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**Citation:** Adams, C. & Cooper, G. (2025). "News on the Street": An Action Research Case Study of Embodied Live Journalism in an Urban Public Space. *Journalism Studies*, doi: 10.1080/1461670X.2025.2531777

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## “News on the Street”: An Action Research Case Study of Embodied Live Journalism in an Urban Public Space

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To cite this article: Catherine Adams & Glenda Cooper (18 Jul 2025): “News on the Street”: An Action Research Case Study of Embodied Live Journalism in an Urban Public Space, *Journalism Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/1461670X.2025.2531777](https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2025.2531777)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2025.2531777>



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Published online: 18 Jul 2025.



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# “News on the Street”: An Action Research Case Study of Embodied Live Journalism in an Urban Public Space

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## ABSTRACT

As journalists look for different ways to tell stories and rebuild communities, this paper details an action research approach to a unique live journalism event in a public space. While journalism theatre shows have been tried out in recent years, this project physically put the journalists on soapboxes in a town square to tell their stories, and interact directly with the public. By taking an action research approach, it attempted to reintegrate academic research, practitioners’ interests and explore the effect of contemporary journalism in a public space. It looked at whether an embodied approach could help engage news avoidant audiences and whether meanings and new identities of the journalists themselves emerged from the experience. In “News on the Street”, an event held at Nottingham Speakers Corner, journalism graduands and early career reporters performed previously-unheard stories to members of the public. The performers reported feeling empowered by occupying the space and claiming it for journalism and discussion of current affairs. More than 150 people engaged with the event and many showed enthusiasm for the approach, seeing journalism as more trustworthy outside its normal context, suggesting that the nature of the street journalism format is itself is a key to audience engagement.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 5 August 2024

Accepted 6 July 2025

## KEYWORDS

Live; journalism; public; urban; space; embodiment

## Introduction

Journalists are getting harder and harder to find: hidden behind screens, working from home, or ceasing to exist as newsrooms close (Metykova 2017; Jerónimo, Correia, and Gradim 2022). The decline of trust in journalists (Robinson 2019) might be partly due to these invisible digital cloaks but can also be blamed on news fakery and mob-building which abound online (Phillips 2015), and the plunge in advertising revenue caused by the internet revolution (Schroyer 2015).

In response, this project devised a solution-oriented event using an action-research approach: instead of trying to claw back mass audiences of the past, we planned a live journalism show where reporters would meet their audience face-to-face, in person in

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the town square. Much like the town crier of old, the journalists would tell their new, exclusive stories to real people, in real life, with all the risk and unplanned consequences that entailed.

The event followed a series of shows produced by the News on Stage project which had previously examined the use of actors and theatrical devices to engage audiences in journalism and rebuild trust. It also picked up a centuries-old global tradition of public staging of news and joined a recent revival of live journalism in Europe and the USA where journalistic stories are presented to a public audience in a limited public arena without being recorded so that they can only be experienced by those who attend (Hänninen and Rautiainen-Keskustalo 2025; Adams and Cooper 2024; Ruotsalainen and Villi 2021; Adams 2020; Tenenboim and Stroud 2020). However the News on the Street format is different because the journalists themselves perform their exclusive stories to an audience, rather than actors or activists. And also these journalists would tell their stories on the street rather than a traditional performance space like other live journalism projects, offering breaking news and original features and potentially generating discourse while standing on soapboxes at Speakers' Corner, just off Nottingham's central Old Market Square.

Bradbury-Huang (2010, 99) talks of the key focus of quality action research being identified by a praxis of participation; practicality; inclusivity of stakeholders and building capacity for ongoing change efforts. We wanted to assess how this event might support or challenge previous ideas and initiatives from our project. Our aims were to examine what impact urban public space might have on live journalism for both practitioners and researchers; what insights or meanings might emerge from the lived experience of the journalists and how important emotional engagement with the audience at an embodied journalism event would be.

## Literature Review

Before thinking about embodiment, one must consider the physical space where it would take place: as Dyson puts it, "space implies the possibility of immersion, habitation and phenomenal plenitude" (2009, 1). In our case, we chose an urban, civic place, the like of which has almost disappeared in the contemporary corporate world (Žižek 2014, 106; Smith 2015, 17). The city can be an alienating place (Lefebvre 1991), although it is argued that citizens can always find creative ways to get round barriers and restrictions. Researchers from the field of the built environment have demonstrated that human interaction and social activity produce public spaces, rather than architecture or authorities (Smith 2015, 68). Stevens and Shin's study of a Glasgow festival showed that space there was a *fluid* socio-cultural medium where unplanned interactions occur (2014). There is no *stable* public place, (Merx 2011, 137), rather people's actions create a risky, *loose space* or "breathing space" within the "hard architecture" and commerce of the city (Franck and Stevens 2006, 16).

Using spacialisation as an analytical framework Low argues that although many central squares have been redesigned with commerce or tourism in mind, they are still the best expression of social and moral freedom, a place where causal relationships between economy, culture and society can be understood (2000, 31). They are sites for sensory experience, interaction, micro-geographies, contested myths and memories and can

allow change and conflict (131). Others draw attention to semiotic structures housing symbols which can affect the feelings of and imbue meanings to the people using them (Franck and Stevens 2006, 23; Smith 2015, 70).

An event in such a space can create a window of perception, a change of the frame through which we perceive the world (Žižek 2014, 19). As part of the current “experience economy” (Pine and Gilmore 2011; Smith 2015, 55) events can be used to revive the public sphere (Merx 2011, 134), connect past and present (Žižek 2014, 72) and even forge identity, (Stevens and Shin 2014, 14). Some events can denigrate a public space if they are perceived as intrusive or commercial “eventification” (Smith 2015, 96) but others can serve as precedents for “re-territorialising” the area and normalising change (101). Žižek and others are however sceptical about their transformative powers, until the prevailing concept or “principal of change” is itself changed (2014, 106).

The idea of a public space where people debate common concerns (Habermas 1974, 49) has long been challenged amidst the rise of the profit motive, decline in community (Blau 2003, 209) and fragmentation of society (Beckett 2008, 87). More recently though, it has been framed as a space for resistance, conflict and experiment (Smith 2015, 167), where the public can express their voice and have a critical relation to power (Reinelt 2011, 18), and where public art can invoke democracy (Merx 2011, 132). London’s Speakers’ Corner is traditionally a platform for “those lacking voice or vote” (Cooper 2006, 753). However, in order to be effective, it is argued, the space must be “performed” (Merx 2011, 132) reviving the use of “the creative strength of the actor” evident in the public life of centuries ago (Sennett 2002, 37).

The [anonymised] project stems from the long-standing view that journalism is a prerequisite for a functioning democratic society, (Pulitzer 1904, 679). Habermas puts it at the heart of the public sphere, in line with the theory that the press should have “social responsibility” (Baden, McIntyre, and Homberg 2019, 1956). The Fourth Estate, expected to speak truth to power and hold the establishment to account (McQuail 2013, 112) has since been jeopardised by global market forces pushing it into a critical state (Deuze 2008, 5) amid a rapid rise of news avoidance (Peters and Broersma 2013; Toff, Palmer, and Nielsen 2023). This has led to a search for more creative forms of communication (Usher 2018) as news organisations strive for reconnection with audiences (Belair-Gagnon, Nelson, and Lewis 2019, 559) though liveness, face-to-face encounters and reciprocal journalism (Lewis, Holton, and Coddington 2014, 229). Some of these formats echo practices in the ancient Greek *agora*, the medieval town crier or the Living Newspapers movement of last century (Adams 2020). The growing network of live journalism practitioners and theorists which has emerged in the last ten years (Live Journalism 2022) has discovered that the willingness of journalists to show their vulnerability and humanity on stage seems to endear the public to them (Ruotsalainen and Villi 2021; Adams 2020; Lyytinen 2020). Some assert that contemporary political theatre can still flourish within the “plurality” of public spheres (Botham 2008, 317) and Adrienne Russell suggests in that journalists can create a discursive forum there (2016).

Our experience of the world is governed by our “biological embodiment” (Gregersen and Grodal 2008, 1), just as participants and attendees of live events are living, breathing subjects of their environment and the universe (Dyson 2009, 17). As de Certeau explained, simply walking through a place can recover meaning, insights and belonging (1984, 93). Thus, the body of the journalist is now framed as a potential “site of experimentation” and

“means of transformation” (Francoeur 2021, 204). In contrast to previous iterations of [anonymised project], our new event would invite random public participation, rather than those who had already expressed interest by signing up for a live journalism event. This might add to the sense of moral or even “noble” practice of the journalist putting “one’s body on the line” and inviting risk as they “bear witness” in real life (Tait 2011, 1223). This immersion need not be at odds with the journalists’ role as producers of rational content (Francoeur 2021, 203).

In her study of town squares, Low reminds us that the experience of being there is “sensory” as well as social (2000, 141). Dyson especially emphasises the importance of sound which touches those present both physically and emotionally through vibrations and gut reactions (2009, 4) while Merx shows how shared “perceptual sensations” at an event can “create intimacy” in public space (2011, 133). It should be noted here that Sennett alerts us to “the myth” that emotional intimacy is a cure-all and warns against worshipping the “god” of “human warmth” (2002, 197) where context is forgotten, style trumps content and the moral replaces the political (Žižek 2014).

Speakers’ Corner in Nottingham was the first to be dedicated outside London and marked by a plaque on the ground (BBC 2009), was formerly a busy road leading to the city’s Old Market Square, and one of the oldest and few truly public spaces in the UK (Smith 2015, 5), in contrast to most central areas which are rented out by councils to raise income. It is a wide, gently sloping, pedestrianised thoroughfare between tall historic buildings, lined with cafes, shops and offices, forking up towards the north of the city. Now a popular venue for rallies and protests (Childs 2021), it is an example of the porous or *loose spaces* which “give cities life and vitality” (Franck and Stevens 2006, 17). People constantly move up and down along one of three “lanes” which run towards or away from the square. The spot is overlooked by a voluntarily funded statue of the legendary Nottingham Forest Football Club manager Brian Clough, which provides some steps for passers-by to sit on. The square used to echo with cries of newspaper sellers hawking the *Nottingham Evening Post* but they have now gone.

Our event at Nottingham’s Speakers’ Corner, “News on the Street” was the latest event from a long-term project we designed, as two academics from two UK universities, to re-engage the public through acts of journalism. This particular iteration was inspired by the Soapbox Science project which promotes science by talking to the public in public spaces (Soapbox Science 2024) and had carried out an event previously at Speakers’ Corner, Nottingham. The national Speakers Corner Trust supported the event, saying it was, “passionate about improving the public participation in open discussion, debate, and wider civic involvement in the issues of the day.” [personal communication, 2024].

One of the intentions of the action research was to find out what difference it could make to the nature of a public space to put live journalists there in person, as we sought to encourage dialogue and interaction on fresh topics or matters of interest. Another was to investigate how the event presented and influenced journalism in the way it was produced and received by the audience.

We wanted to understand what meanings might come to light through the location where the event was enacted with regard to history, heritage, memory and symbolism. We were interested to see how the character and geography of the space and use of soapboxes might influence social interactions and people’s experience. We expected that it would be an efficient place to get the attention of passers-by who might stop, listen

and interact. Soapbox Science attracted more than 700 people there over three hours in 2022 with twice as many speakers. By studying any thoughts expressed and interactions among participants and attendees we would record and investigate signs of conflict, resistance, contested space and emergence of identities.

To sum up, we wanted to observe the experience of live journalism in an urban public space and were open to learn how this model would play out in terms of journalists' and audience perceptions.

## Methodology

An action research approach was chosen because of its focus on participation, reflexivity, partnership and actionability (Wagemans and Witschge 2019; Bradbury-Huang 2010), and for its ability to give insights in real-life settings (Styhre and Sundgren 2005, 58). As Bradbury-Huang describes it "action research is an orientation to knowledge creation that arises in a context of practice and requires researchers to work with practitioners.[it] represents a transformative orientation ... in that action researchers seek to take knowledge production beyond the gate-keeping of professional knowledge makers" (2010, 93). As Wagemans and Witschge highlight, the importance is that "a deliberate attempt is made not to divorce phenomena from the environment which give them meaning" (Hult and Lennung 1980, 245). In devising *News on the Street*, we as researcher-producers were active throughout the whole process, working with the journalists to develop their pieces for public performance, organise the event and where necessary, participate both as producers and then during performance when needed because of illness. Thus, the research was envisaged as iterative and participatory, allowing us to adapt during the event preparation and the event itself. As such, we saw the journalists we worked with as "partners in the work of knowledge creation" (Bradbury-Huang 2010, 95) and our project as one with a practical application to help journalists consider how best to reconnect with audiences. In order to understand the meanings encoded and communicated via the experience, environment and embodied processes of the event space it is useful to consider the phenomenological approach used by urban geographers (Low 2000, 49). We were also interested in examining the journalists' actual embodied, lived experience, which might shed light on a changing profession and reveal a "history from below" (Wahl-Jorgensen 2019, 676). The action research approach meant that we could free ourselves from a strict delineation of jobs, witness first-hand the blurring of roles of journalists, researchers and agents of change, in order to experiment and "to be present at critical moments" (Wagemans and Witschge 2019). It would give us space for "self-reflective inquiry", as suggested by Greenwood and Levin (2006). A practice-based research method allowed us to provide a "bottom-up theorisation of journalism practices" and avoid old assumptions about the role of journalism in society (Witschge and Harbers 2018, 105). We were also inspired by the Reflective Practitioner Case Study (RPCS) model used to study verbatim theatre (Peters 2020) which acknowledges a researcher's position as practitioners while affirming it as a valid perspective from which to reflect and research our work (O'Toole 2006, 56).

This method makes it possible for a dialectic relationship between practice and theorising to emerge (Grady 1996). Contextual or situational analysis which produces naturally occurring data has long been an anthropological research tool (Moser 2003, 79). The RPCS

model demonstrated by Peters (2020) uses conventional qualitative case study methods such as content analysis of the texts and scripts of the performances, journal entries and surveys, but also analyses of rehearsals, interviews with the storytellers, observations and the act of constructing the event itself. Aware of a potential problem in separating our roles as creators and researchers we each subjected the data to textual and thematic analysis separately before coming to consensus through discussion.

With our involvement in the project and performance itself, we had to consider whether the findings depended on our contribution to it, and if so whether they could be generalisable for other projects that we did not have involvement in. Additionally, organising this ourselves we had to consider whether there was an element of bias in wanting the event to succeed and thus shaping the process/outcomes to reinforce our expectations.

These were issues that we were conscious of and continually reflected on. It is well established that practice-led research has personal and subjective elements. As such we followed O'Toole (2006) who suggests that findings can be plausible and credible by using multiple sources. In our case we used not only our own ethnographic documents, but also surveys, scripts, interviews with the storytellers and interviews with the public. For us taking a reflexive standpoint was important, foregrounding the concept that our involvement in the event might affect it. We followed Harding (1991, 151) who calls for "strong reflexivity" - that is, that we would systematically examine their own beliefs, looking "back at the self in all its cultural particularity from a more distant, critical" location (1991, 151) as also noted in Steiner (2018) and Wahl-Jorgensen (2025) who notes that subjectivity is built into the very fabric of professional practice of journalism. As such we reflected at every stage of the preparation of the event, during the event itself and afterwards.

We made every effort to handle the data objectively and rigorously in line with our journalism training and good academic practice, such as being careful not to use leading questions in our surveys or to distort our findings. We devolved the vox pop interviews and surveys of the audience to the crew as well. As dual participants and observers we were able to appreciate better the complexities of the media event, respond "in the moment" to the processes and behaviours we were observing, and gain insights into the phenomenon from the "experiential perspective" recommended by Wagemans and Witschge (2019). For the event itself, Speakers Corner, Nottingham was booked through the local authorities, to avoid clashing with other events, for May 18th 2024 from 12-2pm BST. A safety risk assessment was drawn up to comply with the universities' public liability insurance and security plans were made in place in case of any conflict. Funding of £5,834.20 was awarded by City St George's University of London through its HEIF Knowledge Exchange Fund to stage the event and pay the journalistic performers and production team, and it also received ethical clearance from the same university (ETH2324-1427).

Two months ahead, we began to look for journalists with an unpublished story they wanted to tell. We recruited from within our respective journalism departments, (graduates who had finished their course and were embarking on a journalism career), local news organisations, our contacts and professional networks such as the National Union of Journalists. Most of the interest came from final year journalism students who were keen for work experience after finishing their course and a chance to tell the stories they had been working on for their final year assessed project. Four female and

one non-binary journalists applied to perform their stories and a sixth agreed to report breaking news. The last had to drop out through illness on the day, so we (Author 1 and Author 2) stood in. One of the speakers decided against performing at the last minute due to anxiety so the timeslot was reduced to from three to two hours. This left three final year journalism graduands and one early career professional. All speakers wore a bright blue high-viz gilet with the word PRESS on the back and front and the four main storytellers brought props to help tell their original ten-minute story. Of the main speakers, three were White British, one was Spanish; all on low income and identifying as journalists; three aged in their twenties and one in their thirties.

Ten media students (second years, graduands and a masters student) and one alumnus helped with staging, publicity, filming, market research and data collection, of which eight were present on the day wearing black T-shirts with a News on the Street logo. They carried out the surveys and vox pops with the audience. They were also tasked with filming, streaming on social media, photographing and reviewing the event for the project website. Three of the eleven were male and six were not of British, but of Turkish, Spanish, Romanian, Indian and Chinese origin.

Through regular meetings and rehearsals via Zoom/Teams and working on shared Google Docs over a two-month period, we worked with the speakers to fashion each of their original, unpublished feature story into a narrative version suitable for performance. The four topics were deep fake porn, postcard collections, violence against trans journalists and refugee women. The event evolved organically, and the structure, content and use of space adapted to changing circumstances.

For the event itself we positioned three soapboxes in a semi-circle at the foot of the Brian Clough statue and two speakers told their stories simultaneously from the two outer boxes before being replaced by the other two, repeating the pattern several times over the two hours. In between, short breaking news bulletins were delivered by the producers from the middle box, heralded by the ringing of a brass school bell.

## Data Collection

We gathered a range of data in order to analyse the event from as many angles as possible. To find out about the experience of the audience we used paper surveys, video footage, vox pop interviews, diaries and observation notes from production assistants, who recorded numbers and behaviours of engagement, and carried out the surveys and vox pops. The four main speakers and crew filled in an online survey and three of the speakers were also interviewed in-depth verbally three weeks after their performances by one of the producers [the fourth did not respond]. Contemporaneous notes, communications (emails, exchanges and so on) and research diaries kept by the producers on the rehearsal, meetings, planning and production process were at our disposal; we also had the GoogleDocs copies of the various versions of the stories and breaking news items. Field observations on the comparative use of the performance space were made there on two subsequent occasions: on a weekday afternoon from 12-2pm when there was no event and at the previous Soapbox Science performance on Sat 13th July 2024. Conversations were carried out with the staff at both cafes on the thoroughfare. Data was available from communications with strategic partners: the authors' universities, Nottingham City Council, The Speakers Corner Trust and journalism networks. Local and national

publicity before and after the event was collected, including an independent journalistic review written for our project website, written by one of the production team. All documents were analysed, and themes were discussed and observed.

## Results

In total, 153 people were observed engaging with News on the Street over the two hours and the behaviours of 34 of them were monitored closely. Part of the event was also streamed to just over two thousand social media users. The average time spent watching the performances face to face was 12 minutes 15 s with the time duration ranging from one minute to 120 minutes. There were always two stories being told simultaneously (the speakers were facing in different directions and far enough away to prevent drowning each other out) and several attendees stayed or moved their position to hear more than one story. Stories were fairly evenly attended. People were observed listening, applauding and interacting with each other, the journalists and the production team. 19 people filled in questionnaires, answering both five-point Likert scale and open text questions about their engagement with the event and thoughts about further action. Those who replied were balanced gender-wise (ten identified as male; nine female); their education level was on average degree-level but ranged from GCSE only to PhD and ages ranged from 16 to over 75. Six were family or friends of the speakers, five had either heard about it through work or other means and eight just happened to pass by. Most were with accompanied by other adults, four were with family and seven on their own. Video footage and observations indicated that the age, class and racial background of the audience was diverse.

### *The Sensory Experience of “News on the Street”*

News on the Street occupied a central place in the city which meant people could encountered the event as a multi-sensory experience, facing journalists standing on soap-boxes. Each journalist (referred to as A1, A1, A3 and A4) used props appropriate to their stories as visual effect (a broom handle, postcards, a map of the world, a photograph of a woman which had later been “deep-faked”) and wore uniform gilets while the crew wore T-shirts. A female British Sign Language (BSL) signer worked with each of the journalists to enable aurally impaired attendees to participate. Natural voices (no microphones) were used but the town crier-like bell was rung to introduce the breaking news segments and feature stories. The performers, crew and audience may have experienced physical sensations due to proximity with other people and exposure to changing weather conditions. Journalist A2 said of her experience:

I think the soapbox was really good because ... it was easier to project, and see everybody and get the atmosphere of the space as well It felt like you were actually doing something rather than just standing flat on the street. The gilet did feel a bit like a builder's ... but it did draw people in because it was bright and people thought, oh, what are they wearing that for?

Journalist A3 said she enjoyed wearing the gilet as it evoked a team spirit and also made her feel professional; she noted the unusual experience for her age demographic not to be speaking using a screen (such as Powerpoint) but using physical props.

Journalist A1 also remarked on the power of the sensory experience; they remembered the sound of the buses turning at the top of the hill and aromas coming from the two cafes the soapboxes were positioned in between.

You could smell the coffee right from the coffee shops. And seeing people like put down their drinks or what they were eating and just turn to look and listen for a little while, there was something very compelling about that. I was like, even though people are just going about their day or whatever, but something I have to say has made them stop and listen. And you know, there's something very rewarding about that.

The producers observed that the BSL signer proved an integral part of the visual and theatrical impact of the event and one person surveyed praised the decision to include her. Journalist A1 also questioned whether we were fully capturing the audience because we did not record numbers of those watching from the cafes, which seat more than 80 customers between them.

Whatever there were, there were those moments of engagement that there was eye contact made. There were people nodding, you know, there was there were those connections happening. Even if you don't [count them] on your clicker, count them as people who came into the space because they definitely were part of the space, I think.

A1 also commented the physically strenuous nature of the event: as a wheelchair user recovering from pneumonia they said that repeating their story four times was "taxing and exposing" particularly because "I was, you know, back in those situations again and reliving those emotions." The content of the stories themselves was thus triggering sensory experiences for the performers as well, as they connected to actual incidents in the past. One journalist who pulled out of the event before it started blamed it partly on "nerves". Several participants noted other negative physical feelings around anxiety, chaos and fear of rejection by the public, particularly Journalist A3 who recounted "shaking" before the first time of telling her story and feeling like she would have a panic attack.

From the audience's point of view, the area is normally fairly quiet. Observing the space at an ordinary weekday lunchtime there were no raised voices or noise apart from a murmur of chatting from a café and the background rumble of buses, roadworks and the tram bell and clock chimes. One barista said that the amplified sound used in rallies sometimes tended to put off their customers, but when he once complained the performers told him they could do what they liked: "it's Speakers' Corner,". Two audience members interviewed at News on the Street said they found the quieter speakers more powerful and engaging than the louder ones.

## ***Journalism Occupying a Physical and Public Space***

### ***The Journalist Experience***

The producers had worked with all the journalists to ensure that there was physicality in their scripts; a key developmental point of the scripting process was to encourage them to reversion their stories from written words to performative acts involving sound, vision and movement. Crucial to this was directly interacting with the audience throughout the pieces: Journalist A2 began her story about the history of postcards with the question "Anyone here got a stamp?" Journalist A3 asked the audience to estimate how many

countries there were in the world where women did not have rights. Journalist A4 held up an innocuous photograph of her deep-faked subject in a restaurant and asked the audience whether they had posted similar pictures of themselves on social media. Journalist A1 directly confronted their audience right at the beginning of their piece:

How would you like to have something like this [thrusts broken broomstick over her head] thrown at your head? How would it make you feel?

How do you think it would make you feel, if this happened to you whilst you were at work? Do you think you would want to carry on doing that job?

Asked to reflect on what the physical nature of the event had been like, the journalists talked about it heightening a sense of vulnerability: “the performative nature of it is very attention grabbing and can make you feel very under scrutiny” (A1) and being concerned that it might be “a little awkward” because of being right in the middle of the street in a place “that has a reputation” (A2). Cumulatively however the journalists felt that it had been a positive thing and had shaped their view of the profession and their place in it, validating their role as journalist:

I think it also gives you more confidence in that you know, I wasn’t just there as [my name], I was there, embodied in quite a serious sense as a member of the press, as my profession and I was embodied as a crucial role in our democracy, and so it lent more weight to what I felt I was doing and the importance of what I was doing. (A1)

News on the Street was utilising a space that is already signposted for public discussion and debate; what was original and unusual was the use of researched journalistic pieces rather than opinion to bring important subjects into the public domain. Journalist A3 (originally from Spain) noted that for her the idea of performing at a space that was important “for protest or to talk about topics reminded [me] that freedom of speech was important.”

### *The Audience Experience*

Audience members surveyed also responded well to this interactive embodied approach: the mean rating of the experience was 4.7 on a Likert scale. “News started on the street and it’s good to see it being put back there again” was one response to the questionnaire; “refreshing”, “brave” and “courage” were words that recurred. Another answered: “It was very empowering to see them talk about subjects they are clearly passionate about. Really powerful.”

Only four of the 19 audience members who filled out surveys had ever attended a live journalism event before, but all found News on the Street “welcoming”. Production assistants noted that of the 34 they observed most closely, many were smiling, chatting, engaging with the journalist afterwards, reading the fliers or closely listening, displaying reactions that would not occur or be visible in conventional journalism.

Our surveys asked the audience whether they would take action as a result of their encounter, seven respondents replied “yes”, nine “maybe” and two “no”. However, the average score for respondents saying they would find out more on subjects they had heard was 4.05 and 4.31 would talk to a friend about the event. Given that most reported that they were unlikely to go to live journalism events usually (average score 1.7) this potentially signalled that the interaction with journalists had left them with more

enthusiasm, although it is difficult to analyse this without having a full idea of their news consumption. As one commented, the effectiveness of the event for them was that they saw journalists “standing up talking about experiences - different to normal, different to misinfo [*sic*] online”.

Journalism as resistance occurred in the content and presentation style of three of the stories which ran counter to the mainstream media and conservative political narrative: Journalist A1 challenged the audience to consider whether it was worth living as a transgender journalist; Journalist A4 revealed the suffering of female victims of deep-fake porn and the shortcomings of the law and Journalist A3 highlighted the reality of life for refugee women. A public discussion forum was thus physically created in a highly commercialised area of the city. The result was a space which was temporarily contested: apart from the changes in sound, vision, rhythm and pedestrians adapting their route, in two cases the production team reported members of the public reacting in a hostile and confrontational manner to the presence of a trans, non-binary journalist. One member of the crowd expressed their disgust verbally and another tore a leaflet in half in front of the assistant who had handed it out.

Although it was not often articulated in our research data, some of the Nottingham public will have been aware of the connection of the square with the city’s history of journalism as the site for newspaper vendors, public speakers and town criers while city pubs and coffee shops were venues for people relaying stories or reading newspapers aloud. The ringing of the bell harked back to medieval times, evidenced by the headline used in press coverage, “Journalists become town criers for the day” (Linford 2024) which highlighted the way the event was framed for some in terms of history, heritage and nostalgia. The symbolism of grand colonial era buildings juxtaposed with the statue of self-described socialist and rebellious folk hero “Cloughie” might also be in the consciousness of passers-by.

## ***Journalism as Engagement***

### ***The Audience***

Our observations showed that many people responded well and listened, interacted, chatted and learned from the encounter; one wrote in the survey they were “enthralled”. Respondents considered what they had learned and some suggested that they would take action as a result. One attendee was appreciative that we were “not trying to sell anything”, while another felt that both “news gatherers and the public would both benefit from the experience”, suggesting that there was a sense of reciprocity and mutual engagement. One audience member gave the producers a tip-off about a story which he thought the journalists would be interested in; two shared their contact details for more communication; several responded to the prompt by Journalist A3 to express their thoughts about refugees by writing on Post-it notes; one read “Solidarity with you – none of us are free until all of us are free” while another read “Thank you for stepping up for people’s rights”. Others shared memories or added verbally to the stories they heard. The public used adjectives such as “new”, “interesting” and “unique” to describe the event and said they planned to take a variety of actions as a result: to talk more about the issues raised; be a more outspoken ally of trans people, and pay more attention to where they got their news from and to how news gathering affects journalists.

### *The Journalists*

Journalist A1 reflected that her story of being transgender reached beyond her usual audience, due to the nature of the event:

I think it achieved a lot in my interactions with people. It got people engaged in a way that my usual stories don't. ... I have had, a quite significant uptick, but it's always within particular communities ... so it was really nice to have interactions with people who I think didn't really know much about the issue at all ... people who wouldn't usually click on those kind of stories.

Journalist A3 said that for her, just seeing people listening with their families or from different backgrounds or different ages was "what journalism is about". She noted that it was not like talking in a conference or a usual venue because the team had no idea who would make up the audience. This also meant the journalists had to work hard to engage those watching – and the jeopardy – "everything could change – you didn't know who could come next".

Journalist A2 said:

I think it was good because you got to connect with people and actually talk to them instead of just over the phone on an e-mail. It was nice, they could ask questions that they wanted and they could actually hear what the answers to their questions were and stuff like that ... Everyone would just go. "Oh, yeah, I remember sending postcards. I remember this. I remember that". So it was "people connecting to my story and remembering stuff that they've done.

The effect on the journalists and crew themselves was notable. Like other News on Stage events there was a sense of unity and support which grew throughout the rehearsal period. Journalists interviewed said that the rehearsals (carried out via video-conferencing because team members were geographically apart) had been an important part for them to build a sense of connection and solidarity: "I think it was very empowering, especially being surrounded by other women journalists, you know - to feel part of something, to feel that solidarity" (Journalist A1). Journalist A3 also commented on the encouragement she felt from being part of a team, added to by the shared physical act of wearing visually identifying gilets or T-shirts.

The team were also conscious of the physical risks involved. A1 was concerned that publicising the event to their followers in advance could attract the "hate mob" which had disrupted her campaign work in the past. Two of the journalists had high profiles on social media and A4 live-streamed the event to her 2,043 followers. After discussion it was agreed that A1 would not trail the event, in order to prevent any conflict, which might endanger others, as well as them. We put a contingency plan in place for evacuation to the nearby "Council House" (City Hall) which was explained to speakers and crew and labelled "Plan B". The production team was already briefed about how to handle conflict situations and assigned the task of keeping an eye on the speakers and supporting or protecting them where necessary in case of verbal abuse, misogyny or other hostility. This occurred on two occasions, as mentioned above, but not directly to the speakers. As Journalist A1 commented:

When you encouraged us to build questions and pauses [for answers] into our performances in those moments my whole fear was that someone was just going to take that opportunity to shout, shout something stupid at me. And that I would be forced to somehow deal with that situation or engage. Fortunately, that didn't happen, but that I that was very much on my mind the whole time.

## Discussion

As Ellis explains (1992, 3), emotional, cognitive and physical orientations all combine to produce the subjective lived experience and being immersed at the event helped us to understand some of its complexity. As a sensory experience for the journalists, near their audience, the event was “compelling” (A1) and for the audience, it was “enthraling”, the perceptions shared within the space creating intimacy.

The importance of the voice is sometimes forgotten in the blanket term “embodiment” yet sound and vibrations are at the core of our being. Dyson says to hear is to be “touched, both physically and emotionally” and calls sound “a unifying force, one that dissolves the distinction between the body and technology, nature and culture” (2009, 11). We learned that the quieter speakers were sometimes preferred and more effective than loud ones. Soapbox Science were more restrained in their use of sound: they did not use noise to attract attention and instead of trying to summon and address a crowd, speakers drew listeners in closer to them by engaging just one person and allowing shyer people to edge nearer without feeling watched. It might be useful to adopt this method at a future News on the Street event, as the bell tended to make the audience stay back from the speaker.

As Cooper observed in her study of London Speakers’ Corner, news “circulates” between those listening to the speakers (2006). There were fewer spectators than we had hoped for, compared to Soapbox Science, but enough to gather data from to draw some valuable insights. Historical and geographic symbols and associations may have helped the public to be receptive to news in the chosen space. One journalist (A2) mentioned “the reputation” of the space, indicating it had meaning for her; a member of the public was aware that journalism was “back again” in the city centre and the postcards story made historical connections for people, uniting them through shared conversations. In an analysis of an open-air baking experiment, Public Pie, it is argued that public performance not only brings a space to life and invokes democracy but even helps to re-stitch the fabric of society (Merx 2011, 135). Events like this therefore may act can as a reminder of our ability as humans to gather with strangers to hear stories and talk about them, a process defined by Cooper as “dynamic social commons” (2006, 771). The occupation of an inner-city space can be a disruptive, “re-territorialising” act or can influence how those present think and act politically, but it can also simply encourage people to go there and meet others (Harvey, Low, and Smith 2013, 18). Some of our surveys suggested that the event might have the possibility of stimulating thinking, interaction and discussion, but the main value was to show that something creative could be done in the space provided. A real “change of frame” would require a far more radical strategy over a longer timescale; Harvey notes that action in a public space is “worthless” until private and commercial spaces are also eventually challenged (32).

In contrast to other current live journalism events, staging this in a “loose” public space meant that there was a high degree of unpredictability and risk. The production assistants noted in their observations that this resulted in a large number of unplanned interactions between speakers, production team and audience and also within those groups, including conversations among local people who recognised each other and might stop to chat or “catch up”. There were no interactions at all in the two-hour weekday observation of the same space when no event was being staged. which is perhaps another form of

news dissemination or (citizen) journalism. As Merx notes, public space “performs differently on different occasions” (2011, 32) and the action research strategy helped us to observe the value of journalism for democracy, as Greenwood and Levin’s work encourages (2006, 215).

As breaking news reporters, the producers ended up ad-libbing during their performance to add context, interest or humour to their stories and in reaction to the crowd. This was in contrast to a tightly scripted broadcast news bulletin or published article. Improvisation was present in various other ways throughout the event as the journalists actively adapted to their environment, circumstances and various human interactions. Comparing recordings of the performances to the scripts showed that journalists would sometimes “tease” their stories at the start in order to relate to those listening or emphasise some sections in response to the interest shown by their audience. These organic practices could be described as a kind of *street journalism*.

Stevens and Shin observed that performers at urban festivals create and consolidate their own identities by taking part (2014, 14). As A3 explains, not only did she feel empowered and determined to continue working as a journalist but also is clearer about the kind of journalist she wants to be. In line with the experience of Wagemans and Witschge (2019), participants grew into new roles offered by the event: those who had just finished their university course developed new perceptions of themselves, taking on a variety of professionalisms, such as performer, videographer, producer and event marketer, as well as consolidating their identity as journalists. Meanwhile the physical collaboration and shared jeopardy of the occasion stretched their knowledge of teamworking and provided us with insights about the rewards of sharing skills, allowing roles to overlap and identities to be negotiated.

## Conclusions

At a time when our central urban areas are increasingly commercialised and the notion of “public” space is challenged (Minton 2006; Madanipour 2010; Smith 2018), an event taking place there offers the possibility of reclaiming it as a public sphere. “Meanings and values” are added to the space, which can be contested and full of risk, but is somehow “reawakened” (Stevens and Shin 2014, 17). It is of course difficult to form general conclusions from a one-off event, but the experience did produce some meanings, effects, values and insights for the journalists and audience and reminded us that a performed public space can be reclaimed for journalism and open discussion of current affairs. It was noteworthy that the journalistic content was seen by the audience as different and engaging outside its normal context, suggesting that the nature of a different format may hold a key to audience engagement.

In line with the trends in live journalism and storytelling in the media today (Ruotsalainen and Villi 2021; Lytinen 2020; Tenenboim and Stroud 2020), our research showed that emotional engagement, theatricality and intimacy were important in helping to engage the audience in *News on the Street*. *Street journalism* proved successful but with the caveat that it will only ever be possible if those presenting it have the knowledge, skills and integrity to support it. Building on recent ideas of “mutually beneficial” exchanges between journalist and publics (Lewis, Holton, and Coddington 2014, 229) and the journalist as “community-builder” (Belair-Gagnon, Nelson, and Lewis 2019,

559), the reciprocal nature or *two-way journalism* inherent in the lived experience format resulted in enriching and developing the stories. It would be interesting to experiment with other, less noisy and dramatic styles of presentation and compare the levels of engagement. Moreover it served as a way to celebrate journalism which is sorely needed in a world where journalists and the media are often invisible, distrusted or even reviled.

As we have seen, the embodied nature of the exercise brought with it risks, costs, contested spaces and unknown outcomes for those who produced and participated in it. As Francoer theorised (2021, 219), by using bodies as a site of communication (and scholarship), we learned that audiences who engaged with the event reported a strong sense of connection and journalists themselves reported being transformed by the experience. It should be noted that those who stopped to watch the performance were a self-selecting audience, although because it was in a public thoroughfare, there was a chance of meeting a more diverse number of participants. Although engagement was fairly low, one might expect it to increase if the performance became a regular and expected event, with the faces of the journalists becoming familiar or the brand recognised. Recruiting journalists willing to take part in an unknown experiment was not easy, but this could improve with time, as Black Box productions in Finland have shown, now regularly selling out shows in their national theatre. This kind of event could be a useful practice for news organisations to adopt in future in order to preview upcoming stories, programmes or editions and to build brand loyalty or recognition for their journalists, especially those from minorities. Such events are valuable to society: if news avoidance is most prevalent among disadvantaged groups, existing inequalities will increase unless it is addressed (Toff, Palmer, and Nielsen 2023). We have learned that a live event of *street journalism* can be an effective new format, reaching new audiences and connecting them to stories while the manifestation of different artforms is also an event itself (Žižek 2014, 6).

## Disclosure Statement

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

## Funding

Funding of £5,834.20 was awarded by City St George's, University of London through its HEIF Knowledge Exchange Fund to stage the event

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