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Citation: Adams, C. & Cooper, G. (2024). 'I felt I got to know everyone': how News on Stage combines theatre and journalism for a live audience. *Journalism Practice*, 18(3), pp. 744-761. doi: 10.1080/17512786.2022.2052345

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Link to published version: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2022.2052345>



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RESEARCH ARTICLE



“I Felt I Got to Know Everyone”: How News on Stage Combines Theatre and Journalism for a Live Audience

Catherine Adams ^a and Glenda Cooper ^b

^aDepartment of Media, Communications and Society, Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham, UK;

^bDepartment of Journalism, City, University of London, London, UK

ABSTRACT

Journalism has been suffering a crisis of trust in recent years and in order to re-engage with disconnected audiences, media organisations have turned to creative forms of communication. Some of these draw on the concept of “live journalism”, where both journalists and their stories are presented to a live audience. Various examples in the US and Europe have already been examined; this paper looks at the emergence of live journalism in the UK, and its potential in creating engagement in the public sphere. The authors reflect on two online events they produced as part of their “News on Stage” project during the Covid-19 pandemic, in which journalists presented previously unpublished stories, using dramatic techniques such as verbatim theatre, stand-up comedy, and soundscapes. Using creative, practice-based research, considered relevant to the study of journalism today, they discuss the experience of staging these events to analyse themes of dramatisation, truthfulness, and connection. The authors use ethnographic research, supplemented with audience and participant feedback, to show that this kind of fusion of journalism and theatre can increase interest and trust in journalism and build closeness with audiences.

KEYWORDS

Audience engagement;
journalism; theatre; public
sphere; live news

Introduction

The crisis of trust in journalism has been deepening over recent years (Robinson 2019; Peters and Broersma 2013) and in order to re-engage with disconnected audiences, media organisations have turned to different and creative forms of communication (Usher 2018; Barnhurst 2013). While many organisations have tried to use social media engagement to revitalise the relationship (Nah and Chung 2012; Singer 2011), there has been growing interest in the concept of “live journalism” in which journalists perform stories to a public audience (Ruotsalainen and Villi 2021; Adams 2020). These events, such as Pop-Up Magazine in the US and Black Box in Finland, mirror the exclusivity of paid-for traditional media in that they are usually not streamed so that they can only be experienced by those who attend. They also allow the audience to meet the “cast” of journalists afterwards.

CONTACT Glenda Cooper  glenda.cooper.1@city.ac.uk

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The idea of journalism as performance has a history stretching back to the “living newspapers” of the 1930s and beyond that to the town crier (Adams 2020). New forms of live journalism attempt to address the perceived disconnect between audience and journalist, and create a potential space for public debate at a time of polarisation and retreat from the news.

As founders of the News on Stage project, we wanted to look at the value of such an approach and the advantages/disadvantages for both journalist and audience of experiencing journalism in this way. We decided to take a practice-based and ethnographic approach to interrogate whether these new forms of engagement can help restore interest and trust in journalism and establish a new public space, but also consider what potential issues there are in “dramatising” the news. Through two shows created and staged by the authors, involving a range of journalists from students to veteran correspondents, and including different forms of performance such as verbatim theatre, stand-up comedy, and soundscape, we explore what value such an approach can have for journalism in a post-truth world.

The History of Engagement, Theatre, and Journalism

The area where news organisations have been experimenting with audience engagement that we are concerned with in this paper is “live journalism” where journalists perform to their audience face-to-face.

Theatre inspired by real-life events has a long history (Martin 2012). The “living newspaper” movement which began in Soviet Russia moved through to the US and China in which news was brought to the masses through live performance (Mally 2008). The American Federal Theatre Project ran between 1935 and 1939 and provided work not only for artists, but also journalists unemployed during the Great Depression (Brown 1989). Both the Soviet and American versions eventually displeased those in power and funding was stopped, but the model for the fact-based theatre had been established, and foreshadowed the style of Piscator’s agitprop theatre in Germany, the work of Brecht (Filewod 2016) and contemporary documentary theatre practices (Bernbaum 2010).

One of the closest forms of theatre to journalism is *verbatim theatre* (Paget 1987) in which interviews are carried out, recorded and then transcribed to be edited and constructed into a performance. Luckhurst characterises it as a theatre:

whose practitioners, if called into account, could provide interviewed sources for its dialogue, in the manner that a journalist must, according to the code of ethics, have sources for a story. (2008, 201)

In the mid-2000s in the UK, there was a succession of interactions between journalists and dramatists, particularly in collaboration with the *Guardian* newspaper including dramatisations of *My Name is Rachel Corrie* (based on diaries of an activist killed in the Gaza Strip), and the “tribunal plays” which dramatised inquiries such as the Scott Inquiry (the arms-to-Iraq scandal) and the Macpherson Report (examining police conduct during the investigation of Stephen Lawrence’s murder).

Such dramatic productions use the same kind of tools of conventional journalism but with journalism never becoming a simulacrum of the world but a transformation of “disparate and often chaotic data into an acceptably ordered sequence” (Fulford 1999, 80),

reflecting the same effects of theatrical work. Both journalists and artists use narrative forms and language to create representations of reality (Bernbaum 2010, 44).

Journalists and artists also share similar motivations for the work that they do (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2013) and precarious working conditions (Postema and Deuze 2020, 1305). Journalism can thus be imagined as a created, creative space (Bernbaum 2010). And while performative aspects are frequently discussed in relation to broadcast journalism, print and online journalists also present a particular version of themselves to the public when interviewing as well as carrying out the “backstage” work where the “vital secrets” of the illusion of the performance are constructed and maintained (Goffman [1959] 2002, 53–55).

The use of live performance then provides the basis for our first research question:

RQ1 Can “face to face” forms of journalism increase/restore trust in journalism?

“Live Journalism” – Journalists Take Centre Stage

A number of news organisations have been engaging in live theatre performances recently in which journalists themselves perform, rather than merely answering questions on their work. In 2009, *Pop-Up Magazine* began in the US, described as a “live magazine” which presented non-fiction stories on stage (both news and entertainment). This inspired the Paris-based stage production, *Live Magazine*, and a similar show in Denmark produced by the publisher Zetland (Sillensen 2015). Other notable examples include the Black Box project in Finland (Ruotsalainen and Villi 2021), the De Balie project in the Netherlands (Engaged Journalism Accelerator 2019), and the Creative Storytelling Workshop in South Africa (Kwong 2019).

Such events where journalists are able to discuss their work directly with an audience aim to strengthen their organisation’s brand in a fragmented media world, transforming cultural authority (Larson 2015). It is also a way of hearing more diverse stories and voices (Belair-Gagnon, Nelson, and Lewis 2019) and countering “news avoidance” (Bell 2019; Newman 2019). Bell cites attempts by media brands as varied as the *Huffington Post*, *The New Yorker*, and *Tortoise* who have used tours, events, and festivals to connect with their audience. These events do not tend to break news but provide a slower reflection and critique of it (Vodanovic 2020). In her analysis of the UK event *Sunday Papers Live*, Vodanovic suggests that because the interaction between performer and audience is limited, there is no diminution of journalistic authority or a realignment of the journalist/consumer dynamic (2020).

This leads us to the second research question:

RQ2 How useful or responsible is it for journalists to connect to audiences through immersion and “dramatization” and what are the limits or problems?

The Importance of Audience Engagement

In the twentieth century, the reception of news increasingly became an individual rather than a public act (Whitney 2009), and yet there was still a sense of communal experience with news as a key institution or fixed point in many people’s day (in the UK the *Six* or *Ten O’Clock News* for example). Anderson (1983) has described this as “imagined communities”—the idea that the convergence of capitalism and print technology had meant

that people read the same newspapers, novels and later watched the same TV programmes and recognised themselves as part of a community and participated in a particular political and cultural narrative.

While these imagined communities still exist to some extent, the growth of the World Wide Web has seen an increasing fragmentation of audience and a decline in media credibility. Trust in journalism, while it should not be blind, is an important part of social cohesion (Coleman, Anthony, and Morrison 2009). Without it, the role of journalists as “watchdogs or as convenors of social experiences” (Usher 2018) is limited and journalism has less power to set a public agenda (Wanta and Hu 1994). But trust has fallen by significant margins (Fletcher 2020) and fewer than four in ten people (38%) across 40 media markets say they typically trust most news (Newman et al. 2020).

Brants (2013, 18) identifies trust’s three facets of reliability, credibility, and responsiveness. The rapidity of the news cycle (Rosenberg and Feldman 2008; Hrach 2009; Cushion 2019) has meant an increasing challenge for journalists to balance speed and accuracy; which has prompted accusations of unreliability. At a time when journalists are continually pilloried as purveyors of “fake news” (Ross and Rivers 2018; Quandt et al. 2019) questions persist about post-truth and the contested position of news (Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook 2017; Waisbord 2018).

Many news organisations have pinned their hopes of surviving on the idea of responsiveness, through the concept of “audience engagement”. This argues that journalism must communicate with and consider what its audience wants, in order to better meet their requirements. “Audience engagement” jobs have been created in newsrooms (Davis Mersey, Malthouse, and Calder 2010), and engagement tools and services sold to newsrooms (Cherubini and Nielsen 2016; Nelson 2018) alongside the idea that news media can encourage their audience to engage in public life for civic good (Konieczna and Robinson 2014).

But the concept of engagement is frequently fuzzy, as theorised by Belair-Gagnon, Nelson, and Lewis (2019). Lawrence, Radcliffe, and Schmidt (2018, 16) demonstrate how an engagement initiative can be presented as a democratic process of involving users, while meaning nothing more than a cynical “tweaking or repurposing content to gain greater audience reach” (2018, 6). There needs therefore to be a distinction between “reception-oriented” and “production-oriented” engagement. Nelson (2019, 7) defines reception-oriented engagement as the amount of time the audience spends reading a story, sharing it, or tweeting about it. In contrast, production-oriented engagement, primarily focused on by non-profits, considers how many diverse voices were included in a story and how many audience members requested the story or participated in it (Nelson 2019, 7–8). Going beyond this, Konieczna and Robinson looked at new non-profits which had been set up with the aim of rebuilding community trust and worked “to re-define that journalist–citizen relationship through their daily activities” (2014, 969).

Building on this is the recent interest in ideas of *reciprocal* journalism, with the act of reporting no longer seen as being part of a one-way process. Lewis, Holton, and Coddington (2014, 229) introduce the notion of “mutually beneficial” exchanges between media organisations and the public, also dealt with by Belair-Gagnon, Nelson, and Lewis (2019) who present the idea of journalists acting as:

community-builders who are equipped to catalyze patterns of reciprocal exchange — directly with readers, indirectly with community members, and repeatedly over time — that, in turn, may contribute to greater trust, connectedness, and social capital with the public broadly and audiences specifically. (2019, 559)

Tenenboim and Stroud (2020) argue that what they call “enacted journalism” (a play developed through journalists’ work followed by conversations between audience and journalist) is not inherently designed to change role perceptions, but to bring accurate reporting live on stage, and it would feel uncomfortable if such performances were to take on an activist or campaigning hue. Adams (2020) however disagrees, going as far as to suggest that “staging” journalism events could un-blur confusion around Habermas’s vision and help communities activate a public sphere (or spheres).

Our third research question looks at this concept of audience engagement and reciprocation:

RQ3 How effective is the approach of News on Stage in improving the value of journalism (to society)?

Methodology

Our chosen method of investigation was practice-based research, considered particularly relevant to the study of journalism today (Witschge, Deuze, and Willemsen 2019). We aimed to produce an original, creative outcome which could explore our research questions as a multiple case study, using in-depth data collection. In other words, our rationale was that the most effective way to test the concept of News on Stage was to put it into practice.

Having studied the context of this genre, the significance of the public connection and the values of quality journalism as set out by Adams (2019), we drew up a plan for two events which could experiment with this blend of news and drama. We each planned, produced, and performed a show of five unpublished stories with journalists and actors in front of a live audience, while documenting the experience. Originally, we were booked to stage these in person (in a pub function room and a performance space respectively). Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, we moved the live shows online, via the video-conferencing software Zoom, for an invited audience.

The first show, “Unrelated Stories”(S1), featured performances of five stories by experienced journalists on topics of gaming, nature breakdown, war crimes, surviving the Holocaust, and fostering a child from a warzone. It was presented by Author 1 at 7 pm on 30 July 2020 and attended by 99 viewers. The second show, “Up and Coming Stories” (S2), featured five final-year journalism students from Author 2’s university, covering stories on space junk law, working as an NHS radiographer, campaigning to save hospital facilities, surviving child abuse, and vegan fashion. It was presented by Author 2 at 7 pm on 24 September 2020 and attended by an audience of 41 viewers.

The cast and crew were invited to take part through normative journalistic methods, by trawling personal contacts and professional networks such as the National Union of Journalists. One actor-director made contact with us after reading a magazine article about the project. Selection was carried out with an awareness of diverse representation and desire for a broad range of voices. The structure, format, and style of the two shows

were very similar although adjustments were made with the second one to improve the audience experience, such as shortening the performance durations from ten to eight minutes. Between each story was a brief question and answer session with the performer(s) and both shows ended with a general discussion in the “Virtual Bar” or “Virtual News Café”.

In some pieces, the journalists told their stories to the audience themselves, using a script adapted for the stage, audio-visual materials, in one case involving a live interviewee. Two adopted fictional personae (a university professor and an Instagram influencer) and four used professional actors to tell their story. In one, a journalist recreated her interview verbatim, with an actor playing the part of the interviewee, and in two others, an actor performed alone, presenting a dramatic monologue written by the journalists based on interviews.

Data was gathered from both events from multiple sources of information. Two original scripts were written for the shows comprising 28,335 words of text and a number of audio-visuals (photographs, gifs, videos, and sound recordings). Around 20 hours of video were recorded of meetings, rehearsals, and the shows themselves, which lasted 2 hours 14 minutes and 1 hour 36 minutes respectively. A total of approximately 16 weeks’ work was spent on each show by the researchers, producers, cast, and crew. After the first show, cast and crew were offered a small remuneration for their work from a fund of voluntary donations from the audience. The second event was staged as part of City University Journalism Department Welcome Week.

We gathered responses and feedback on the events from participants and observers in a variety of ways: 25% of those present completed a survey (36 in all) in which they were asked questions about which section they had found most interesting and why; how they had actively participated in the show; their perception of trust of journalists before and after the show, and if that had changed, why they thought it had; this, and any follow-up interviews were given ethics approval by the journalism department research ethics committee at City (ETH2021-0324). During the shows, we collected data from opinion polls, comments on the Chat, and discussions during the “Virtual Bar” and “Virtual News Café” sessions, having made this clear to participants. We also archived email and social media exchanges after the shows. In order to capture some of the perceptions and values of the people involved in the productions and the emerging culture of News on Stage, we kept diaries for ethnographic notes, observations, and critically reflective comments on the entire process, both concurrently and retrospectively.

The type of analysis used to look at the content, discourse, behaviour, and interactions of our case study was thematic (Braun and Clarke 2006). The work was grounded in definitions of quality journalism (Adams 2019) alongside our own reasoning and personal experience. We studied the data following an inductive model and using a constructionist approach, looking at both semantic and latent levels. The aim of the interviews was to seek exploratory data through their comments and descriptions, looking for patterns and themes, nuances and tensions, and deep information or knowledge (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2010) with regard to the four research questions.

First, we coded the ethnographic material from our diaries and drew up possible themes, before coding material from the scripts of the shows, video recordings, surveys and poll data, and cross-sampling data from the audience discussions. Having revised our themes, we went on to code feedback from cast, crew, and audience in the form

of emails, other correspondence, and comments in the chat on Zoom. The themes were then reviewed, checked, confirmed. They naturally clustered into three groups: (1) content and credibility, (2) dramatisation, and (3) the connections made between the people involved, which roughly aligned with our research questions.

Although the number of online surveys returned was low, the amount of data we gathered overall was extensive. The mixed method of data collection made it time-consuming to code systematically, but our approach allowed for some important insights which otherwise might have gone unnoticed. There was an element of subjectivity as the researchers were embedded and invested in the project, but we strove to be objective about our analyses. Due to a lack of funding and security hazards with Zoom, we were not able to stage or promote a genuinely “public” event; we relied on drawing our audiences from snowballing the publicity through acquaintances, interested parties, and contacts, so we acknowledged that feedback was likely to be supportive, although we did receive criticism too.

Themes

Content and Credibility

The first cluster of themes to emerge from our data was around the essence and content of the productions: the information selected and the perspective of the storytellers; the agenda or branding of the shows and the insights provided by the stories. The truthfulness of storytelling comes into play here, if reporting is to be, in the words of Carl Bernstein, “the best obtainable version of the truth” (1992, 24), with the potential to increase or restore trust in journalism (RQ1).

Brand and Agenda

The research project and the concept of News on Stage were explained at the start of each show, but as a brand, it was not developed, beyond our strict agenda of aiming for “quality journalism”. We had devised a colour scheme (red/orange/purple) for our publicity materials, inspired by our hand-painted logo of a traditional stage, spotlight, and floorboards, intended to evoke traditional theatre, but with graffiti-style text, hinting at something more anarchic and original. Apart from this, we looked only for a mix of interesting stories, which could translate well to the stage, curated in a magazine format. Two participants in S1 raised concerns about the lack of unifying theme for the show. Limitations to our time and budget meant that we could not pick and choose from many stories, but where we could, we selected those which were the strongest journalistically and dramatically.

Bias

There was an ongoing internal discussion about bias, namely the perceived Zionist angle of the Holocaust story, with one audience member warning privately beforehand that she might disrupt proceedings. Author 1 noted in her diary that “a diplomatic paragraph to the text” had been inserted into the script, but voiced concern that “it won’t be enough to prevent charges of pro-Israeli bias, as I don’t have a Palestinian voice [for balance]”. The diary records how it was decided to address this in the Q&A by challenging

the writer/performer directly: “how and why are you putting yourself, as a journalist, in this position? i.e., explore the issues, but also the relevance of journalists’ beliefs/objectivity, etc. through discussion”.

Representation and Diversity

As authors, we were aware that the shows might struggle to include performers from a range of backgrounds. One audience member remarked that it was “fascinating to hear diverse stories”, and attendees joined the event from USA, India, Spain, and France, but a diary entry also recognised the content was dependent on the limitations of our own contacts.

The gender balance of performers across both shows was even, with eight women out of sixteen (including the two female presenters), but the representation of non-white journalists and actors was low, numbering only three in S2 and none in S1. At least three BAME performers who were contacted dropped out after an initial meeting for S2, because of work commitments. Economic reasons meant some of those who wanted to, could not take part: for example, one (student) tech operator dropped out at the last minute because he had been offered a new job. In S2, a diary entry notes how we also had difficulty recruiting “because we were not paying”. Another cast member commented, “The research says that comedy [...] is seen as quite a middle-class activity, which might make it feel too exclusive”. One of our diary entries predicts that the audience will “mainly going to be left-wing people, some radical, and that’s OK for now, but for it to be a truly public sphere, we’d need a cross-section of political views”. These questions of bias, diversity, and brand identity will all need to be considered together as the project progresses.

Insights

The findings also show that News on Stage was effective partly because the audience could look behind the veil of the journalistic profession. In the experience of Jaakko Lyytinen from the Helsingin Sanomat Black Box shows in Finland, “the audience are really hungry to hear about the journalistic process” (Interview, 2019). This was illustrated by the war correspondent who talked to the audience in S2 about how he “wound down” after covering a conflict story. The audience were also keen to ask direct questions to performers about the content using the live Chat function with queries such as, “How did you feel about how the media used your story?” According to our written observations, participants told us they felt strongly that “insight” into the stories was facilitated largely by the face-to-face nature of the event.

Trust

Dramatising the stories occasionally meant that content was adapted to heighten engagement. In two instances, imaginary characters were created, but the audience were made aware of this, and the content of their script was taken from the original reporting. We recognised afterwards that invention had crossed an ethical boundary when the actor interviewing an imaginary “fashion influencer” gave misleading information for dramatic effect. A diary entry notes that “while improvising, [she] gave an amount of followers she didn’t have – when all the other numbers were true”, which called into question the rest of the journalism. However, the use of actors appeared to increase the “truthfulness” at other times: after watching the re-enacting of her

radiographer story, the journalist said in discussion afterwards that it felt “very true to the original experience ... getting these one-on-one stories feels like you’re in the moment with them”. Another journalist said of her own performance, “you can add some flair, but the truth of the story remains untouched”.

Our data suggested that the credibility of the journalists in the eyes of the audience depended partly on the perceived truth of the stories, but also on the trust they felt towards them. According to our questionnaires, trust levels in journalists increased after the event. Most of the cast and crew who responded also said they believed events like this could increase trust in journalism “a great deal”. This may have been helped by the biographical information we provided about each journalist, but audience comments suggested it was more about getting to know the journalists as people. Audience members said it was hard to trust “faceless e.g., writing journalists”; instead, they made comments such as “I trust people introduced to me from a trusted source” and “I trust the ones I know”.

Thus, we see potentially increasing levels of trust in journalism with this format, in spite of the pitfalls or temptations to change aspects of the story for entertainment, because of the journalists becoming more known to their audience.

Dramatisation

A second cluster of themes centred around the process of dramatising stories, the benefits and the tensions of this approach and the journalists’ reaction to it. This links to RQ2 which asks how useful or responsible it is to connect to audiences through immersion and “dramatisation” and what are the limits or problems?

Dramatising the Stories

The process of dramatising the stories varied widely between performances; some journalists scripted their pieces unaided while others did so in collaboration. In S2, a theatrical director worked closely with each journalist.

The storytellers in S1 were all freelance journalists, their stories drawn from months or years of work, but never published. One was an experienced stage performer, presenting her story about climate change in the form of stand-up comedy, but most found it challenging to adapt their piece to drama. Several had “cold feet” early on in the experience. For example, one journalist felt uncomfortable about the co-director’s dramatic reworking of his story of the history of Dracula and decided he didn’t want to “act”. Instead, he produced a script for a different story, based on interviews from a warzone, for an actor to perform.

In S2 the performers were students using their final year journalism project as the basis of their stories. While they did not have the journalistic experience of those in S1, they were more used to appearing on Zoom calls and felt more comfortable in an online medium. The initial ideas for each item were brainstormed with Author 2 and then finessed through discussion with the theatrical director. For example, the A&E story, originally conceptualised as a game show with the audience voting in opinion polls, was reworked to become a soundscape, using original interview audio, while retaining the interactive poll element.

In S2, all bar one of the students “performed” their own story, with considerable time spent with the theatrical director acting as voice and acting coach.

This resulted in more emphasis on delivery and building character as part of the performance. So, for example, the character of a space law professor was developed for a piece delivered as a *How To Get Away With Murder*-style monologue. Dramatisation proved difficult when it came to a personal story featuring a re-enacted interview with a survivor of child abuse. Extensive discussions took place about how to make the journalism compelling to watch, without allowing such a sensitive story to become a performance. In the end, a set script was discarded in favour of a scripted introduction and conclusion from the journalist, while the rest was prepared but unscripted questions and answers. As such, a large amount of rehearsal concentrated on discussion with the interviewee about how he felt most comfortable telling his story.

From the post-performance surveys of the shows, the two most popular items in S1 were the stand-up comedian, and the duologue about the genocide survivor which included an actor and journalist. In S2, the two most popular were the space law segment and the reconstruction of the abuse survivor interview.

We repeatedly spoke to the journalists about the need for all the drama to be based on solid journalism. In both shows, the MCs [Author 1 and Author 2] repeated the shows' mantra to the audience of "never let the drama get in the way of the facts".

Feedback

As part of the S2 Q&A, one student journalist whose work was performed by an actor was asked whether she felt the piece remained "true" to the story, although dramatised. She replied: "Absolutely ... You're not just sharing stats ... but talking [about] someone who knows and has experienced it".

However, another student in the feedback questionnaire did express some reservations about whether journalism translated into performance might be properly understood: "People might mistake the theatricality of the performance for a lack of seriousness". Another also questioned, "Will the message of the piece be received / digested as 'news?'". In S1, one participant commented on the stand-up piece on climate change, "The research says that comedy does not necessarily help convey certain messages: people are focussed on getting the joke, it doesn't necessarily help people understand how serious the issue is".

The benefits to the performers themselves seemed clear. Feedback from the students in S2 included comments such as "I've never done anything like this before. It was so fun being able to act and educate others on something I'd researched and written"; "It gave me a chance to prove myself and push myself out of my comfort zone".

The S1 journalists also reflected on the benefits for journalism. "Direct interaction with the audience allowed me to respond to questions that I like have otherwise been left unanswered. Essentially providing a more complete piece of journalistic work", commented one in the questionnaire. "It was incredibly interesting to be part of a newly budding movement which explores a dimension of journalism I had no prior experience with", said another.

Theatricality

While we were concerned whether the experience would be different for the audience because of the online show, we found that use of Zoom did not necessarily diminish the connection between audience and cast. Like many other theatre companies who

switched to online performances, we found that the power of Zoom theatre during the pandemic created an immersive quality, an experience in which cast also became audience, creating a theatre of “communal experience” (Gardner 2020) thanks to the “elusive category of liveness of an event transpiring in real time of its consumption” (Worthen 2021).

Initially, in both shows, there was a conscious effort to create a stage-like experience, and terminology was used which echoed theatrical parlance. The Zoom meeting where participants gathered prior to the performance was called the “Green Room”, while the debrief Zoom was dubbed the “After Party”. During S1, Author 1 arranged a crimson stage-style curtain behind her, and Author 2 selected a virtual theatre auditorium as her Zoom background for her show. We referred to the break in the middle as the interval (illustrated with ice-cream gifs), and in the Virtual Bar (S1) and Virtual News Café (S2) (the post-show discussions on Zoom) the audience were encouraged to stay and chat with the participants. Author 1 and Author 2 referred to the mixture of journalists and actors as “the cast”, and the production team “the crew” as noted in Author 1’s diary: “I’ve started referring to the journalists as ‘performers’ as we have journalists and an actor, so it’s more convenient to have a collective noun” [diary note]. While this was undoubtedly convenient and emphasised the “show” aspects, it also meant that the theatrical aspect was being promoted.

In S1 several soundtracks were used to enhance the dramatic experience, for example, music from Sierra Leone set the scene for the story which was based on that country, and the Game of Thrones theme was played to introduce the gaming item. In S2’s hospital story, a soundscape was created which included interviews describing a 999 call and a mother’s account.

Those who watched the shows noted the potential danger of over-dramatising the journalism. One audience member remarked that if S1 had been more theatrical, “it might have felt too contrived and taken away from the authenticity. It was the closeness that really worked and from the journalism point of view, improving levels of trust among the audience”.

Connections and Reciprocal Engagement

The final group of themes clustered around the connections which were forged between the people present: the cast, crew, and audience. It comprised topics of collaboration, interactions between audience and performer, emotional bonds created and evidence of coming together in a public space for debate and align with RQ3 which asks how effective News on Stage can be in improving the value of journalism (to society).

The Power of Face to Face

The approach to the audience was direct in both shows, with the S1 host welcoming members by name as they arrived on the call [one of several live event techniques learned from Zoom Theatre webinar (Nims 2020)] and one performer addressing attendees warmly as “lovely face tiles”. The shows adopted the Diario Vivo style of exclusivity by encouraging audience to switch off any other devices to enhance the unique nature of the experience as “un espectáculo único, efímero, irrepetible” (2021), although some recordings were later posted on our website in order to build awareness of the project.

This live element helped forge an immersive experience (Worthen 2021) even while the audience and cast were all joining remotely.

When asked about the advantages of the format, both audiences and participants responded well to the (virtual) face-to-face nature of the event. As one performer said: "It presents the human face of journalists and their work to audiences in a very immediate way". Another commented, "I loved the interaction with viewers and how creative some of the pieces were. Sometimes when we read the news, we can't connect personally with the characters involved. News On Stage means you can fully connect with the people that these stories are about".

Another commented "the liveness of the show, and the nature of the presentations, created a strong atmosphere of intimacy". This was exemplified during discussion with the child sexual abuse survivor when a strong sense of connection was observed: "[He] answers audience question very openly and sincerely" according to our ethnographic observations.

From the audiences' point of view, the majority of the respondents to the S1 survey said they participated in the event, mostly by "raising a hand" or writing in the Chat box; others took part through polls or at the discussion points after each story, but here interaction was limited. Only three people from the audience spoke in S2's Virtual News Café and none were on camera, with most of the public discussion taking place between the host and the cast.

Passion, Humanity, Personalisation

A key way in which connections were made appeared to be through the passion, humanity, and personalisation of stories by the performers. One audience member said, "I like personal stories that suggest a wider picture of the world". This sometimes meant subjectivity, such as S1's interview with a Holocaust survivor "which has personal connections for her, a much more personal journey", noted another attendee. The journalist told the audience how she had injured her leg on the day of the performance, which may have increased audience sympathy toward her, as diarised by [Author 1]: "I fully expected the Free Palestine campaigners to jump on her, but no-one did, maybe because she had been injured – it seemed to be one of the things that increased the warmth towards the cast". As one audience member put it in a feedback email, "I hope [she] recovers well soon. I felt I got to know everyone, and it was a night well spent".

During the S2 post-show discussion it was noted by participants that "students felt the face-to-face conviction and [the] passion of the journalists came across, and this brought the stories home". In S1, a travel correspondent talked of his personal crusade to help war victims, at one point revealing to the audience, "This is something I have not spoken about publicly before".

The audience asked several questions directly to the performers/journalists, sometimes very personal ones. One S2 viewer asked the abuse survivor how therapeutic it was to tell his story, to which he responded that the more he told it, the less traumatic the experience was. Compared to the festival format at Byline and the FT Weekend, as explored by Adams (2020), more questions were heard from the audience and discussion times were longer, but many more questions posed on Chat could not be read out or followed up, due to time constraints.

Passion was evident in the approach to the whole project by those involved. One journalist performer said of another: “you could tell that she really cared, felt so passionate about it ... you felt like you could trust her because she cares so much about what she’s talking about”. It was also demonstrated by the sacrifices made by participants. One diary entry notes that we were “humbled by the huge efforts and commitment from the cast and crew who are doing it for nothing”.

A vital component of the effectiveness of the productions, therefore, appears to have been getting to know the journalist and their passions. This mirrors the experience of Black Box, whose audience survey shows they “like the ‘genuine enthusiasm’ of the reporters and that they’ve ‘put themselves on the line’” (Lyytinen 2019).

Not everyone felt that the personalisation enhanced the journalism though. Another viewer commented, “I am put off by articles which start off with a very personal story, obviously trying to sucker you in by the tragedy (or triumph) of a particular individual. On all occasions, the context should also be included to make sense of the article”.

Public Space

One of the aims of the project was to explore whether the setting of a News on Stage production could stimulate thought and public debate on the stories presented and even result in some input into the stories, which might develop them further. The authors were also interested in examining the border between journalism and campaigning. As explained by Author 2 to the S2 audience, “this project is all about bringing journalism directly to people”.

Interaction was regularly encouraged by a co-host in the Chat box by writing comments such as, “Brilliant questions guys, keep them coming!”. Author 1’s diary notes before S1 also show the hosts’ aim of nurturing discourse and connections: “I’ll try to cover the issues from the stories – asking for people to add their experiences, as well as comments and questions, so increasing personal contacts between journalists and audience ...” and the intention to link the stories to activism after the event: “... suggesting/prompting action at the end”.

Most respondents to the S1 questionnaire found the event either “somewhat” or “extremely interesting” due to the content of the stories. One commented that “people were very keen to type in the chat box and ask questions”. An audience member responded to an invitation to “add to those stories” by sharing a personal experience via Chat about being too scared to use a shower after being told about her family’s experience of the extermination camps, following the Holocaust story. One of the journalists also explained to the audience in the Virtual News Café how her shopping habits changed after doing the story on vegan fashion, being “more actively aware”.

Some debate happened before the event, such as the topic of pro-Israeli bias and whether the inclusion of the story was defensible. Author 1 writes in her diary, “I would counter” criticism by saying that it “provokes just this conversation which is good”. Indeed, when asked why they enjoyed a particular segment one audience member responded later: “Made me think more widely about the attitude of Israelis”. Another commented: “News on Stage was great. Very heavy. Lots to think about”.

Audience interaction might have been further increased if the discussion times were longer, but that would have meant cutting story content. Author 1 noted, “The Virtual Bar felt chaotic to me ... but looked slick on the recording. I didn’t know how much to

“chair” or how much to let it alone”. Hosts could have waited for free discussion to take place, before using prepared questions to performers, but the instinct was to fill the silent gaps caused by Zoom time-lag. At an in-person performance, which we plan to do next, the live discussion could potentially be open-ended and involve mingling at the end in and outside the venue.

Coming Together

Our last themes were about the coming together or community of cast, crew, and audience, the creation of a communal, collaborative act, and also the opposite: the problems of inequality, hierarchy, individualism, and non-co-operation which occurred.

The “coming together” began with the creative process of planning the productions, putting in place the foundations what followed “as for the event, a lot of it is putting people in touch with each other and briefing ... they all need managing, which is time-consuming” [diary note]. The size of the audience was determined by the efforts we made as organisers and involved pro-active messaging.

Among the cast and crew, we observed a “truly shared experience” in both events, particularly in the students’ show (S2), which “felt like a communal operation because they knew each other and their staff who attended” [diary note]. The technical process was collaborative in terms of discussion and also the use of interactive online tools such as Google docs.

In spite of the tutor/student power dynamic, students experienced a “collaborative process” of adapting the stories to stage and their “enthusiasm and loyalty to the project” was observed. However, as mentioned earlier, there were several instances where cast or crew found it difficult or impossible to stay on board with the production, for example over misgivings over the aim of the project, or unwillingness to “act”.

The unequal, “talking down” nature of the relationship between journalist and audience is potentially exacerbated by the stage itself, and the Zoom webinar replicates this, until the host invites attendees to “join” the cast in vision. Once on video in gallery view, everybody is on the same level and takes up the same space, allowing for a more equitable presence. There is no hierarchy of seating, as there might be in a theatre.

To sum up, there were strong connections made among those on the project, and through the various forms of feedback and interaction, a clear sense of “belonging” to the project, the event, and its content. This “brand loyalty” involved the audience too to some extent and could potentially be taken forward to create a kind of community.

Discussion

In order to try to identify the particular insights this project makes to this area of journalism practice, we return to our research questions. In response to RQ3, which asks how effective this approach is in improving the value of journalism to society, our research shows it can indeed provide a new, live, potentially public space; journalists become more “audience-oriented” and are hearing from both audiences and sources during a production. The event is a two-way street, in line with participatory and reciprocal journalism models, addressing the problem observed by Deuze that many journalists remain “out of touch with the lived reality” (Deuze 2008, 857).

The extent of the success of this kind of event as a crucible of society's ideas will, of course, always depend on how representative and widespread the practice can be. As town hall meetings have increased in the US in recent years, feeding into political discourse, this type of live journalism would need to become a popular phenomenon to have a significant effect.

In the words of Katherine Fink, "The single biggest challenge facing journalism today is the public's lack of trust in it" (2019). Evidence from the online events show that new connections can start to develop, including the lost "communities of readers", to address the crisis of trust (RQ1). A bond between journalist and audience was forged by the face-to-face nature of the engagement and by the passion, humanity, and personalisation of the performances, with confidence increasing through the event.

Although there were problems generated by "dramatising" the news (RQ2), "theatricality" in journalism, combined with "liveness", playfulness, and creativity, seems to work as a new (or revived) journalistic format. As predicted, there were instances during the shows of subjectivity, immersion, and lack of context, but the evidence also showed that engaging, quality journalism could still be produced. Bringing on board actors, directors, and theatrical expertise was arguably vital though in achieving an effective performance.

Moreover, the News on Stage project was exciting, disruptive, and innovative because it challenged norms. Being "creative" in this way pushes at the boundaries of quality journalism and turns journalists into performers, exposing them on stage but stretching their personal and professional potential.

Conclusion

In response to indications of an appetite for more interaction and live breaking news (Adams 2020) a new concept and format was developed to involve journalists themselves on stage. Through the production of two events, we defined some criteria for News on Stage-style productions: that the material must be new; the journalism should be well-researched and of a high standard; it should be performed by journalists or actors, using theatrical devices and entertainment but without altering the facts. The experiment shows how this unique blend of journalism and reciprocal interaction can, even when online, engage the public effectively, increase trust in journalism and help to build communities.

This experiment built on questions around engagement and reciprocity in journalism and contributed to the field by allowing the audience to directly question and comment on pieces of journalism presented in a live performance. It gave the journalists an opportunity to explain and clarify their work in a supportive setting. This takes forward Lewis, Holton, and Coddington's (2014) theory of "mutually beneficial" exchanges between journalist and publics. Added to this is the potential of journalists acting as "community builders" (Belair-Gagnon, Nelson, and Lewis 2019) in a creative environment in which journalist and public can interact to form connections. It demonstrated a new way of reviving humanity in journalism and reaffirming its place in the arts.

Questions remain about the funding for formats of this kind, but similar innovation in Finland, the USA, Spain, and South Africa indicate that a business model is emerging, not least as a brand-builder. The next development for live journalism, post-lockdown, is of course to stage an in-person event and experiment with more theatricality, to explore

how far those boundaries between drama and journalism can be stretched. In the experience of Black Box productions, live theatre allows for a deep connection in which the audience are “there in the dark, [without] their mobiles, very focused and immersed in the story” (Villi 2019). This study also shows that a format using actors, even online, is effective in bringing the audience closer to journalism, making it “more complete”. The News on Stage format is a viable template to use as a foundation for more practice-based research and, in our view, confirms it as a concept situated firmly in the future production of journalism.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Catherine Adams  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1727-3991>

Glenda Cooper  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2367-8626>

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