NEWS ON STAGE

Towards re-configuring journalism through theatre to a public sphere

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Abstract

Journalism's various crises have been well-documented, such as the decline in its credibility and active role in the democratic process, but constructive ideas to address them are far and few between. In an age of confused news literacy, this article presents evidence to show how face-to-face journalism might be successful in helping to re-establish its status, authority and truth-telling role in society. It reviews past and present relationships between journalism and theatre and uses them as a springboard to introduce the concept of 'news on stage.' It makes historical connections between early formats of live news such as the town crier, through revolutionary theatre to today's experiments in event journalism around the world. Using qualitative, empirical data from interviews and two case studies, the FT Weekend Festival and the Byline Festival, it examines whether and how such events offer ways of strengthening the relationship between news, public and performance, rebuilding communities of readers and/or activists. It configures a version of Habermas's public space/sphere as a new locus for this kind of open journalism, performed to the public. The author concludes that journalism can benefit from such events and proposes practical models for presenting 'news on stage' in the future.

200 words

Key words: journalism, theatre, public, sphere, stage, news

Introduction

Many articles have been written about the problems facing journalism; fewer that focus on possible solutions. Offline connectivity, 'liveness', 'experiential' events and 'face-to-face' performances are all trends in journalism which indicate that it may be moving closer to its audience again. At a time of low credibility for the profession, this paper investigates whether it is possible to regain public trust and redevelop the idea of the 'public sphere' through 'journalism on stage.'

There have been studies of 'liveness' and 'journalism as performance' in the past, but few which analyse contemporary events involving journalists on stage or assess their value and importance to the future of journalism. In contrast to Tenenboim and Stroud's (2020) examination of the effects of 'enacted journalism' on theatre audiences, this paper looks at the role of journalist, rather than actor, drawing from theories about the importance of the public sphere and the role of quality journalism in society. It is grounded in a historical review of recent experiments and past incarnations of live journalism around the world. Data is gathered through interviews, ethnography and questionnaires from two 'live journalism' events, the Byline Festival and the FT Weekend Festival. The study considers the boundaries between reporting, campaigning and activism and asks whether journalists' live interaction with the audience can bring about action or generate news itself. It also explores its potential as a business model, encouraging audiences to pay for news as they did in the past, and even indirectly encouraging print sales.

My hypothesis, based on a review of journalism and theatre up to now, is that such events do not only improve the public's engagement with journalism (as Tenenboim and Stroud showed with regard to plays), but that audiences would welcome more live journalism, and in particular, events where they are the first to hear exclusive stories. This paper contends that 'news on stage' might revive journalism, bringing it back to a physical, public space and drawing a community together to explore the truth of shared experiences.

Background and Context

Finding our way back to a public space/community

The public sphere, as presented by Habermas as a place where people debate matters of common concern (1974, 49) was already being mourned more than thirty years ago, (Blau 1985). Blau argued that it coincided with the disappearance of community and the erosion of 'memory' and 'the social' (206) He claimed that everything was dispersed and that without community there was no audience for the theatre (211), a state of affairs familiar to editors of declining newspaper readerships today. Blau pointed out that a genuinely free performance as a community experience was impossible because of power and profit (209). Global commercial networks are bound to prevent the sphere from being independent of outside control as Habermas had hoped and recent evidence shows that new media has further fragmented it (Beckett 2008, 87-8).

Others have claimed that there is no single public sphere, but a variety, including the 'virtual' non-hierarchical one (Cropf 2008, 1526), containing networks with a 'plurality' of publics (Reinelt 2011, 18). Any public space is complicated by class division, in spite of the Habermas' idealised consensus of 'equals with equals' in the *agora* (Reinelt 2011, 17). Nevertheless, Paola Botham shows that the public sphere is a place where contemporary political theatre can still flourish (2008, 317). There have been other signs of the re-discovery of the public space for politics and media, such as the Occupy demonstrations and the McDonalds Radio University project (Odate 2018, 99). In 'Journalism as Activism: Recoding Media Power' (2016) Adrienne Russell suggests how journalism itself can create a discursive forum.

A public sphere can be defined then as a place where discussions can, but do not have to, lead to change, but where the public can have a critical relation to power. It can embrace orality, visuality and the print medium, and need not convey perspectives solely as 'rational argument' but in any form which expresses the views of public voices (Reinelt 2011, 18-19). This paper seeks to explore whether this interpretation of the public sphere can be rediscovered through contemporary journalism and theatre.

What journalism is supposed to do

As Joseph Pulitzer forcefully argues in his treatise for professional training, journalism is a pre-requisite for a functioning democratic society (1904, 679). Habermas puts it at the heart of his public sphere. Whether staff, freelance or 'citizen' journalist, Western conventional wisdom ascribes to them the vital role of truth-seeker. Contemporary journalism's codes of conduct around the world not only recognise the importance of information and truth, but also the right of the public to acquire them through journalism (IFJ 2018). It is widely accepted that quality journalism should be fact-based, neutral, accurate and proportional (Deuze 2005, 447). The Fourth Estate is expected to speak truth to power and hold the establishment to account (McQuail 2013, 112); indeed, the work of investigating or questioning the status quo has never been greater or more important than it is now, in the age of dominant global networks (Greenwald 2014, 230).

Crucially, journalism reveals items which are new and of substance, (Ray 2003, 23; de Beer and Merrill 2009, 17), and presents them in 'original' form (Shapiro 2014, 561). In order to serve the public interest (Curran 2015, 144), or perform a 'public enlightenment' function (SPJ 2018), it should also represent a broad range of voices (Overholser 2009). Journalism does not simply report, but provides insight, analysis and context (Rosentiel et al 2003), linking the local to the global and vice-versa (Zuckerman 2013, 5). It must engage its audience effectively (Rosentiel et al 2007), using visual attractiveness, entertainment, and drama (Golding and Elliot 1979, 115-118). In order to be trusted, quality journalism also needs to show 'ability, benevolence and integrity' (Blöbaum 2014, 14). At stake is the public's understanding of current affairs, their historical context and the collective political memory, to enable informed decisions to be made. Journalism helps us to know the biases of history and understand the world (Carey 1997, 90) and the alternative to possessing this knowledge is a feeling of helplessness which can be easily manipulated. In order to serve the public interest however, journalism needs firstly to have an audience.

Disappearing journalism

Good journalism can still be found, not least in long-form, magazines, podcasts, or digital native investigative sites, but the mainstream press industry is booming at the cost of quality journalism and jobs. The Press Gazette reported that 198 UK newspapers had closed since 2005 (Cox, 2016) and almost sixty percent of US newspaper jobs were lost between 1990 and 2016 (US BLS, 2016). Local communities of readers are dispersed among the internet where journalism is less likely to be curated by experienced editors. Instead, news proliferates via clickbait, filter-bubbles, niche sites and opinion channels, adding to current affairs illiteracy (NUJ 2015). The range of angles, opinions and sources has narrowed (Davies 2008, 203) complex issues are simplified, and the power and influence of PR has exploded (Greenwald 2014, 233) at a time when 'credible sources' are needed more than ever (McNair 2017).

In fact, quality journalism has been disappearing for some time: critics recognised back in 1975 that TV news had 'slowly evolved a slick, showbusiness approach to news presentation in an effort to attract larger ratings and revenues' which 'may not be in the public interest' (Dominick, Wurtzel, and Lometti 1975). Journalism was accused of simply repackaging corporate interests (Carey 1998, 658). The advertising revenue lost through free internet access meant ruthless measures to 'sex up' the news and 'immerse' the viewer (Schroyer 2015), determined by new technological formats such as 'drones' and virtual reality. Global market forces have led to staff cuts and wage freezes, forcing journalism to a critical, if not fatal juncture (Deuze 2008, 5).

There is nevertheless a perennial demand for journalism, expressed through surveys year after year and reflected in the recent growth of hyper-local news provision (van Kerkhoven and Bakker 2016, 432). The success of some print start-ups which consist of strong local or investigative content such as The Bristol Cable and The Byline Times in the UK, show that a loyal readership community can be created around a characterful publication, perhaps for the very reason that they exist outside the internet.

Stuck in the net

As Jamie Bartlett points out in The People vs Tech, 'the internet was supposed to set us free,' (2018). The international journalistic collaborations which produced the Panama and Paradise Papers could not have been carried out without it and analogue and digital methods often successfully complementing each other, but at the same time the internet can 'destabilise' citizenship and community (Carey 1998, 658). The 'network society' has led to an infatuation

with technology, surveillance, a rise in the power of the private over public forces and a breakdown of social and moral boundaries (Hardey and Atkinson 2018, 13). Scholars have charted an increase in people experiencing alienation, atomisation and isolation. Rainie writes of a sense of 'hopelessness' and 'loss of trust' in the U.S. when faced with the internet and the power of artificial intelligence (Rainie 2015). Mass surveillance revealed by Edward Snowden (Greenwald 2015) and the harvesting of personal data through Facebook reported by Carole Cadwalladr (2019) lay bare more dangers of the digital revolution. In 'The Closing of the Net,' Monica Horten warns that only the privileged few may have web access in future, further jeopardising freedom and democracy (2016, 146). The current trend is to edge away from global online networks: 'growing numbers' are disconnecting and returning to personal communication and non-digital formats (Hardey and Atkinson 2019, 16).

Techlash

Face-to-face communication and the desire for experience and liveness is booming (Zuckerman 2013, 195). There is increasing interest in the value of being 'disconnected.' People have 'switched off' to rediscover the 'intimacy', 'authenticity' and 'community' they missed resulting in more 'productive and meaningful social communication' (Hardey and Atkinson 2018, 15). Liveness, un-plugged performance and physical or analogue formats are popular again. As Walter Benjamin argued, mass audiences of media want proximity and intimacy (1969, 217). The popularity of bringing performance closer to the people is demonstrated by the rise in festivals, pop-up theatre and the US town hall movement. The Campfire Club invites people to experience folk music around a fire, so that the audience has to 'dig deep into the music: 'the opportunity for *interaction* is invaluable' (Lee 2018). Pop-up theatre, 'gives us event status' and 'people who wouldn't normally see Shakespeare come and have a look'; 'people cry out for something different and original. We all love a real experience' (Cundall 2018). History is brought to life at places like the British National Justice Museum by involving audience members in re-enactments of real murder trials; art exhibitions 'do the rounds' and visit the people, rather than the other way around (Gardiner 2018). Calcutt argues that journalists need to be educated in the Arts and Humanities and 'create structures which help to call our common humanity into existence' (2018, 2). Humanising journalism may be what is needed, to save it (Carey 1998). As a way of 'experiencing the world' (Carey 1997, 90), it is surely ideally suited to a live platform of this kind.

Why theatre?

The use of theatre as a vehicle for journalism is problematic for various reasons, not least because it often operates outside most people's experience in the modern age. As Reinelt puts it, 'theatre as an institution has a difficult time showing up within this level of discussion of mass transmission through television' (2011, 22). However, if new practices are needed to bridge civil and political life and rediscover the public sphere, the theatre is not a bad place to start (Reinelt 2011, 21). A theatrical event in an openly accessible place, such as a street corner, can be among the purest manifestations of the public space, because of the random and potentially diverse nature of people encountering it. The importance of contemporary live performance should not be underestimated (Auslander 1999): Kattenbelt argues that 'it is this physical reality of the theatrical staging that might help to deconstruct the mediatized staging of reality,' (2018, 20).

The stage has been used in the past as a way to get news to the 'illiterate' (Taylor 2013, 29**)** across the USSR, China, and in UK 'newshouses' - pubs where newspapers were read to the customers. Although more people can now read, there are fears of a '*news* illiterate' society and 'calls for news literacy have surged' (Ashley 2019, 3). Theatre can also provide 'aura' or 'magic' (Barker 2003, 38), as required by engaging, effective journalism. As far as truth-seeking is concerned, a staged event can put 'witnesses' in front of people, thereby adding 'truth' to knowledge, and stimulating or challenging the audience (Hare 2005, 82). It acts as an antidote to the mass media, offering a replacement for the 'false intimacy of TV' (Barker 2003, 37). Like carnivals and festivals, theatre can suppress the ego of the spectator and provide an organic contrast to the 'obscene number of images' viewers are subjected to on screens (Blau 1985, 210). The stage is local, immediate, live and meaningful; it allows the audience to be part of the 'action' and of change (Barker 2003, 26). As Bodek shows, in times of polarity in politics the importance and interest in theatre rises (1991). Its tradition of resistance can be traced to its very transience and fragility (Reinelt 2011, 25). Those involved in the Living Newspapers productions discovered that their plays were considered so powerful by the authorities, they tried to ban them (Nadler 1995, 621).

The use of theatre and journalism in the past

Marrying current affairs and theatre in order to inform and persuade has a long history. In the fourth century B.C. the Theatre of Dionysus in Athens was also the meeting point for political assembly. In eighteenth century Europe, news was communicated via live performance at public events and in market squares by the town crier and American newsboys or hawkers and the women who ran 'kioskes' in Paris would shout out headlines to passers-by (Hudson 1873, xxiii).

Pop-up theatres are nothing new either: in sixteenth century UK cities, pub yards were used for theatrical performances and scaffolding was regularly erected outside the council house for strolling players (Godfrey 1891, 1). There are reports of ten thousand Blue Blouses troupes in Europe at one time, originating from working class clubs, involving a variety of music, dance and props (Bodek 1991, 201), imparting information with a mix of satire and political propaganda (Taylor 2013, 40). In Jan Wiese's novel 'The Naked Madonna,' a local character called 'The Weatherman' would deliver forecasts in the Italian town square (1990).

Living Newspapers, which originated in 1920s Italian futurism, appeared in Germany and developed into 1930s USSR agitprop or 'zhivaya gazeta' and 'huobaoju' in China, surviving well into the 1960s. There they were performed at schools, trade unions, military bases, factories and villages, often improvised, to communicate party policies and moral outrage (Taylor 2013, 34). Funded in the U.S. as a Federal Arts Project, Living Newspapers delivered topical, political cabaret with huge casts and spectacular sets. Some used comedy, stock characters, (such as the narrator or 'loudspeaker' and the common or 'little man') and verbatim statements from officialdom. The emphasis was on 'the truth' and a call to action (Nadler 1995, 617). If journalism is still to be regarded as 'the story of the growth and transformation of the human mind,' (Carey 1997, 93), news theatre can be about representing shared beliefs as well as imparting information.

A review of what we might loosely call 'political' theatre should also include a mention of Moreno's effort to 'dramatize' the news, or Arendt's attempts to discover nuances and 'truths' about the stories through improvisation (Casson 2000). The Theatre of the Oppressed invited audience members on stage to be 'spect-actors' to replay or work through harrowing events as a kind of therapy.

Modern Live Journalism

Theatre has been used in Africa for many years to communicate news and transform lives (Beckett 2008, 115); Reinelt writes that Johanssen's community plays on AIDS awareness 'lay the groundwork for changes that may only come gradually or later'(2011, 24). Wall and el Zahed report that 'pop-up news' in Syria is among a plethora of news activism in the Middle East (2015, 721). Following a resurgence of 'town hall' meetings to debate US politics during Trump's candidacy in 2016, 'events' organised by news organisations have emerged as a renewed cornerstone of news revenue (Phelps 2011). Stand-up story-telling, as staged by the Moth Radio Hour and the Pop-Up Magazine, is a popular format (Sillesen 2015). In Paris, refugees 'take centre stage' in 'The Hope Show' and find 'a space where people have the permission to talk,' (Durie 2018). City tours guided by reporters and 'live journalism' workshops bring stories 'from page to stage' (Evaleth 2015) while a protest performance is credited with changing the Romanian government (Balme 2018, 62). Audiences can 'meet the journalists' on book tours or events like the Guardian newspaper's Changing Media Summit. Many modern plays blend news and theatre, based on the 'verbatim' method of using text from actual interviews within the script (Hammond 2008), such as Alecky Blythe's 'London Road' musical, Hare's 'The Permanent Way' and 'Via Dolorosa' or Mark Jagasia's 'Clarion.' Meanwhile the Guardian and National Theatre of Scotland teamed up to produce the site-specific play 'Enquirer' about the journalism industry itself (Tiffany 2012).

It is still rare to involve journalists themselves in breaking news to a live audience, nor has there been much academic research on the significance of these phenomena for the future of journalism. However, several successful models have emerged in Europe in the last few years, inspired largely by Pop-Up Magazine. At a journalism conference panel on 'extreme engagement (IFJ, 2019), Riikka Haikarainen of the leading national daily, the Helsingin Sanomat's 'Musta Laatikko' (Black Box) shows said that their audiences told them they became interested in things they were not interested in before. Like 'Diario Vivo' in Madrid, the news outlet offers 'a unique night in which journalists tell true, intimate and universal stories for the first time.' They both request that the audience make no recordings of the event. Haikarainen told the panel that the vulnerability of the journalist adds to the trust with the audience. Decat o Revista, (DOR), in Bucharest says they stage their live shows because it fits their 'mission' to transform communities and bring people closer together. 'Live Magazine' also fills theatres (in France and Belgium) with 'stories never told before,' including multi-media narratives, music, shadow puppets and cartoons. Jakob Moll of Zetland says that their events are 'an incredible way to build relationships with the audiences'. All these enterprises are making small profits with what I call 'news on stage.'

Methodology

In order to get a close-up picture of the value or otherwise of face-to-face journalism in its current embodiment in the UK, I used two case studies, useful for generating and testing hypotheses (Flyvbjerg 2011, 306). I attended The Financial Times (FT) Weekend Festival 2018 and The Byline Festival 2019 and carried out ethnographic observation, interviews and questionnaires to qualitatively analyse the experience of attendees. I also interviewed several other people involved in other 'live journalism' projects around the world. Cottle showed how ethnography is a well-established method of researching journalism practice to produce

‘grounded findings’ (Cottle 2007, 1). Participation observation provides a strong basis for ‘penetrating insights’, once findings are triangulated with other methods such as interviews, conversations, documents and questionnaires. Interviews and observations in the 70s and 80s provided ‘an invaluable sociological record’ of the creation of news values and priorities (2007, 3-4). Situational or contextual analysis, which can produce naturally occurring data, has long been an anthropological research tool since being originated by Max Gluckman (Moser 2003, 79).

I devised twelve lines of enquiry for my research, based on the criteria of ‘what journalism is supposed to do’ (p.2) to find out how valuable the events could be. I wanted to ascertain whether and how far the events offered or encouraged the following: a live, off-line, face-to-face experience; a public space for debate; interaction and two way communication (whether collaborative or combative); the breaking of exclusive news to the audience; a demonstration of truth-seeking; ‘lifting the veil’ or insight into journalism; enhanced credibility of journalists; a community of audience and publication; a border between reporting, campaigning and activism; actions which resulted from the event; a new business model and support for print journalism.
Based on these twelve lines of enquiry, my field research took three forms. I distributed one hundred paper questionnaires by hand at each event, (with the lines of enquiry distilled into ten questions), mostly to the audience and some to journalists (either attending or performing). Attendees were asked what the advantages or disadvantages were of seeing and hearing from journalists in person; whether the event felt like a public space, where ideas of the day were debated; what kind of interaction there was there between journalists and the audience; whether journalists revealed any exclusive information to the audience; whether there as there any sense of community or evidence of campaigning at the festival; whether it would prompt them to take action with regard to anything they heard from journalists, whether they were more inclined to buy the printed version of the newspaper than before and whether they would be interested in attending a live event involving ‘breaking news.’There was a response rate of 15% at the FT Festival and 32% at Byline with a wide range of participants from aged under eighteen to over sixty, with twenty-five women, twenty-one men and one with no specified gender. Secondly I gathered ethnographic data from observations of crowds, groups and individual behaviour and conversations during the event. Thirdly I made notes, recordings and transcripts of as many sessions as possible which featured journalism, such as panels, workshops and talks, (twenty-one in all - six at the FT and fifteen at Byline).

I selected these two events as both are trail-blazers in the UK field of ‘live journalism’. In the words of FT Weekend editor, Alec Russell, ‘others are racing to follow our lead on festivals,’ with ticket sales increasing by fifty percent following its inception in 2016 (2018). The FT has already experimented with creative approaches to journalistic storytelling with ‘early work-in-progress, scratch performances of its stories on stage’ as part of the Contemporary Narratives Lab (Bhattacharjee 2018). Nearly three thousand people attended the FT event (FT 2018a), which explicitly advertised audience participation, promising that speakers would ‘debate the ideas and passions of 2018’ (FT 2018b). One hundred speakers appeared over the day across nine stages erected in marquees, many of the fifty-nine sessions involving journalists and including Questions and Answers (Q and As) with the audience.

The Byline Festival was started in 2017 and in 2018 five thousand people attended (mostly camping) over four days 'the world's only festival of free speech and independent journalism,' later launching the printed Byline Times in 2019 (Byline 2019a). Their website described the 2019 event as 'the only festival trying to change the world' (Byline 2019b), explaining in its printed programme that its aim was 'to strengthen independent journalism and free speech.'

Findings from the Research

Face-to-face experience

Respondents to the questionnaires overwhelmingly indicated that seeing and hearing from journalists in person was a positive experience. They suggested that the journalists' presence or 'proximity' and 'animated delivery' humanised the process of receiving news, because they could 'see body language, tone of voice, personality behind opinion and facts,' 'it made them real people rather than writing on a page' and they felt more intimately connected because they could 'see face and hear voice.' Personal revelation was a key part of this, exemplified by the FT columnist who said that her 'Mum was upset' by readers' comments and another who admitted of his column that part of him was always 'afraid that someone's going to read it'. The rawness of the experience was a factor: 'interesting to hear their off-the-cuff responses' and 'first hand unedited opinions.'

Another aspect was the theatrical format itself. One festival-goer also observed that 'it seems more real/fun to see them in real life,' reflecting perhaps the dramatic, playful style of the event. There was evidence at both festivals of frequent humour on stage and laughter or enthusiastic applause from the floor. The live nature of the events produced some mildly dramatic, if not pantomime moments: the FT audience reacted keenly to prompts from the chair, switching from cynical laughter (at the mocking of a left-wing commentator) to rapturous cheers (for the idea of a new centre party in British politics). Among the few negative comments was that some of the journalists at Byline were 'better writers than speakers.'

A public space for debate

Most respondents agreed that the festivals felt like a 'public space,' 'where ideas can be thrown around and discussed and questioned'; they enjoyed the agency of 'being able to ask questions directly'. However, many said these opportunities were actually far and few between. At the FT Festival there was 'too little time' and only 'a particular segment of society was present.' In the FT's live leader debate there were just three straw polls to gauge audience opinion (through a show of hands) and a two minutes twenty-four seconds section spent on 'seeking the thoughts' of the audience. In the live leaders' debate, audience members were invited to shout out the features they would like to see of a new centre party, but these were not debated. The chair and FT editor, Lionel Barber, describing himself as an 'enlightened despot,' interrupted one audience member, saying 'we can't have two questions', nor were follow-up questions invited.

Several Byline Festival-goers indicated that the nature of a communal event meant that they could hear 'multiple angles' and 'enjoyed hearing an ongoing discussion rather than reading one article in isolation.' They described the event as 'very welcoming' but complained of 'not enough public discussion,' or that it 'felt more like a formal talk because they had a metal barrier between them and audience and on a raised stage.'

Two-way communication

When asked about the interaction between journalists and the audience, most attendees experienced this as positive and collaborative. At Byline, they noted 'formal and informal' discussion and 'free flowing' 'exchange of ideas', with 'the audience often providing input for journalists to follow up' although one regretted that they were 'all of one viewpoint.' One performer said the 'public were interested and polite, respectful.' FT festival-goers reported the atmosphere as 'very relaxed and fun as well as respectful, still people are OK asking critical questions and disagreeing,' but one experienced the dynamic as 'teacher/pupil.' Several felt 'limited' to the Q and As; the longest I saw at the FT lasted just twelve minutes forty seconds. There was scope for the FT speakers to mingle with the audience, but they were mainly on stage, (literally on a higher plane) or behind a desk for a book signing. The interaction was predominantly between journalists themselves, with only the occasional comment or question directed at the audience: 'We don't know what you read!' exclaimed one columnist, attempting to reach out to the them. Two Byline attendees noted that most questions were asked by journalists 'who know a lot about the subject' and 'might put other people off'.

Breaking exclusive news

Asked whether journalists at the festival had revealed any exclusive information to the audience in the sessions they had seen, a third of respondents at Byline and half at the FT said 'yes'. Some respondents described the event as 'unique' and 'rare': a chance to hear material 'that's not picked up in the press' or 'stuff you don't hear elsewhere'. Others mentioned 'indiscretion from editor – 'yes, humorous/harmless "gossip,"' and 'a few investment trusts to recommend/buy.' Two thirds of the respondents at Byline said they would be 'interested in attending a live event involving breaking news', with one suggesting it would improve trust: 'yes, break the wall and make me trust the way news is talked about.' Seven (across both events) expressed uncertainty, a few writing that they were 'not sure what this means.' Among the journalists on stage the views were mixed; one rejected the idea outright saying 'No. I'll focus on the publication of my piece.'

Truth-seeking

Truth was conveyed through interaction, revelation and proximity: the audience found 'truth' through their experience of 'trust,' 'honesty,' 'better understanding of how journalists work' and the way the event 'made them real people.' One respondent (who did not attend any journalism events) asked whether one 'advantage' of seeing journalists in person was that 'they can lie to you more easily?' The stated intention of 'seeking views' or truths by the FT organisers materialised to some extent with the straw polls, but the live promise that an 'editorial will result' the following week came to nothing. An editorial on a new centre party was indeed published two days later but did not include any reference to the festival audience's ideas. The attendees showed an interest in getting to the 'truth' of FT journalism, but speakers sometimes self-censored: 'What do I want to say in public?' mused the Guardian editor out loud.

Insight

Several remarked on the insight they gleaned of 'seeing the inside track' and lifting the veil to 'see behind the scenes of the new industry.' There was a plethora of workshops at Byline (podcasting, online journalism, court reporting, and advice for breaking into journalism) and several FT speakers brought detailed description of their working lives and transparency

about their craft. One highlighted the transparency ‘about inner workings, politics or newspaper decisions.’

Credibility

There was evidence that trust in or credibility of journalists was boosted, not only by humanising them, but also via their perceived professionalism or integrity. The audience remarked on their skills, commenting on ‘great news analysis’ and ‘good questions and questioning technique!’. Respondents said, ‘I like and have faith in the news more now that I have met Martin Wolf’ and ‘am more likely to trust them in future.’ In the FT news editors’ discussion, speakers told the audience that they strove to ‘enlighten and explain,’ ‘hold power to account’ and that the fact-checkers ‘must be the hardest working department in the BBC at the moment.’ The speakers flattered their colleagues on several occasions and the Guardian editor endorsed her staff, saying, ‘I can’t think of anyone I’d want to leave.’ Journalists attending Byline felt strongly about the importance of their profession being conveyed positively: ‘It’s a good morale booster. It’s good to see journos have their FANS.’ A freelancer pointed out,

It's important for people to get in front of an audience so people can get to know the faces of investigative journalists and that’s helpful for investigative journalists defending their work and having a profile.

A shared community

There was strong ‘sense of community’ experienced by the majority of festival goers but the nature of the group(s) varied. At the FT festival one respondent said ‘no one feels like excluding anyone. Anyone can feel welcome.’ Others noted a lack of diversity, calling the roped off area for subscribers ‘another niche within a niche,’ observing ‘everyone is very white and privileged’ and ‘little interaction between attendees.’ The Byline Festival appeared to be much more diverse in terms of race and age and attendees were mainly enthusiastic about ‘the lovely peaceful vibe’. Respondents identified another eight, sometimes overlapping, communities: the journalists themselves, also in sub-groups of performers who go from one event to another as ‘a moveable feast’; festival-goers who ‘hang out together’; the audience gathered for a particular scheduled moment; the audience and speakers in ‘dialogue’; a political community ‘overiding anti-Brexit,’ (‘everyone is in same political camp (or so it seems)’; the campsite community; ‘families’; and ‘volunteers.’ The ‘communities’ were not necessarily always in harmony: one Byline respondent reported ‘quite a negative vibe’ with particular reference to ‘equality events’ and another remarked that ‘XR (Extinction Rebellion) had their usual cult vibes.’ However, as performers mingled with festival-goers throughout the weekend there was a feeling of a shared experience: ‘a great community atmosphere.’

Campaigning journalism and activism

None of the respondents at the FT said they saw evidence of ‘campaigning journalism’ during the day, but I noted one speaker urging ‘all the people sitting here and their friends’ to join the Conservative Party to act as a moderating force. In contrast, respondents at Byline reported that the ‘whole tone is campaigning,’ ‘local, national and international,’ in line with the festival’s expressed aim ‘to change the world’. A third of respondents there said that the event would prompt them to ‘take action’ following something they had heard from the journalists, including complaining to the BBC, lobbying their MP, carrying out trade union work, getting more involved in Extinction Rebellion, to ‘reflecting on some life choices.’ One audience member said, ‘not yet, in fact ER turned me away.’ A journalist commented ‘not

sure yet, sometimes ideas feed in and emerge later as actions.' At the FT festival attendees said they would 'travel to Finland,' 'read FT Lunch feature,' and 'read around subjects in press more and corroborate'. The integration of Extinction Rebellion into the Byline festival, as well as the participation of avowed campaigning journalists, such as Nick Davies and Carole Cadwalladr, meant that any border between journalism and activism was often absent. A range of workshops on activism were available, such as 'how to riot' or 'how to change the world through local government.'

The printed newspaper

Two FT festival-goers said that after attending the festival or seeing a sample of the printed edition there, they were more inclined to buy the printed version of a newspaper. At Byline, a third of the respondents said they were, often referring to the Byline Times itself.

New business model

As a business model, the FT festival has clearly been successful, winning the 'Best Use of an Event to Build a News Brand' trophy at INMA Global Media Awards in 2018, (FT 2018b). It may have contributed to the slight rise in print sales of the FT in 2018 (Russell 2018). There was evidence pointing towards potential increased revenue: the high percentage of Byline attendees vowing to buy a print newspaper in future; the continuation and expansion of both festivals over their first three years; the strengthening of brands, communities and readership loyalty around both news outlets. The event was used as a PR opportunity to promote work and showcase talent: the Guardian editor portrayed the paper as heroically impartial: 'we'll publish the facts even if we don't like them,' while the BBC's Today editor claimed that they broadcast 'the best brains.'

Analysis and discussion

This exploratory data alongside the indications from contemporary shows in the USA and elsewhere in Europe, have shown that the audience, the publication(s) featured and journalism itself have all benefitted from staged events. The public generally enjoyed the live experience of encountering journalists face-to-face; transparency about journalism was feasible and popular and public debate and interaction were embraced by the audience, although sometimes limited by the organisers.

At the FT, much potential went unrealised in terms of proper debate, two-way communication, breaking news, testing the border between reporting and activism and bringing about action. There was little mingling by the journalists, news-breaking did not take place and sessions were tightly chaired due to time constraints and big audiences, so that new truths were hard to establish, but festival-goers still engaged more deeply with journalism by attending.

The Byline Festival was less exclusive and more diverse, creating a feeling of a more representative 'public space.' The fact that it was held over four days for which the audience and often performers stayed on a campsite resulted in a more relaxed and egalitarian atmosphere. It was fascinating to note that much of the debate, argument and exchange took place outside the schedule, in social spaces or on the campsite.

The general portrayal of journalists was positive and their credibility enhanced by the festivals, partly because they were on stage but also through self-promotion and explanations of their craft. Several communities were identified, some overlapping. Byline was alive with activism designed to challenge the status quo. As a business model for generating income, both events appear to have been marginally successful, in line with ventures elsewhere in

Europe. In any case, by paying for news directly, rather than through advertising, ‘news on stage’ might also dispel the sense of commodification which hampers journalism (Benjamin 1969, 224) while also allowing it to present itself in the locality where it originated (219).

In conclusion, this research shows that face-to-face journalism is currently enjoyed and valued by audiences; that the border between journalism and activism can be productively breached and that there is an appetite for more interaction and live breaking news. There are of course problems around funding and resourcing ‘news on stage’, of drawing a truly ‘public’ and politically diverse audience and of persuading some journalists to reveal their stories before publishing them. If ‘enacted journalism’ can change the public’s perception of the role of news media (Tenenboim and Stroud 2020), it seems likely that news involving journalists themselves on stage could be even more effective. The data so far has shown that ‘news on stage’ is emerging as a successful vehicle for quality journalism and that it would benefit from new spaces to allow it to flourish as a format. It suggests that ‘staging’ journalism events could un-blur confusion around Habermas’s vision and help communities activate a public sphere (or spheres). Journalism can clearly benefit from a renewed and strengthened relationship between news, public space and performance/theatre/liveness. To help journalism towards playing its democratic role more fully, there clearly need to be opportunities for the audience to interact with journalists in social spaces after performances (as happens at the Black Box shows) and be deeply involved in the theatrical experience.

A way forward.

The challenges of a ‘news on stage’ event

In order to be regarded as quality journalism ‘news on stage’ would need to be truth-seeking, in the public interest, new and original, representing a range of voices while contextualising, explaining and analysing, with integrity. It would also have to fit into a new version of the public sphere, finding a balance between ‘expressiveness’, ‘rightness’ and ‘truth’ (Botham 2008, 317). ‘News on stage’ could encourage networking, debating and ‘bridge-figures’ (Zuckerman 2013, 171); it might take an agonistic approach (Hansen and Sonnichsen 2014, 266) or be a forum for campaigning or ‘influencing,’ as Habermas envisaged. However, journalists could be reluctant to ‘perform’ on stage and reveal their stories early. If organised independently from a news brand, as an autonomous endeavour, funding could be difficult’ if in alliance with a campaign or political movement, integrity and identity could be at risk. Then there is the question of audience and trust (Preston 2004). Blau argues that we are obsessed enough with spectacle as it is and shouldn’t allow it to be so powerful that the audience sacrifices its perception in exchange for intimacy (Blau 1985, 203). Politicians already ‘mimic’ theatre in real life with press conferences and publicity stunts to a dangerous degree; ‘news on stage’ could be in danger of over-dramatising too. Another problem is how to attract a theatre audience which is representative. Ideally class divisions melt away as the public mixes together in a public sphere with equal voices (Cropf 2008, 1525), but bringing those people together is a challenge. Perhaps there are lessons to be learned from agitprop theatre, which reached out to unrepresented groups such as unemployed youths (Bodek 1991, 25).

Imagining 'news on stage’

'News on stage’ would be led by journalists, based on witnesses (interviewees in person, or played verbatim by actors) and would tell real, exclusive stories, perhaps with the help of a drama group, and involving the audience. Performers would ‘break the news’ to the audience using investigative or ‘soft’ feature stories. The event would be an exclusive, dramatic,

shared physical and sensory experience. Journalists could provide insight into their own thoughts and feelings, ‘lifting the veil’ on the newsroom and demystifying practices. A performance could engage audiences through human interest and humour, involving the audience in the telling of the story, thereby moving it on.

The reputation of theatre as being ‘exclusive’ is not helped by the recent practice of ‘private’ plays being delivered to the mansions and polo fields of the superrich (Neate 2018). News theatre could take place anywhere where the public meet: village hall, pub yard, football ground, festival or arts theatre and in any style, from commedia dell’arte to agitprop. A ‘news tent’ or pop-up stall where the audience pays to get in to hear the latest, would reward the news outlet directly. It could simply be a round-up of proceedings outside a City Hall or courtroom at end of the day. Tried and tested dramatic techniques, such as improvisation, props, puppets, disguises and stock character roles could be employed, but also local, regional or folk styles of expression (Taylor 2015, 38). 'News on stage’ could be used as a form of education, benefitting students of politics or drama, echoing the visits to Chinese schools by performers of the ‘huobaoju’ (Taylor 2015, 39). Performances might even take place at workplaces, football grounds or national rallies, as they did under the auspices of Ewan MacColl’s Theatre of Action (McColl 1990, 2008).

Stories would go live online or in print straight afterwards, and slightly later editions or versions could include the audience’s contributions or updates. Audiences could be requested to switch off digital devices during the performance, to prevent breaking an embargo: this complicity itself could add to the fun. In an age of polarised politics and a strong desire among the public for experiential live events and face-to-face contact, and with journalism trying to find its humanity again, the time is ripe for 'news on stage’.

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