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Womxn on soapboxes: the experience and impact of an all-womxn public performance of live journalism

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ABSTRACT

In the wake of historical under-representation and marginalization, the voices and experiences of women often fail to take centre stage in journalism. Ethical frameworks for journalism have advocated that it should be judged by its success in promoting change, such as making a difference for the under-represented. In response, this work takes a feminist action research approach by producing a live journalism event, 'News on the Street', to promote womxn (women and non-binary people) in journalism. The event showcased original, unpublished stories written and presented by a team of all-womxn journalists performing on soapboxes in an urban public space. Through inductive thematic analysis, surveys and interviews revealed how onlookers were 'a-livened' to the stories they were hearing and admired the 'bravery' of the womxn journalists. The data also revealed some hostility to the presence of a non-binary, trans journalist. The journalists reported feeling empowerment, solidarity, emerging professional identity and finding courage to overcome fear and anxiety. The event was regarded largely by the audience as 'campaigning' demonstrating that such a format can be effective as a radical, ethical approach to journalism.

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1. Introduction

There are more womxn journalists than ever. A global survey in 2023 (European Journalism Centre 2023) showed 48% of digital journalists identified as women (and 1% non-binary) compared to 40% the year before, following a steady rise in numbers over recent decades (Lobo et al., 2017, p. 1151), but the profession remains male-dominated. Historically, women have struggled to be taken seriously as journalists, although by the end of the 19th century there was a sizable presence, with every national newspaper in the United Kingdom, employing at least one women writer on their staff (Hall, 1976) and by the 1930s, more than 3200 women self-identified as journalists – around 17% of the total, up from 9% in 1901 (Lonsdale, 2017, pp. 463–4). While many worked in 'soft news' stories, some women forged successful careers as foreign correspondents and political correspondents (Cooper, 2011; Lonsdale, 2016),

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but they remained marginalized and subject to sexism. The situation was similar in the United States, where advances in women's careers in the early and mid-20th century were constantly met with either attempts to constrain them into human-interest roles or to increase difficulty for them in the workplace (Steiner & Mulupi, 2022, pp. 112–3). Those who escaped those confines, such as war reporters or sports journalists, could still find themselves restricted in the kind of stories they covered. Edy (2019) persuasively argues that more women war correspondents existed than often thought, but were constrained by covering the 'women's angle'. Sports journalists, while showing high job satisfaction, were often tempted to leave their jobs after being left out of opportunities to network or get access to players (Claringbauld et al., 2004; Cramer, 1994).

Have things got better? A recent study across five continents found that only 24% of top editor roles are held by women, due to 'structural inequalities' and 'gendered routines' within journalism itself (Arguedas et al., 2024); men have had the majority of leadership roles and professional prominence in many countries (Franks, 2013), and the Global Media Monitoring Project indicates 'a continuation of the general pattern of women's invisibility in influential international media' (Azzalini & Claudia, 2021). Moreover, 'newsrooms are masculine spaces' (Bauer et al., 2024): a UK study found that as well as facing exclusion, women felt they had to act in a masculine way to fit in to the 'blookish' culture there (Topić & Bruegmann, 2021). Literature looking at non-binary and trans journalists (as opposed to coverage of trans/non-binary issues by journalists) also reflects the masking and concealment that these journalists feel they have to adopt (Johnson, 2025; Verhoeven, 2025). A feminist approach is not usually adopted in the mainstream news media, and when it is, women journalists can become the target of vicious abuse (Adams, 2018). Research in Austria suggested that 'thrusting' women onto centre stage could be a positive move towards gender equality in journalism, amid the failure of 'guidelines' to effect it (Riedl et al., 2024). We decided to try it out.

1.1. How things are

Habermas put journalism at the heart of the public sphere (Habermas, 1962/1991) and journalism analysts have argued this remains its crucial position in present times (Greenwald, 2014, p. 230). However, there is widespread concern about the rise in news avoidance (Andersen et al., 2024), partly due to failing trust in large organizations and authority, but also due to a perception that it is no longer necessary to look for information because 'news finds me' or 'NFM' (Goyanes et al., 2023). Rethinking conventions of news is suggested as a possible solution to news avoidance (Toff & Palmer, 2019), which Sui et al. argue is particularly prevalent among women (2024, p. 14), but women journalists remain less valued and less visible. Recent research shows that 57% of the press bylines and credits in the USA were men's (Womens Media Centre, 2021) and the management and ownership of news there is dominated by them too (Sui et al., 2024).

The media has long been part of feminism's cultural and material struggle (Van Zoonen, 1994, p. 148), yet it is still characterized as 'patriarchal' in the 21st century (Scraton & Flintoff, 2002). News by and about men, rather than women, is simply seen as more important (Sui et al., 2024). Feminist media scholarship has highlighted gendered hierarchies of authority, harassment and scrutiny in journalism (Byerly & Ross, 2008;

Posetti et al., 2021). When transposed into civic space, these dynamics raise questions of visibility, vulnerability and legitimacy for women reporters.

To understand the gendered framework behind journalism (Ruoho & Torkkola, 2018), it is useful to point to its continuing 'male' global economic context (in terms of its interests and character), thriving in a 'transnational business masculinity' (Connell, 2020, p. 54). The more news becomes commodified, the more identified with masculinity it is. Strategic rationalization has taken over from a community approach to the organization of journalism in modern society, which clearly disadvantages women and non-binary writers. According to Jones, 'women's visibility threatens to disrupt the system of international (dis)order based on competition' (Jones, 1990, p. 812). We should not be surprised then, if institutions of media and other corporations, in which men are central and women peripheral, sustain male hegemony (Connell, 2020, p. 98). Women are hit harder by economic downturns (Steiner & Mulupi, 2022, p. 117) and reducing jobs and resources arguably affects them worst as they are always more likely to be casualized or work part-time (Carter et al., 1998; Chambers et al., 2004). More commercialization in journalism also increases the feminization and sexualization of women, narrowing the range of content, so that feminism is seen as controversial (Carter et al. 1998, p. 4).

Abuse and harassment are common occurrences for many women journalists today, both through online violence (Posetti et al., 2021) and because of current trends in politics and ideology (Adams, 2018; Coleman, 2010) and aided and abetted by the very institutions and environments in which they work (Claesson, 2023). In some ways the online sphere has been safer and 'better' for women (Steiner & Mulupi, 2022) and women's journalism in the form of magazines is thriving (Ferguson, 2025), but the dangers are always there. The sustained surge of abuse unleashed in 2014 in a global online row about women's right to comment on the gaming industry (the 'Gamergate' affair) revealed the depths to which misogyny could drive women to adapt their working practices, self-censor, change their identity or leave journalism altogether (Adams, 2018). There is limited scholarly exploration of the experiences of non-binary and trans journalists (Shaw, 2022), but there is evidence that non-binary and trans people generally experience high levels of harassment and discrimination in everyday life (Boncori et al., 2019; Truszczynski et al., 2022) while media representation tends still towards seeing gender in more rigid forms (Eze et al., 2026).

1.2. Intentions

In their contemporary definitions of journalism ethics, Harcup (2020) and Parks (2021) write of the importance of a journalism which is truthful, caring, joyful or making a difference. This contrasts with traditional views that it should always be objective, without opinion and conflict of interest (for a detailed history of the growth of objectivity in journalism, see Schudson, 1990). Recent frameworks are more in step with historic feminist ethics approaches which embraced the roles of emotion, care and women's experiences (Gilligan, 1982; Gilligan, 2023; Noddings, 1984/2013), as well as theorists who have sought to challenge the ritual and ideology of 'objective' journalism by suggesting alternatives. One of these is Varma (2025), who highlights the benefits of a 'solidarity' approach where marginalized voices and struggles are prioritized, as opposed to a 'monitorial' approach which focuses on official statements which can give precedence

to, for example, men's voices. This builds on notions such as 'strong objectivity' (Durham, 1998) and a commitment to seeking out under-heard voices as well as the journalist's need to examine their beliefs and self-approach (Harding, 1991; Steiner, 2018; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2026). These approaches highlight representation, at a time when mainstream media often fails to challenge hegemonic ideology (Harcup, 2020, p. 61). Women journalists are shown actively and positively constructing news (p. 54), whether through community radio in Brazil or the counter-hegemonic 'Slutwalk' event in Canada (pp. 58–60). It is 'journalism from below' (p. 66), leading to the consciousness which in turn can subvert norms. It is more evidence of the importance of an ethical approach to journalism which recognizes unfair structures and promotes the agency of the marginalized, such as women and the LGBQ+ community, for the public good (pp. 79–85). Harcup argues that news should be seen through a lens of struggle and that its social value and 'representation of more diverse voices' should be fought for (Harcup, 2023, p. 7).

Parks (2020) believes that journalists are needed to humanize the news and buck the 'scientization' trend, saying that trust in journalists appears to decline from the mid-1970s onwards as precision or 'data journalism' emerges and increases (p. 1241). He sees a backlash against algorithm-driven press and proposes that caring journalism means journalism for the good of society (Parks, 2021, p. 82). Meanwhile, Ruotsalainen and Villi use the concept of 'eudaimonic journalism' to study the effect of their Black Box live journalism shows in Helsinki through the prism of self-transcendence, autonomy, competence and relatedness (2020). Their research shows how eudaimonic news stories are not only ethical but can foster a sense of meaning and agency in audience members as well as participants.

Our aim was to explore the effect on audience and producers of staging news which celebrates feminism in a public space, using this new ethical approach to journalism. Framing our work within an historic 'politics of intervention, that is a desire to disrupt the familiar assumptions' (Carter et al 1998, p. 3), we decided to put womxn and their stories at the top of the news hierarchy and agenda, reflected by physically placing them on soapboxes to raise them above the general public at street level. We hoped our production could be an example of 'constructive journalism' 'harnessing human potential' (Parks, 2021, p. 8), which would 'open our imaginations to civic possibilities' (2022, p. 196).

1.3. *Embodying stories*

Postema (2024, p. 371) posits that using the body as medium in live journalism seems best understood as a 'journalistic device that is first of all affect driven', following work that suggests that in crisis reporting, journalists can see emotions as facts that add to the credibility of the story (Kotišová, 2020, p. 1722). Indeed, while professional integrity is often seen as distancing, the act of everyday journalism encompasses the body, which has been seen in the past as 'missing in action' (Francoeur, 2021, p. 204). In-depth interviewing often tries to capture how the interviewee makes the journalist feel in themselves. Putting together complex stories also requires emotional labour (Middleweek, 2026; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018). As such, the journalist's body can become part of the news medium in which it acts as a channel of emotions, authority and a chance for audiences to engage through such professional vulnerability (Postema, 2024, p. 375).

In fact, this has long been true of women's bodies, which have often been on the line for journalism. In her study of early women journalists, Smorul highlights the trend for first person sensationalist reporting among women who could not get work published in other ways, such as Nellie Bly's undercover experiences in a mental asylum and women's re-enactment of the force feeding of suffragettes (Smorul, 2015, p. 57), showing how a woman's body could be a site of performance and their work an embodied response to social injustices (p. 70) as well as more recent experiences such as Barbara Ehrenreich's experience of poverty as detailed in her book, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America* (Ehrenreich, 2011), or Florence Aubenas' time as a cleaning woman in France (Aubenas, 2010). The harrowing correspondence published in the pioneering feminist magazine *Spare Rib*, from women readers speaking publicly about their abuse, turned out to be vital for journalism and change (Stanley & Wise, 2002).

Over the last 40 years, feminist theory has been increasingly involved with activism (Cassiers, 2023) but when it comes to journalism, the debate about the value of subjective, in-person reporting has been longstanding, with concerns that this kind of news can be 'too emotional' and that bringing 'feeling' into news is dangerous (Boler, 1999, p. 112). There are those who warn that news editors must not fall into habits of 'cozy' journalism and 'the normalisation of affect' and should always strive to make the construction of news 'transparent' (Beckett & Deuze, 2016, p. 4).

Studies of the experience or effect of an exclusively all-women performance line-up are rare, although positive and affirmative action strategies have been practised or enshrined in law in the United Kingdom and USA since the 1960s (Vogel-Polsky, 1985, p. 385). Harder to find are those which consider the inclusion of non-binary or trans speakers, this at a time when global business and politics witnesses a social and political 'backlash' against diversity, equality and inclusion (Benato et al., 2024). As Cassiers put it, 'the presence of womxn in contemporary performance continues to be a radical act' (2023).

1.4. *Womxn journalists on soapboxes*

News on the Street was the latest in a series of live journalism events produced by the (the News on Stage project) which aims to examine the use of dramatic techniques to engage audiences in journalism, similar to previous manifestations such as Living Newspapers (Cox, 2023). Live journalism is defined as an event where journalistic stories are presented to a public audience in a limited public arena without being transmitted so that they can only be experienced by those who attend (Adams, 2021; Adams & Cooper, 2024; Hänninen & Rautiainen-Keskustalo, 2025; Ruotsalainen & Villi, 2021; Tenenboim & Stroud, 2020).

As such, the researchers have worked with a succession of journalists to create different events in different venues and spaces. In these events, previously unpublished stories are presented to a live audience by the journalists, who are also available to be questioned by the public during and afterwards, allowing for interaction between the reporters and those experiencing the stories.

To create this particular iteration as a feminist journalism intervention, we sought womxn journalists willing to perform original stories in public space, in response to a particular amount of funding. Our recruitment for womxn journalists through journalism

education networks and professional organizations yielded initially five participants: four cisgender women and one non-binary/trans journalist, all of whom were early-career reporters and who all self-identified as above. One of the participants subsequently withdrew part-way through the rehearsal process, leaving four who took part in the final event.

The all-womxn composition was a deliberate feminist strategy to centre womxn's voices and challenge journalism's male dominance. Through 8 weeks of collaborative rehearsals via videoconferencing, we worked with the journalists to develop their journalistic stories for performance. Our research questions thus fell into four areas:

RQ1: Inspired by previous efforts to investigate how womxn journalists affect content and challenge the contemporary news agenda (Steiner & Mulupi, 2022, p. 116), we wanted to know what happens when womxn journalists are invited to tell the journalistic stories that they want to. Under these circumstances, what stories would they produce?

RQ2: Parks suggests that much of current reporting is more emotional, and that this connects feeling and facts, beyond the 'rational' to become 'affective' and augment information (2022, p. 181). Others have claimed that the style used by women is quieter, less aggressive (Holmes & Stubbe, 2003, p. 574) and with more humour than news produced by men (p. 578). We wanted to know how the journalists would operate within the format; would they conform to these perceived norms and how would they convey, or 'do' their news?

RQ3: Our third area of enquiry was engagement with those attending, namely how audiences react to and all-womxn and non-binary journalism presentation in a public place?

RQ4: Finally, how did the journalists themselves say they experienced the event in terms of their gender?

This study draws on the same May 2024 event analysed previously for its broader dynamics of embodiment and civic space (Adams & Cooper, 2025).

2. Methodology

Feminist action research distinguishes itself through positioning women's experiences and perspectives as primary knowledge sources (Bleijenbergh, 2023; Goessling, 2025; Reid, 2004; Reinharz & Davidman, 1992; Shimei & Lavie-Ajayi, 2022) and pursuing work that aims to create change as well as recognizing the researcher's positionality as inseparable from the research process (Harding, 1991). As two women academics who previously worked in male-dominated journalism environments, we brought and acknowledged our own experiences to this project and the approach aligned with our dual roles as 'researcher-producers', allowing for valuable insights from an experiential perspective (Wagemans & Witschge, 2019). As

Bradbury-Huang (2010, p. 93) argues, action research 'seeks to take knowledge production beyond the gatekeeping of professional knowledge makers' – particularly vital when gatekeepers have historically excluded womxn's voices. A Reflective Practitioner Case Study (RPCS) model meant that being immersed in the production process could yield knowledge inaccessible to outside observers (Peters, 2020). Our field notes, diaries and reflections thus became primary data sources alongside our formal interviews and surveys.

We regarded the journalists we collaborated with as co-creators rather than just research subjects. This model reflects feminist commitments to non-hierarchical research relationships and recognizes participants' expertise about their own experiences. Through our collaboration during rehearsals and script development, we learned alongside the journalists about what kind of stories and presentations could emerge when womxn controlled the storytelling process. As feminist researchers, we were conscious that as established academics (compared to the early-career and student journalists), and organizers of the event, we held structural power. We compensated all participants fairly for their creative labour, obtained ethical approval from City University of London (now City St George's, University of London) and secured informed consent from all participants.

Multiple data types were gathered including analysis of the story scripts, observations in rehearsal and performance, surveys and vox pops and interviews with participants. We trained 11 production assistants, of which 8 were present on the day (wearing clearly marked crew t-shirts), to (a) note down on clipboards how many people stopped to watch any or all of the event, how long for, whether alone or in a group and any further comments; (b) circulate through the crowd to carry out brief paper surveys and (c) record vox pop video interviews. The surveys consisted of 17 standardized open-ended questions, both Likert-scale and open-text responses (including an open-text response for gender), but the crew was also instructed to note any unsolicited comments about gender, women or the non-binary journalist.

The survey asked audience members questions about how many journalists they had listened to, whether they had attended a live journalism event before; how they rated the experience and what actions they might take afterwards (options included finding out more about the subjects covered and telling a friend about what they heard as well as different ways of engaging with live journalism). It also asked open-ended questions about what they found interesting about the event and their reactions to journalists performing in public. One question asked how effective this event was in promoting women and non-binary journalists (from not at all to very effective) and their reasons for that answer.

The four main speakers and seven of the production crew also filled in an online survey; three of the four journalists participated in semi-structured interviews 3 weeks after the event (the fourth did not respond to requests) and interviews were conducted by the lead author, recorded and transcribed. Participants were asked about their experiences as womxn performing in public space; perceptions of solidarity; moments of vulnerability or empowerment; whether gender affected their storytelling choices; and reflections on audience responses to their gender identity.

Our plan was to examine the data using open coding and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with a specifically feminist interpretive lens, in line with our research questions. Thirty-six segments of key text were coded which aligned with four broad

themes, which were reviewed and modified to identify their essence and sub-themes. We each did this separately before coming to consensus through discussion.

Throughout the project, we maintained reflexive awareness of our own positions as white, cisgender, middle-class women academics, with different lived experiences from the other journalists. As researcher-producers, we were unable to observe all aspects of the event.

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2.1. *The event*

News on the Street took place over two hours on a Saturday afternoon in May 2024 at Nottingham's Speakers' Corner, a wide central pedestrian thoroughfare designated by the City Council for public speaking and demonstrations and a historically male-dominated public space (Adams & Cooper, 2025). The choice to occupy the area with an all-womxn line-up therefore could be seen as physically claiming territory that has traditionally excluded womxn's voices. The event structure (described fully in Adams & Cooper, 2025), inspired by Soapbox Science, a project which aims to promote the visibility of womxn scientists and tackle stereotypes, positioned journalists on soapboxes – a design choice with symbolic feminist significance (Pham et al., 2024). All journalists wore bright blue high-visibility gilets emblazoned with 'PRESS', marking their professional authority, while creating visual solidarity as a womxn's collective. A woman BSL interpreter worked alongside each speaker.

Performing in a public place naturally incurs risks, such as performance anxiety, but given documented risks facing womxn journalists – particularly those covering gender issues or identifying as trans/non-binary (Adams, 2018; Posetti et al., 2021) – we implemented extensive safety protocols. These included recruiting a large production team and briefing all participants on intervention procedures, contingency evacuation plans and strategic decisions about publicity to protect the trans/non-binary journalist from potential 'hate mob' disruption they had previously experienced. The visible 'uniform' of gilets and crew T-shirts brought us a certain feeling of safety in numbers and the strength of being part of a wider team.

In total, 153 people were observed engaging with News on the Street over the two hours. Part of the event was also streamed to just over 2000 Instagram Live users from a personal account. The average time spent watching the performances face-to-face was 12 min 15 s with the time duration ranging from 1 min to 120 min. Several watched more than one story and 19 people filled in the surveys. Of those who did so, 10 identified as men; 9 as women; their education level was on average degree-level but ranged from GCSE to PhD and ages ranged from 16 to over 75.

3. Results

We organized our findings around the four research questions that guided this inquiry, to find out how gender shaped the various dimensions of the News on the Street event.

With regard to RQ1, the topics the journalists independently chose – refugee women, deepfake pornography, old postcards and violence against trans journalists (the only story

told from first-hand experience) – all centred gendered experience, demonstrating that when womxn control the journalistic agenda, they can surface news/feature stories that have been marginalized in the past. The journalistic stories were all rigorously researched and written, with no departures from the guidelines to quality journalism, as fully outlined in Adams (2021) which requires it not only to be fact-based, accurate (Deuze, 2005) but also showing integrity (Blöbaum, 2014). Their delivery was carefully rehearsed to make sure they did not include anything which took away from their validity and authenticity. The researcher-producers observed that the stories did not exploit stereotypes, feminization or sexualization of women often seen in the press and the main sources were all womxn.

J1's story looked at art and refugee life, focusing on refugee women's voices. J1 began by directly addressing the audience: 'How many of you have a daughter, a sister, a mother ...' – a rhetorical move that immediately highlighted women and family relationships. The story featured poetry by a young Iranian refugee woman who wrote:

I always dreamt of being independent/To help people And one day why not/To be a good example for other girls like me too/Something important for me is/Trying to find myself again.

By foregrounding this young woman's voice and aspirations, J1 resisted mainstream media's tendency to portray refugee women as passive victims. She also invited audience members to write their own responses on a banner, creating a participatory feminist space for solidarity with refugee women.

In J2's 'Being a Trans Journalist Broke Me' the trans/non-binary journalist wielded a broken broomstick to demonstrate the weapon thrown at their head while covering a demonstration. This visceral performance directly challenged audience members: as J2 said:

'How would you like to have something like this thrown at your head? How would it make you feel? Do you think you would want to carry on doing that job?' The story made visible the violence trans and non-binary journalists face. As we discuss below, this visibility provoked both solidarity and hostility from audience members.

J3's 'Postcards: Time Capsules of the Past' might appear less overtly 'feminist', but J3 analysed historical postcards through a gendered lens, inviting those listening to add their memories to her own reflections. For example, displaying a humorous postcard of a drunkard trailing his elegant wife, she said: 'I'd like to think that Mary would turn around and punch that man in the face and make her own future, but I highly doubt it as in 1908 women didn't have a leg to stand on. But they were trying!' before going on to connect this to the struggles of the suffragettes, arguably positioning contemporary womxn journalists within the historic lineage of feminist resistance.

In J4's 'Not My Body' an investigation of deepfake pornography examined how a real woman became a victim when an innocuous social media photo was transformed into a pornographic image. J4 began by asking 'how many of you have a phone?' and ended with 'Do any of you know anyone with a similar experience?', questions that invited the audience to meditate on the technological systems enabling gendered violence. By focusing on one woman's specific experience rather than abstract statistics, J4 humanized the issue while revealing inadequacies in legal protections.

For information, J5, who withdrew from performing at the final event due to anxiety, had prepared a piece on a young woman's vulnerability to 'buy-now, pay-later' deals.

News on the Street allowed journalists to tell their own choice of stories without a corporate 'agenda' (Ruotsalainen & Villi, 2021). It revealed that when given the freedom to choose their own stories, the journalists prioritized making visible the experiences of womxn, particularly marginalized ones (refugees, trans people, victims of technological violence).

RQ2 asked about the nature of the womxn's performed reporting. We found that the womxn journalists employed distinctly embodied and emotional performance styles but did not conform to one particular style. J2 was described by some audiences as 'in your face' while J4, by contrast, spoke quietly, creating intimacy through subdued tone. Interestingly, some audience members expressed preference for quieter voices, suggesting gendered expectations about how womxn should occupy public space. However, J3's humorous approach also proved effective, demonstrating that womxn's performance styles can successfully vary. Her joke about the postcard wife combined feminist anger with humour, making her critique more palatable while not diluting it.

All four speakers tried to engage their audience in their stories. The personal approach used by the journalists united the cast and crew alike, demonstrating that 'anger and emotion' lead to 'collective intimacy' as observed in former feminist publications (Waters, 2016). In particular, J2's story (their experience as a trans journalist) showed how useful 'encounter-based' data could be as a way to engage audiences, as noted by Postema and Deuze (2020) and Parks (2022, p. 188).

With RQ3 we wanted to find out what audience responses were to an all-womxn performance. It emerged as a highly significant factor according to our survey responses: a result which we had not expected. The journalists themselves experienced a strong 'solidarity' around that and a protective feeling towards J2.

Of the 18 people involved in the production at Speakers Corner on the day, all but three of the cast and crew were womxn and the speakers presented as women (J1, J3 and J4) and non-binary (J2). Comments on this in the survey were numerous and indicated that it was received positively. When the audience were asked whether they thought the event was effective in promoting women and non-binary journalists, respondents gave a mean score of 4.94, although we had not promoted the event as such. One attendee in her 60s said she was reminded of being part of a feminist group in her college days and that 'this event served as an impressive platform for female journalists to get some spotlight'. She recognized 'the dangers of being a female journalist', saying that they were 'brave' and that she would 'definitely' recommend future News on the Street events to her friends and family. Another younger woman talked about how 'she loves women supporting women'. From the crew's written observations, the public's interest was 'mixed', with some showing 'curiosity' and 'intrigued', while others walked past and 'didn't want to know' or 'ignored' the event.

The surveys showed that the stories which provoked most reaction were J2 and J4. One wrote that they were moved by the trans journalist and stated, 'how scared people are when confronted by other people's reality the level of violence it creates is shocking'. When asked what they had learned from the event, one wrote, 'being a trans journalist is dangerous and difficult'. Another said, the action they would take would be to engage in conversations about women's rights with friends. A vox pop interviewee commented that

'it's something that I think just resonates with a lot of people that have family and friends that are trans and just general differences of, you know, black female. [sic]'

Hostility occurred on two occasions, but not directly to the speakers: one person tore up a leaflet handed to them when they saw the word 'non-binary' referring to it as 'an abomination'. A crew member said, 'we experienced homophobic people as well, who approached us and told us that they would not attend this due to there being a trans journalist sharing their story'. Another commented, 'Some of the transphobic comments made towards [J2] made me feel a bit uncomfortable about what sort of people were coming along'. Significantly, no hostility was directed at the cisgender women journalists. This reveals that while womxn journalists generally face obstacles, trans and non-binary journalists face qualitatively different and more severe threats.

RQ4 asked how the journalists themselves said they experienced the event in terms of their gender. The most consistent theme in journalists' reflections was the empowerment they experienced from working as an all-womxn team and not simply about professional collaboration but specifically about feminist solidarity.

Journalists interviewed said that the rehearsals (carried out via video-conferencing because team members were geographically scattered) had been an important experience for them to build a sense of connection, perhaps even a realization of collective political identity (Cassiers, 2023): 'I think it was very empowering, especially being surrounded by other women journalists, you know – to feel part of something, to feel that solidarity' (J1). J3 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 uniforms functioned as more than practical identification but helped create visible unity, marking the space as occupied by a collective of womxn journalists rather than isolated individuals. One crew member reflected: 'it comes in understanding that this was not an easy endeavour for our speakers and therefore being supportive of them sharing their journalistic stories'. This recognition of difficulty – that womxn journalists undertake risks most male journalists don't face – generated protective solidarity among the broader team.

The participants themselves regarded the idea of an event which promoted womxn in journalism as a powerful one. J2 commented, 'I think it was really important, because obviously, journalism itself is quite male led and it was just different to have female stories, because they have a different perspective, especially [J1] and [J4]'s'. J3 said that she felt it was important to highlight women's voices 'because the majority of people would think of a man [if asked to name a journalist]'

Production crew surveys echoed this: 'It was nice and refreshing to be part of a team who were doing something so exciting ... Also being able to talk to strangers and bring people to the event was good fun!' The enthusiasm suggests that creating feminist journalism spaces is energizing for participants and a contrast to constantly navigating male-dominated environments.

However, there remained concern around the safety of performing. This fear – that performing journalism creates openings for abuse – is gendered. Male journalists asking questions might anticipate disagreement, but womxn journalists (particularly trans/non-binary journalists) reasonably fear verbal abuse, humiliation or worse. J1 described 'shaking' before her first performance and feeling like she might have a panic attack. Another journalist pulled out entirely due to nerves. The fact that J2 felt this fear 'the whole time'

reveals the psychological burden for a trans person performing journalism in public space. J2 also described performing as ‘taxing and exposing’, particularly because as a wheelchair user recovering from pneumonia, repeating the story four times was physically exhausting. But beyond physical fatigue, they noted the emotional toll: ‘I was back in those situations again and reliving those emotions’.

Despite these anxieties, journalists also described feeling empowered by physically occupying space as womxn journalists speaking with professional authority in order to fulfil ‘a crucial role in our democracy’ (J2). J1 reflected that the experience clarified ‘the kind of journalist she wanted to be’ – one willing to take risks to tell important stories.

3.1. Codes and themes

Our analysis was inductive and data-driven: 36 key segments of text from all our data were collected and examined for themes. Four broad themes emerged, which we reviewed and modified to identify their main essence and sub-themes, labelling them as ‘building something’, ‘breathing life into journalism’, ‘butterflying’ and ‘bravery’. These first two echoed what we had seen in previous shows, but the second two were new. All four ideas complemented and fed into each other. ‘Building something’ referred to the experience of helping to create a collective, community, project, which led to the sense of solidarity among performers but also a togetherness between journalists and their audience; ‘breathing life into journalism’ was the feeling that they were humanizing journalism, making the audience feel close, present and ‘alive’ to their stories, ‘a-livening’ them to what they were hearing and seeing, so reporting in a news ‘environment’ rather than as a ‘conduit’ (Gamaleri, 2019); ‘butterflying’ was the idea that the journalists were emerging from a metaphorical chrysalis, opening up and transforming into a stronger version of themselves, finding empowerment, professional identity or owning the space and ‘bravery’ referred to the overcoming of feelings of vulnerability and fear of hostility to speak out and take part or perform in public.

4. Discussion

All our discussion points fall under these four themes. The first thing to note was that the content of the initial material produced by the womxn journalists showed us that there were powerful stories they wanted to tell, which perhaps were not part of the normal news ‘agenda’ (Steiner & Mulupi, 2022). Experiences and issues systematically marginalized in male-dominated journalism surfaced when the journalists feel comfortable in a space where they have permission to prioritize gendered experiences. They were contemporary, issue-based stories, which all referred to gender and identity in some way, of passionate interest to the young journalists performing their stories. This aligns with the longstanding feminist ethics that those experiencing oppression are best positioned to understand and articulate it (Harding, 1991). All four performances foregrounded lived experience and emotion, reflecting what Parks (2022) identifies as journalism’s ‘affective dimension’ which feminist scholars argue is wrongly devalued in male-dominated journalism culture.

Second, the format of in-person storytelling, often eyeball to eyeball, has the advantages of hyper-localism and generates a person-to-person sense of caring

about their audience. The use of 'talking' to an audience as a journalistic practice produces not only content but also 'atmosphere', notes Haikarainen (2023). The performances exemplified a feminist alternative to normative journalism not only because they challenged narratives on gender (Weaver et al., 2019) but also because they treated the public as citizens (Steiner & Mulupi, 2022, p. 116). The exposure of performing makes journalists vulnerable and more trustworthy, revealing them as people as well as professionals (Haikarainen, 2023), thus demonstrating some of the differences between traditional news values and 'human values' highlighted by Parks (2020, p. 127).

Third, the prominence of womxn's presence was clear. The physical elevation of the journalists on soapboxes above the public space and the crew appeared to raise their status and highlight their gender in the eyes of the public, as women already 'sign' as women, men being the 'norm'. As the audience member in her 60s suggested, the event might look like a revival of second-wave feminism, at a time of global backlash against diversity and inclusivity. The way the journalists were dressed, in 'unfeminine' gilets, took attention away from their 'looks' and might have diverted focus to the content of their stories instead (Sebba, 1995). It was also obvious that this news production was in the hands of womxn, not least because of the work of the two researcher-producers on the day.

Fourth, we learned that the 'atmosphere' was vital and unique. The reaction of audiences was broadly positive, but in a few cases oppositional and even hostile. Comments in the free-text part of the surveys reported feelings of 'awe' and 'respect' and praise for the 'courage' of the womxn. But there was also prejudice and rejection, illustrated by a passer-by who showed contempt at the word 'non-binary' on the publicity leaflet and another who tore one up. We were reminded that the contemporary ecology of media can be characterized not a conduit but rather an environment, in this case one with risk, shaping human interaction and cognition (Gamaleri, 2019).

The chaotic, incohesive nature of the general public on the street meant that there was no homogenized audience, except when they coalesced around a performer. There was also an inherent disjuncture when speaking about a specific subject to a random crowd, which made the activity reminiscent of the 'hit and miss' nature of curated printed press of the past, when everyone was 'fed' the same edition, rather than picking and choosing from the maelstrom of news on the internet. Journalists were talking to a mixed crowd who had not previously signed up. Therefore, a story might resonate with one person and be ignored by another or find an unexpected listener and disrupt their thoughts. That was exciting and invigorating, but also frightening, for those present.

The experience was emotional. The importance of audience interaction was shown in a study of readers' letters to *Spare Rib*, which used Lauren Berlant's theories to argue that the magazine created 'an intimate public sphere' and that contact with strangers led to social belonging (Berlant, 2010) and that provoking an emotional response is part of doing politics (Waters, 2016). The feminist approach to our event tested whether the general public were tired of diversity and inclusion (Steiner & Mulupi, 2022, p. 118) and the experience of tensions at times when the public space was contested showed that we had created a space where 'dangerous' but 'vital feelings', such as J2's story and the hostility towards it, could be displayed, thus revealing connections, understanding and the struggle around them too, as *Spare Rib* had done (Waters, 2016).

Fifth, the all-womxn line-up was promoted successfully. All-women newsrooms are rare, such as the Azmina news team in Brazil or the Boju Bajai in South Asia, but the latter has been branded 'activist' and funding for these models can be hard to sustain. In the United Kingdom, it is usually only in sport or some women's magazines or radio shows where the presenters are all-women (Waters, 2016). The journalists involved in this production reported feeling solidarity, power, and a strengthening identity as a result of the line-up; as they were together in person at a communal experience, they shared thoughts and emotions, as bodies 'catch feelings' (Gibbs, 2001, in Waters, 2016). J1 regards the experience as a turning point in her career: 'That moment marked the beginning of my journey in public speaking and made me fearless. While I'll always have the "shakes" in those first few seconds standing on a podium, I remind myself: "If I could do that, this is easy!"' All the cast and crew discussed and shared the aftermath of the transphobia and non-binary prejudice expressed by passers-by.

Some of the speakers said they would have preferred to have been supported by electric sound amplification, thinking that they would have attracted a bigger crowd that way, but it was often the quiet voices which drew people in, as our Soapbox Science colleagues discovered (personal communication 2024). Whether audiences are drawn more to quiet womxn's voices because of prejudice against louder ones is another question.

Sixth, Stevens and Shin observed that performers at urban festivals create and consolidate their own identities by taking part (Stevens & Shin, 2014, p. 14). J3 explained that not only did she feel empowered and determined to continue working as a journalist but was also now clearer about the kind of journalist she wanted to be. As Cassiers notes, womxn's performance practices are often currently concerned with feminism and identity (2023), which is particularly pertinent and relevant for womxn at this early stage of their career.

Lastly, an event of this kind is important because it expresses a challenge to male domination of the industry and of the public sphere: 'claiming space' and 'acts of disruption' by womxn can increase their confidence and should be nurtured, especially in urban environment where they may fear violence (Beebeejaun, 2017, p. 327). By highlighting matters of gender, the importance of womxn's 'bravery' emerged from this examination of the event, which had been absent from our earlier analyses. Consciously breaking into male-dominated territory and performing stories with regard to gender equality has long been seen as a feminist act (Reinharz & Davidman, 1992). It serves to change the male gaze into one made by womxn (Cassiers, 2023). The event leaves us with the question, why should womxn be or have to be brave? Perhaps one answer is that what happens on the margins determines the future (Phillips, 2015, p. 7), so making abuse or prejudice visible or challenging it will redefine what is acceptable. Harassment and insults are routine, endemic and normalized in many ways, with women not always realizing that they are being abused. This not only negatively affects women's lives but also journalism and society. Journalism suffers if women are driven out of the profession by fear, or made invisible, leaving the stage to those are thick-skinned or loud enough to withstand insults. Speaking about the fallout from Gamergate, Quinn says, 'we're driving away people with any sensibility ... with a whole perspective' (Adams, 2018, p. 865). Bravery should, however, surely not be a task left to individuals, but a matter to be addressed collectively and structurally (Ashworth & Pedersen, 2023).

Our study had several limitations. As a single event with a small sample, findings may not generalize. The journalists were all early-career, white, UK-based womxn so a further practice-based study would benefit from more diverse participants. The audience was likely to be a snapshot of a highly diverse city as 42.7% of Nottingham residents identified as non-White British (ONS, 2021), but actual monitoring of the racial demographic of the audience would have been useful. The self-selecting survey participants and interviewees likely over-represent sympathetic responses compared to the general public. Future research should therefore continue to experiment but also examine regular feminist journalism rather than one-off occurrences. It should also look at intersectional experiences of journalists facing multiple marginalisations, in particular trans and non-binary journalists, and develop strategies to enable their participation without unacceptable risk. Despite these limitations, our feminist action research approach generated rich insights into how womxn journalists experience and are experienced in public space, and what emerges when womxn control the journalistic agenda.

5. Conclusion

Women professionals have historically striven to validate themselves in any other way except in terms of men (Spender, 1985, p. 21) and this process is still continuing (Beard, 2014, p. 5; Cassiers, 2023). News has hitherto been defined in 'male' terms (Carter et al., 1998), partly as a result of the predominance of men in positions of power and entrenched 'masculine fundamentalism' observed by Connell (2020). In that context, womxn performing 'street journalism' through their own 'bravery' can offer a rich and productive experience which is both challenging and encouraging for those involved. The embodied nature of this exercise brought with it risks, costs, contested spaces and unknown outcomes for those who produced and participated. As Francoer theorized (2021, p. 219), by using bodies as a site of communication (and scholarship), we learned that journalists could make people feel present in their stories and were themselves affected, if not transformed, by the experience. This study contributes to media and gender scholarship by bearing out Aston's prediction in *Feminism and Theatre* (Aston, 2003) that enacting feminist criticism of society on or through the body would be a valuable practice in the future (p. 282). It helps us see how womxn journalists' identity is negotiated and illuminates the complex dynamics of feminist performance.

Feminist journalism like this is a form of activism through its affectiveness (Waters, 2016) because it 'should confront how the world feels' (Parks, 2022, p. 196). As we have seen, the presence of trans women on stage in itself leads to positive results in the thoughts and actions of the audience. In the case of *News on the Street*, we theorize that a new type of 'ethical' journalism, aspired to by Parks and Harcup, was indeed on display here and is therefore possible, depending of course on who is telling the stories and how challenging the stories are. Above all, the event felt like a celebration: championing womxn's achievements in itself is a good enough reason to stage performances like this and work as a force for encouragement (Mitchell, 2015). When womxn journalists are speakers in a public space, as they arguably make themselves even more vulnerable and therefore have to be 'braver', making it all the more important to find a structural and institutional solution. The display of emotions from both the journalists as performers and

audiences are more important now in journalism (Haikarainen, 2023) as we need spaces for humanity, reflection and humour more than ever' (Parks, 2022, p. 196).

Twenty years before this event, Arthurs (2004) recognized that the sheer presence of more women in the media would not necessarily change news: they needed to have a more politicized understanding of the ways in which their subordination was reproduced and the will to change it. By allowing an all-women and non-binary line-up of presenters to tell their stories, News on the Street became an example of this: of conscious, ethical, feminist journalism, expressing the news (and human) values of truth, care, joy and change and with womxn journalists acting as 'moral interpreters' (Parks, 2025).

The experience of this project has taught us how powerful all-womxn line-ups can be, for both audience and performers: there was evidence that through it, the public can learn to trust journalists better but also to trust womxn and specifically journalists that are womxn. By extending prior work with a feminist analytic lens, this paper demonstrates how civic interventions through journalism are entangled with gendered vulnerability and expectation but can inspire our imaginations to all kinds of future possibilities, as Parks suggests (2022, p. 197). We believe there should be strategic and long-term funding and investment of more events of this kind.

Womxn journalists should continue to be encouraged to be radical, to 'own' public spaces, tell their stories with love and humanity, experience their power, realize that what they have to say is interesting and that there are people who want or need to hear it, for the benefit of womxn, journalism and society, and above all, to be brave and be given the support to be so.

Author contributions

CRedit: **Glenda Cooper:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Catherine Adams:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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