. As Eve noted, audience responses did sometimes influence the development of the series:

The show certainly evolved based on what we thought was working or how people were responding to it. Mum’s ‘little shit’ line definitely hit big so we reprised it. I think initially in the later episode the line was scripted differently but based on the response of her delivery in episode two we decided to repeat it - almost like giving her a little catch phrase. (Eve in personal correspondence with Steinar Ellingsen, January 14, 2020).

While Eve was naturally somewhat protective of the back-end audience information to which he had access as a publisher on Facebook, we were able to conduct our own analysis of the available data, while recognising that there were clearly limitations to what we could achieve given that we were not directly interviewing members of the audience. As a first step we mapped views, shares and comments for all episodes of the series, which revealed some interesting patterns across the season (**Fig 1.**)

Cancelled Audience Response

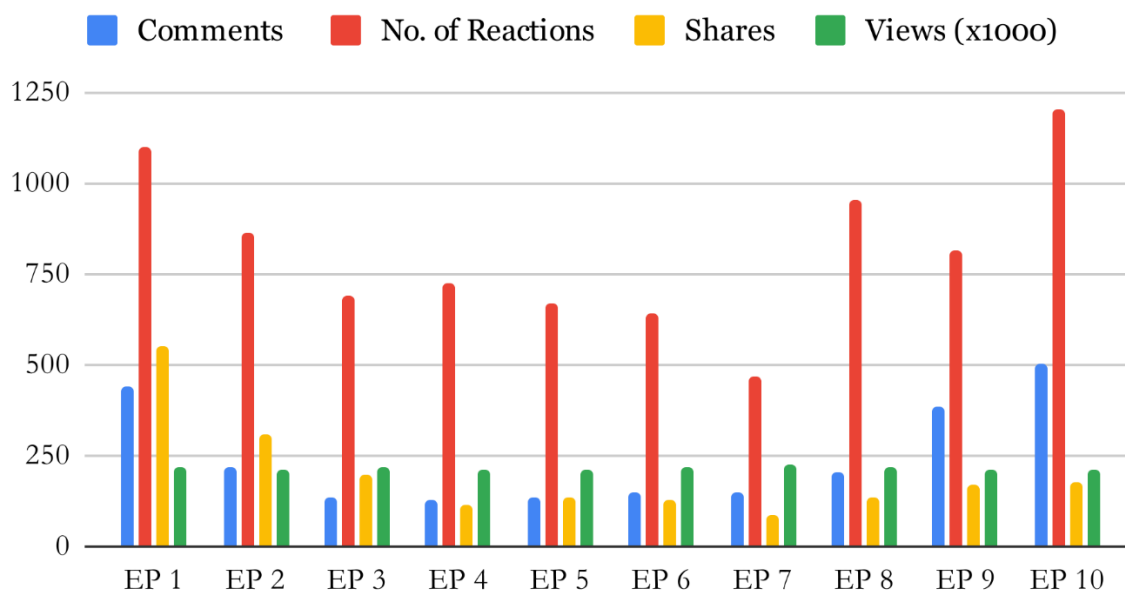


Fig. 1

What these data told us is that while views stayed roughly the same for each episode, comments, reactions, and shares were all higher in the first two and last two episodes, but lull in episodes three to seven (**Fig. 1**). According to Eve, views were being recorded from different parts of the world as lockdown extended. Thus, one could predict the origin of the views based on the intensity of COVID-19 induced restrictions. As Eve noted:

... at the beginning of the release, say episodes 1-5, the majority of our audience was Spain and Europe but then as summer hit and restrictions started easing, our audience share shifted to South America and Australia whose own lockdowns started to come into effect'. (Eve in personal correspondence with Burkholder, December 2020)

Of particular interest is the inverse relationship between comments and shares as revealed in **Fig. 2**. While the first three episodes received more shares than comments, between episodes four and ten comments increased steadily while the share totals never matched the highs from the first three episodes. What these data may suggest is that interest in a piece of media content may initially prompt viewers to choose the share button and invite friends and family to take part in the experience with them. However, later in the season, once viewers have invested time in the series and developed an affection for it (as discussed below), they may be more inclined to engage directly with the content itself. As Hill and Dahlgren state in their article 'Parameters of Audience Engagement' (2020) – 'Affect, in sum, can be seen as dynamic, collective emotionality that connects with people's shared social experiences; affect animates engagement and helps motivate participation.' This plays out vividly in the case of *Cancelled* in the rapid increase in the comments on the final two episodes of the series when the emotional peak to the series is reached.

Cancelled Shares and Comments

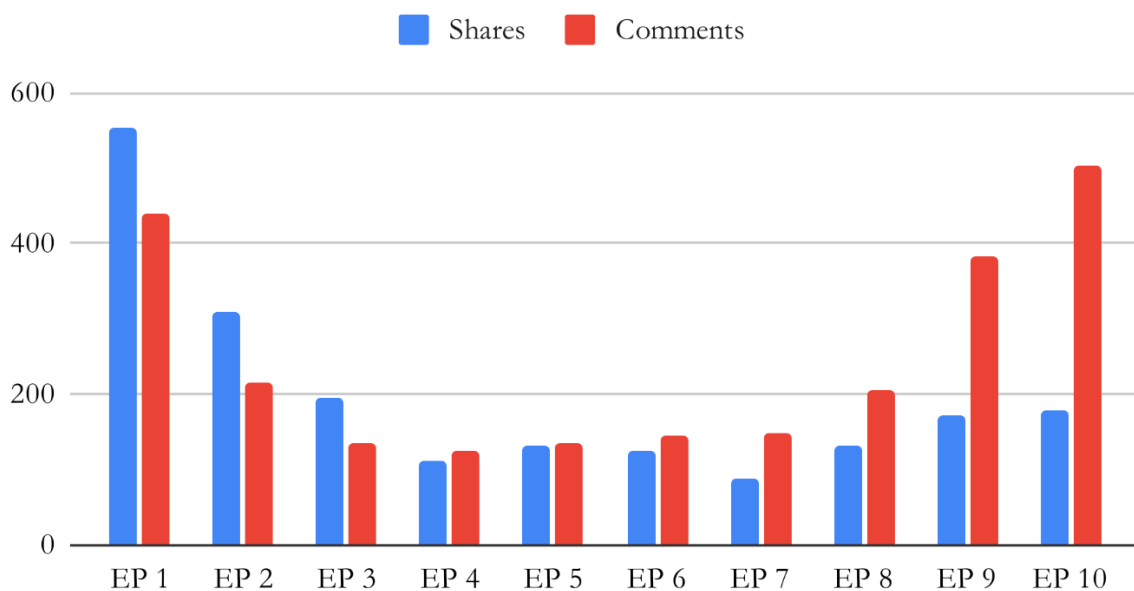


Fig. 2

It is interesting to note that the majority of the views, comments, shares, and reactions occurred while the series was being released. This proves that Eve and his team were correct in rushing through their production in order to release the episodes while audiences

were still under pandemic restrictions. While the totals of views and responses to the videos continued to increase over the months following the series' release, the pace slowed significantly as pandemic fatigue set in and a much smaller portion of the global population remained under strict restrictions. Moreover, as audience scholar Rhiannon Bury pointed out, commenting on a series when the players as well as most of the viewers have, as it were, left the room would have been less appealing (personal communication, *Participations* review process).

To analyse the content of the comments we collected all the publicly available comments on the Facebook site and the names of the commenters using a data scraping software. This enabled us to capture 860 of the 2,431 total comments over the duration of the series with the majority of commenters unidentifiable because of the commenters' privacy settings. The comments we did collect were then sorted to determine the most often used words. These data also enabled us to see how many people were actually commenting, giving us 483 different names with 151 people commenting more than once. Where available, data regarding the top commenters' connection to the series' creators, location, and comment language were also collected. For example, commenters reacted in both English and Spanish although Facebook offers a translation tab for viewers who want to read comments in another language. We also extracted comments of the top 22 commenters who commented six or more times across all episodes and their comments were analysed according to which episodes were being commented on, and the most frequently used words.

After the characters' names, the most frequently occurring words were 'congratulations', 'thanks/gracias', and 'more/más' from an audience located in Australia, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, Spain, Thailand, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Venezuela. The frequency of the words 'more' or 'mas' are a sign of the simplest dimension of engagement discussed by Evans (2020), that is the keen desire to see more of the content. The wide array of locations of viewers suggests the international appeal of this story to a global audience experiencing a pandemic, although it might be noted that this cultural spread involved no African countries, and only one Asian country.

When considering the nature of the comments in more detail, one of the first things that struck us was just how often people mentioned how what they were watching echoed their own experiences of quarantine or their own cancelled plans and isolation. As Eve himself observed:

Literally every week people would write to us and say, 'I laughed and I cried, and I could empathize, and we're living through this ourselves, or we just had'. And so I was really proud of that and that's why I knew Facebook was the platform for it. I knew it wasn't for YouTube (Eve 2020).

Facebook had, as Eve hoped, reached the demographic he was targeting and produced the kind of emotive responses for which he was hoping. Often it was small details of life in

lockdown that viewers highlighted as something to which they could relate. Episode three, in which Luke ‘decontaminates’ his groceries drew a number of viewers to comment on how much this resonated, such as one viewer who wrote, ‘The washing of the groceries nearly killed me. It’s only today, 27th May that I realised my husband has stopped doing it.’⁹ The scene in which Luke and Maria go out on their balcony to clap with their neighbours for health workers similarly prompted many thoughts about the poignancy of this way of thanking health practitioners, ‘All the emotions come back to me as I see my (still today) Covid routine. How the clapping would bring me to tears.’ (commenter on episode six). The shared experience of lockdown clearly played a significant role in producing the emotional *affect* that drew the audience into the show. One commenter illustrates this perfectly in their response to episode four, ‘ummm ... did you sneak in to our rented flat in Brisbane and secretly film us ? . your mirroring of this on a personal level, Globally is blowing my tiny mind Luke Eve am not [crying] ... something in my eye ok?’

Such an affect, as Evans has argued, may then result in an *affection for* the content that is being experienced and the building of a ‘brand’ loyalty for it and or its producers (Evans 2020, p. 94). The affection for the story world of *Cancelled* and its characters/creators was very visible by episode eight; comments like this one were typical ‘OMG this is just getting too intense! Poor old Luke and Maria!! It’s a brilliant series. Keep ‘em coming please! Xxx.’ When Karen, Luke’s mother left to fly back to Australia in an especially moving episode nine, there was a similar outpouring of emotion by viewers: ‘This episode! Cried when Karen left! Miss her already.’

The strength of the bonds felt by viewers also prompted them to send advice and encouragement to Luke, Maria and Karen throughout the season with remarks such as ‘Stay strong Maria!’ and ‘Time to look to the future when you guys will get back on track!’ and in one case a recipe sent in for them to cook during lockdown. By the final episodes viewers had begun to comment openly about the sense they had of having built relationships both with other audience members: ‘This is amazing. It’s like a whole global community. Love it !!!!’ (commenter on episode nine) and with the people on screen: ‘I loved this series so much. Made me feel less alone. You 3 feel like extended family now, Xo’ (commenter on episode ten). The viewers were clearly invested in the relationship between Luke and his fiancée Maria, with one viewer expressing that the season end reconciliation ‘was a good ending, hope it’s real’ and many sending their best wishes for the wedding and asking for a second season. From one commenter on episode ten there was even a question about whether the wedding would be live: ‘Can’t wait for The Wedding! Will it be live? ...Stay safe and look forward to more from you.’

In Evans’ (2020) terms then, *Cancelled* succeeded in producing moments of intense affect during episodes and strong feelings of affection for the series as a whole that led viewers to ask for more. What factors enabled such engagement to emerge over a relatively short period of time?

A theme running through the comments was the frequency with which viewers switched between fictional and reality frames. Comments that addressed the characters as

real people, ‘stay strong Maria!’ sat alongside comments praising the performance. Questions even as late as episode ten about the reality of what they were seeing: ‘good ending I hope it’s real’ suggest the way viewers crossed and recrossed the border separating the narrative fiction from the offline reality of Luke, Maria and Karen. Undoubtedly, the ambiguous reality status of a series involving characters playing scripted versions of themselves and their real-life experience of lockdown and a cancelled wedding contributed to the viewers’ frameshifting. While *Cancelled* was indeed a scripted dramady, there are clearly moments when it has the appeal of reality TV in terms of what Roscoe (2001) has described as the ‘flickers of authenticity’ that are apparent. These are the moments when we see people experiencing what appears to be a genuine emotion, as was indeed the case for Luke, Maria and Karen as they replayed, relived and indeed lived through the experience of Covid-19 and its impact on their lives. Although Karen and Luke had never acted before, and Maria and Karen had never shot video before, any imperfections in performance or camera work hardly seem to matter in terms of the audience engagement and may indeed have enhanced it. One such moment occurred in the penultimate episode of the season. When Luke’s mother, Karen, was at last able to return to Australia, they filmed the drive to the airport, and Luke’s tearful reaction in real time to Karen’s departure in the car afterwards.¹⁰ Indeed Luke produces tears on several occasions, both onscreen and off. As Eve told *The Screen Show*’s Hanna Reich, ‘There were scenes that we would do and then we would have a bit of a cry [afterwards],’ (2020).

The extent to which fictional and reality frames commingled was further compounded by the presence among the audience of many of Luke, Karen and Maria’s real-life friends. The top 22 commenters on the series comprised a mix of friends of the creators (11) and strangers (7) along with four whose connection could not be determined. The comments from friends very quickly set a tone of teasing, playful intimacy that may have influenced other audience members to feel and adopt a similar familiarity more quickly. A scene in which Luke appears without a shirt and is told to ‘Put your shirt back on Pasty Boy’ in Spanish by a neighbour on a balcony in their apartment complex, prompted one friend in the comments to repeat this phrase delightedly and a second friend to observe that ‘Luke you know ‘Pasty Boy’ is going to stick!’. It should be noted that when this comment is first made to Luke, in Spanish, he does not understand and simply beams and waves back to his neighbour, while the subtitles let the audience in on the joke. Significantly, the use of this phrase points to the way frame shifting between the fictional world of the series and the offline world of real life took place among friends of the couple as well as among viewers who were strangers; the responses among friends, like those of the audience more broadly, switched frames, sometimes remarking upon particular lines or interesting camera moves and sometimes looking through the fiction to Luke’s real life offline where the moniker ‘Pasty Boy’ was likely to follow him around.

The uncertainty about the reality status of moments within the episode was also deliberately played up by creative choices taken by the producers in the shooting of the series, in moments where the actors sometimes appeared to break the fourth wall to

address the audience directly. For example, Episode four begins with Luke and Maria looking into the camera and seeming to greet their viewers, ‘hello guys’ (Fig 3). Seconds later we discover that Luke and Maria are not addressing the Facebook audience, but (as we see them looking at the screen of their iPhone) making a video to send to the friends they had invited to the wedding. Of course, the line between making a video on the iPhone for friends, many of whom are on Facebook and making a video on the iPhone for an *audience* on Facebook becomes an enjoyably fine line as a result of this maneuver.

The selection of Facebook as a platform for the series may also have helped to engage the audience by making the border between fiction and reality feel especially porous due to Facebook’s spatial architecture. As Fig 3 demonstrates, Facebook sits the comments from viewers alongside the screen window. Given the assiduity with which Luke and Maria responded to the comments, this meant that Luke and Maria were working both sides of the border, as it were, replaying their lives on screen and responding to comments by the audience in the offscreen space of the comment field. The effect is heightened when on one occasion, Maria crosses the border between creators and audience to comment on an episode herself, using the comment field to praise the contributions of the talented crew working on *Cancelled*, ‘I don’t normally comment but I have to say that what Andy Wright, Leah Katz, Josh Pearson and Matteo Zinglaes have done in this episode is amazing. Can’t wait to listen episode 9’ (comment by maria on episode eight). In addition, Facebook is a platform where users scrolling through their news feed may be presented with updates and unproduced content from their Facebook ‘friends,’ whose own status as an online or offline friend (and a ‘real’ friend or ‘Facebook friend’) may vary. By publishing *Cancelled* on Facebook, Eve and his team were not only targeting a demographic but were well positioned to capitalize on the platform’s own affordances for building the kind of affective network of friends, family and quasi friends and family that appeared to emerge around *Cancelled*.

Our investigation of *Cancelled* suggests a number of directions for future research on web series engagement. The responses to *Cancelled* that we documented attest to the fact that short form narratives can have powerful affects. The discovery that such emotive responses could be the product of a text-audience relationship that played so often and so delightedly with the frames of the story opens up some intriguing questions about reflexivity. Self-reflexive fictions are often regarded as a way to cool audience emotions in order to attract a more intellectual response. Viewers who shifted sometimes in the space of a single comment from treating characters as real people to congratulating the creators on their story reconfigures notions of how audiences deal with reflexivity and points to the cultural value that web series deliver in exposing new aesthetic possibilities in storytelling.



Fig. 3

The intensity of emotions that viewers repeatedly described themselves experiencing with many finding themselves, as our top commenter put it, ‘Sitting here crying my eyes out’ (episode 9) may have been helped by a spatial arrangement that put the audience in close proximity to the storyworld in the shared online spaces of the Facebook site where the series appeared. Given that in Evans’ study, the behaviours that were foregrounded as signs of an engaged audience were those that took place at some *distance* from the core text in what Evans terms the ‘peritextual dimension’ of discussions on social media, our findings introduce some flexibility into the spatial logic of audience engagement by demonstrating the kinds of affective interactions with the text that take place when an audience is literally ‘close’ to the text.

Our study of *Cancelled* also expands our understanding of the ways in which temporality underwrites engagement. Much of the audience response to *Cancelled* stemmed from the location of the web series in the ‘near present,’ with viewers repeatedly referencing the feelings and behaviours associated with the pandemic lockdown that many of them were still going through themselves. In terms of our model of the value of web series, the opportunity audiences had to see their experiences of lockdown writ large were one of the most important social values that *Cancelled* offered them. A sense of a ‘shared temporal dimension in which they co-exist’ is an important feature of Benjamin Anderson’s conceptualization of imagined communities and a key aspect of arguments that networks on social media sites such as Twitter can form groups that feel and behave like communities (Gruzd et al., 1303). As was clear in the comments on the later episodes of *Cancelled*, there were signs of an incipient community consciousness and this seems like an important direction for web series researchers to explore. Web series are especially well equipped to mine a temporality that is close to the present than the slower paced production of film and

television series that require longer to reach the screen. Already a number of web series about the pandemic lockdown have appeared in countries around the world.¹¹ This shared temporality may have accounted for the speed with which a weekly short form narrative was able to engage its audience in significant and affectively intense ways.

Indeed, by the time of episode 10, the idea that Luke and Maria are simply making a video for friends and family was no longer that removed from the truth. From the audience there were many requests for another season or episode featuring the wedding, with many viewers wishing they could be there. As the final episode closes, Luke and Maria break the fourth wall again, speaking into the iPhone Maria is holding up to tell everyone that they have a new date for their wedding in Valencia in 2021. This time the invitation on screen also appears in the credit sequence, leaving it open to interpretation whether Luke and Maria are addressing their real-life friends and family or the newly acquired friends who have watched their show. While we now know this wedding is unlikely to happen, since the pandemic is hardly over, this invitation nevertheless holds within it not only the promise of a sequel, but also a powerful message to the audience that they are indeed part of this story.

Biographical notes:

Meredith Burkholder founded Webfest Berlin, Germany's first international short form series festival, in 2015. She is also the co-author of *Short, Narrative and Serialized: A Complete Guide to the Web Series Phenomenon* (2019) with Joël Bassaget. She offers training and consultation on short form series development, production, and sales alongside regularly contributing as a speaker and moderator at TV series events around the world. In August 2020, she began her PhD research as part of the 'Valuing Web Series' project at the University of Wollongong.

Steinar Ellingsen is a senior lecturer in Journalism, and Communication and Media at the University of Wollongong. He is a co-founder and former Director of Melbourne WebFest and has given keynotes and seminars on web series across the globe. Steinar is currently working on a first-of-its kind international long-term study on the value of web series to the greater screen ecology. The project, *Valuing Web Series*, is funded by the Australian Research Council's Linkage Program (2020-2023).

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Notes:

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luke_Eve

² Funded by the Australian Research Council, this industry Linkage project (LP 180100626) involves four partners including the Melbourne, Vancouver, Toronto and Marseilles web festivals.

³ ABC's Stateless wins 13 AACTA awards. <https://tvblackbox.com.au/page/2020/12/01/abcs-stateless-wins-13-aacta-awards/>

⁴ Available on Stark's web page, <https://kirstystark.com/resources>.

⁵ <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/lukeeve/low-life>).

⁶ <https://twitter.com/stephenfry/status/597766886873440256>).

⁷ (<https://www.facebook.com/lowlifewebseries/posts/555609324598008>).

⁸ (<https://investor.fb.com/investor-news/press-release-details/2020/Facebook-Reports-Second-Quarter-2020-Results/Facebook,2020>).

⁹ All the comments quoted in this section are from people who did not know the couple. We excluded comments from friends where a degree of affection would presumably already exist and not be attributable to the show.

¹⁰ The informer interview with Natalie Sady

<https://www.facebook.com/TheInformerTV/videos/243696190290429>

¹¹ See for example, *Loving Captivity* (Australia, July 2020) <https://www.lovingcaptivity.com/>, *Sins of Solitude* (UK, May 2020)

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLWGIxwsfl_Gcr9UUUmvzznVFfNOYmYgm, *Se Eu Estivesse*

Ai (If I Was There) (Brazil, June 2020) [https://www.excompanhiadeteatro.com.br/se-eu-estivesse-ai-](https://www.excompanhiadeteatro.com.br/se-eu-estivesse-ai-if-i-was-there)

[if-i-was-there](https://www.excompanhiadeteatro.com.br/se-eu-estivesse-ai-if-i-was-there), *Drinnen (Inside)* (Germany, April 2020) <https://www.zdf.de/serien/drinnen-im-internet-sind-alle-gleich>.