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# “News Cabaret”: Live Journalism and Theatre “Making Human Contact Again with the News Agenda”

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## ABSTRACT

At a time of political polarisation, social fragmentation and continuing mistrust in journalism, the practice of “live journalism” is flourishing. The practice aims to reconnect audiences and rebuild trust in news organisations through interactive events in public spaces. The authors of this paper experimented with a new format of putting news on stage involving both journalists and actors using theatrical and comic techniques to tell exclusive, unpublished stories in a show called News Cabaret. This article explores the reactions of the audience and participants to the event. The show consisted of eight dramatic pieces of journalism involving verbatim theatre techniques, stand-up comedy, sketches, monologues, songs, masks and improvisation. Discussions between cast, crew and audience took place during and after the show. We adopted a Reflective Practitioner Case Study approach and analysed surveys, recordings, observations and interviews. Our research suggests that using actors and theatrical devices to deliver content did not detract from quality journalism and resulted in some unexpected positive outcomes. The audience reported that the event challenged them to think and prompted some action, albeit limited. Results show that such events could be useful to revitalise journalism practice, challenge social and political norms and re-engage hard-to-reach audiences.

## KEYWORDS

Live journalism; theatre; public sphere; audience engagement; news; cabaret

## Introduction

In spite of falling levels of trust (Fletcher 2020), journalists are still seen as “convenors of social experiences” (Usher 2018), looking for ways to involve their audiences in reciprocal journalism (Belair-Gagnon, Nelson, and Lewis 2019). In recent years, the idea of journalism as a live event has become increasingly of interest to news media organisations, as commercial pressure rises and loyalty from erstwhile communities of readers ebbs away (Adams 2021; Ruotsalainen and Villi 2021; Tenenboim and Stroud 2020).

Live journalism has been defined as an event where “carefully edited and rehearsed journalistic content is presented to a live audience” and is a recent phenomenon increasingly practised around the world in various formats (Live Journalism 2022). Manifestations

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include *Musta Laatikko (Black Box)*, a show produced by journalists from the *Helsingin Sanomat* newspaper in Finland; *Pop-Up Magazine* in the US; *LIVE Magazine* in France and *Diario Vivo* in Spain. In 2022, practitioners and academics gathered in Helsinki for the first-ever international conference of its kind, establishing the Live Journalism Network.

Research in this field up to now has looked at various types of live journalism, but we have not found any that focus on productions that present previously unheard stories and that involve information about the development process. Most studies so far have been concerned either with theories about live journalism, such as the aesthetics of the medium (Vodanovic 2022), the concept of aural communication (Hänninen and Rautiainen-Keskustalo 2025) or how similar formats work in practice (Adams and Cooper 2024) rather than exploring the wider experience and impact on its audience, participants and producers. While there is literature on verbatim theatre and journalism (Blythe 2008; Luckhurst 2008; Paget 1987), there is limited research into productions that connect different actors and journalists performing together (Adams and Cooper 2024, 2025; Vodanovic 2022) with most live journalism critiques focusing on those that use journalists as performers only (Hänninen and Rautiainen-Keskustalo 2025; Lyytinen 2020; Ruotsalainen and Villi 2021). This study also aims to further explore the boundaries between news and drama and whether the audience and those involved found this more theatrical approach to journalism effective, and if it might serve as a democratising force.

Our ongoing UK live journalism research project, *News on Stage* (Adams and Cooper 2024), set out to test whether telling exclusive stories on a public stage could potentially restore trust between journalists and their audiences, rekindling the communities of readers enjoyed by the press in the past. Audiences at our previous (online) shows, *Unrelated Stories* and *Up and Coming Stories*, identified potential risks to journalistic integrity, such as subjectivity, immersion and lack of context, but recognised that the events were successful in increasing audience engagement, building communities and enhancing the credibility of the profession (Adams and Cooper 2024).

We decided to follow up these events with an in-person show, using more theatrical performances and introducing more intellectual challenges for the audience. *News Cabaret*, a one-off ace-to-face live journalism show in London in 2021 presented exclusive features and breaking news through performances from both journalists and actors, using a variety of dramatic techniques, including verbatim theatre, improvisation, monologues, stand-up comedy and song. In this paper, we use our *News Cabaret* event as a case study, examining the reactions and experience of the audience and participants of the show, which tries to incorporate theatricality without compromising “quality journalism”, as defined by Adams (2021). The criteria we were most concerned with were that the journalism should be new, original, truth-seeking, provide insight, serve the public interest, challenge the status quo and show integrity while engaging the audience. We also examine their experience of the blurring of boundaries between fact-based journalism and entertainment to see whether or how trust is compromised (Tandoc et al. 2017).

## Trust and Live Journalism

Journalism faces a well-documented crisis of trust (Gronke and Cook 2007; Hanitzsch, Van Dalen, and Steindl 2018; Müller 2013). For Western democracy in particular there have

been warnings that “trust will get worse before it gets better” (Fletcher 2020). The importance to democracy of a reliable press, recognised by Pulitzer over a century ago (1904, 679), means that both publics and policymakers are increasingly concerned about problems such as fake news and want action to be taken (Fletcher 2020; Pew 2021). In the context of this paper, trust is regarded as “confidence” or “faith” by consumers that the information provided by journalists is as true and reliable as possible; we agree with Hanitzsch, Van Dalen, and Steindl’s definition of trust as “the willingness of the audience to be vulnerable to news content based on the expectation that the media will perform in a satisfactory manner” (2018, 4).

One suggestion is to test whether journalism can reimpose its “cultural authority” through “live publishing” (Larson 2015), bringing together a network of sources, audience members and sponsors. Employing both visual and textual narrative strategies to assert their status and authority (Zelizer 1990), such events can prove popular and profitable for those who stage them (Larson 2015; Media Insight Project 2016). Audiences can be not only entertained but connected to the event in a personal and memorable way (Pine and Gilmore 2011, 5; Vodanovic 2022). Surveys and feedback from our previous live journalism events indicate that audience interaction with journalists can result in a sense of intimacy and connection (Adams and Cooper 2024, 2025). The idea of “being there” matters, with the concept of liveness giving audiences a perception of “assurance of access to truth” while the audience is in turn “responsible” to the event (Peters 2001). Drama can help an audience to feel that they fit in, an idea referred to by Peters (2019) as the “dramaturgy of belonging”. The importance of the direct interaction between audience and journalist has been examined by several theorists, who note the rebuilding of community trust (Konieczna and Robinson 2014).

There is also growing interest in the theory of reciprocal journalism, where reporting is no longer seen as a one-way process (Belair-Gagnon, Nelson, and Lewis 2019; Lewis, Holton, and Coddington 2014). While many media organisations have concentrated on online relationships with audiences, for others “offline” (face-to-face) has been welcomed more. Belair-Gagnon, Nelson, and Lewis (2019) saw offline forms of community building as the “ultimate form of media engagement” providing “truly meaningful connections” (2019, 11). Our *News Cabaret* production in 2021, although socially distanced due to COVID-19, was staged face-to-face, in contrast to the first two shows, held online in lockdown. We already found that engagement and interaction in our Zoom shows “humanised” journalists (Adams and Cooper 2024), so we wanted to test Larson’s claims that a physically present event transforms the story itself and creates new tensions and contradictions, resulting in an “emerging form of journalism production in its own right” (Adams and Cooper 2024).

## The Intersection of Theatre and Journalism

Theatre has always been a vehicle to tell stories, but also a medium to convey news, as in the case of “Living Newspapers” which spread through the USA, China, and the USSR in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Taylor 2013, 29). Their use was sometimes controversial: in China and Russia, they were used to spread propaganda, and in the USA, their campaigns for working-class rights resulted in the withdrawal of funding by Congress (Cosgrove 1982). Like *News Cabaret*, *Living Newspapers* used theatrical devices and

comedy, but they were usually didactic in docu-drama style, “to communicate party policies and moral outrage” (Taylor 2013, 34). Essentially, they were dramatising an existing problem, replaying events that had been already publicised, rather than bringing new stories (a key criterion of quality journalism) told for the first time by their authors.

In our contemporary online society, plays staged in a public space have potential for even more impact due to the very fact of their being out of the ordinary as a non-screen-based experience. “It is this physical reality of the theatrical staging that might help to deconstruct the mediatized staging of reality,” suggests Kattenbelt (2018, 20). As news often reports on conflict (Harcup and O’Neill 2017), it is also well suited to be re-versioned as drama, which is based on “the law of conflict” (Boal 2005, 57).

Theatre, like journalism, can provide a public space for the examination of contemporary issues. Brecht showed how this could be done, demystifying the art form and arguing for performance based on reason and critical thinking rather than emotion, so that the spectator becomes an observer, questioning rather than being spoon-fed information (Brecht 2014). British radical theatre embraced these ideas, promoting greater equality between the stage and the auditorium and using the play as “a form of democracy” (Kershaw 1992, 103), developed further by Freire and Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed and Forum Theatre where the audience becomes *spec-actors*, taking an active role in a piece’s development by intervening at key moments (Boal 1998; Flores 2000; Freire 2009). In the UK, the most popular format uniting journalism and theatre is verbatim theatre (Blythe 2008; Luckhurst 2008; Paget 1987) which can examine different experiences and “speak truth to power” (Garson 2018).

Verbatim theatre, which has its roots in 18th-century Germany, aligns with journalism in that it is “research-based” drama (Baer, Salisbury, and Goldstein 2019) where interviews are carried out, transcribed, edited and constructed into a performance with nothing imagined or invented (Elias 2021). Luckhurst characterises it as a theatre where practitioners, if asked, could provide interviewed sources for their dialogue, in the same way that a journalist must, according to their code of ethics, have bona-fide sources for their story (2008, 201). In verbatim theatre, the audience expects to hear the truth but “scenic truth ... [the] distillation of reality into something aesthetically appropriate and artistically constructed” (Merlin 2007, 42). *News Cabaret* incorporated many conventions of verbatim theatre: stories were based on interviews conducted by journalists following norms and ethics of journalism practice. The difference was that the journalists themselves were given the opportunity to perform their exclusive work alongside real actors. We also included theatrical devices such as songs, masks, costume, comedy and improvisation to see whether this would prove confusing or elucidating. We encouraged the use of comedy, regarded as a useful tool because “laughter opens people up”, as Selman *et al.* acknowledge (in Prentki and Preston 2009, 320), but we knew that too many dramatic devices could raise issues about the journalistic ethics (Peters 2001); after all, as Salverson puts it, theatre can be a “dangerous witness” (2008, 245).

## Consciousness and Activism

The *public space* envisioned by Habermas, where communities could be built and common ideas developed (1974, 49), has never been more threatened by power and profit (Blau 1986, 209). It has been defined as a place where the views and voices of the public can be

expressed, often with a critical relation to power (Reinelt 2011, 18–19) and there are various ways in which journalism can use it to fulfil its democratic function. More than a hundred years ago Mexican news ballads or *corridos* helped “toward the maintenance of society” and to “keep people together” (Westgate 2013, 1005). More recently Adrienne Russell suggested how journalism could be “re-coding media power” to produce social and political activism (2016). The producers of *Black Box* in Helsinki describe their live show as a form of “eudaimonic journalism”, conscious of virtue, meaning and potentials (Ruotsalainen and Villi 2021). In our first live events we saw how *News on Stage* had the potential to lead to changes in attitude or behaviour among the audience. Our question now was whether increasing the dramatic elements in our shows would have resulted in audiences’ perceptions of more consciousness and resulting in more activism and whether *News Cabaret* could be a useful format for applied, or even political theatre.

*Applied Theatre* is work that resonates with its audiences, who leave the show with a new awareness because they feel they “share ownership of the material” (Prentki and Preston 2009, 365). Its goal is transformation. One of its pioneers, Dorothy Heathcote, called drama “a process for change” with the audience coming away thinking “there’s something I haven’t conceded before” (2009, 201). While social consciousness is separate from actual behaviour (Madsen 2018), it can be argued that such forms of theatre support the transformative learning required. Boal talked about theatre as “transitive democracy” (1998, 22) where immersion and discussion can/should lead to “a desire for change” (1998, 20), while Freire claimed that true, conscious reflection leads to action (Baer, Salisbury, and Goldstein 2019, 5).

In summary, then, our research question is as follows: how will audiences and participants experience and react to the production of a highly theatrical live journalism format, *News Cabaret*? Our particular interest will be on how the show might alter their perceptions of their trust in journalism, its use of drama, and what, if any, action it might prompt them to take.

## Methodology

As with our previous work, we wanted to take a practice-based research approach relevant to the study of journalism today (Witschge, Deuze, and Willemsen 2019). As Witschge and Harbers reflect (2018, 105), such a method can provide a “bottom-up theorization of journalism practices, avoiding the pitfalls that come with *a priori* definitions of what journalism and its societal functions are”. We found particularly useful the work of Peters (2020) and his use of the Reflective Practitioner Case Study (RPCS) approach, which he says allows the artist’s practice to “merge seamlessly into how [we] research”, (O’Toole 2006, 56). An RPCS approach acknowledges our position as practitioners (journalists, writers and producers/performers in the show) but positions this as being a valid perspective from which to reflect and research on our work. As Haseman (2006, 7) puts it, “practice is the principal research activity” in practice-based research, where a dialectic relationship between practice and theorising emerges (Grady 1996). Peters explains that while the documentation of practice occurs during conventional qualitative case study methods such as journal entries and surveys, there is also value in considering learnings during rehearsals/performance, interviews with storytellers and the act of constructing the play/performance, seeing stage and screen plays as “research artefacts in their

own right” (Baker 2018, 1). He used the triangulation of transcripts, his own journals, and journals of collaborating artists.

We studied a range of data sources, which included the scripts themselves, online recordings of meetings and rehearsals, video footage of the show itself and post-show audio interviews and conversations. Both authors kept diaries and ethnographic notes, and we collected reviews of the show and surveys; 24 surveys (out of 30) from the audience and ten (out of 15) from cast and crew were completed. The audience surveys, consisting of 14 questions, were a mixture of quantitative and qualitative. Four quantitative questions (using five-point Likert scales) were asked about: 1. The use of actors and drama to tell journalistic stories (from very interesting to not at all) 2. Trust in journalists before the event, and then a subsequent question after the event (from a great deal to not at all) 3. Evidence of campaigning journalism (from a great deal to not at all). In this case, we used Barnett et al.’s definition of campaigning journalism, which describes it as “identifying issues directly relevant to [audiences], and demanding appropriate action from relevant authorities” (2022, 336). The ten qualitative questions asked: 1. which part of the show they enjoyed most, 2. which they enjoyed least and why; 3. if their trust levels had changed, why they thought this was; 4. what they thought of the idea of journalists performing in person as a concept; 5. anything new they had found out from the stories; 6. what they thought about interaction between performers and audience in this event; 7–8 the advantages and disadvantages of seeing journalists perform in person; 9. how the event could have been improved; and 10. what action, if any, they would take as a result. They were also asked demographic questions around age, gender, ethnicity, occupation and if they would be willing to be interviewed. The cast and crew survey asked most of the same questions but also asked, whether they thought the event had increased trust in journalism, if it had created a sense of community among the audience; whether it had created a public space to debate ideas of the day and how many hours they had spent on the project.

These data sources sometimes interacted and overlapped, such as in the case of script revisions, which evolved through discussion between producer and journalist and were amended during the rehearsal process. The data was subject to textual and thematic analysis by both of us separately before coming to consensus through discussion.

We were careful not to produce leading questions in our surveys or distort our findings to produce certain results, in line with good academic practice. In order to further separate our roles as producers/promoters from that of objective researchers, the work was subject to an ethics procedure at City University of London (ETH2021-0324).

With our involvement in the project itself, we were always conscious to keep reflecting in order not to shape the process and outcomes to reinforce our expectations and desire for success. Practice-led research is well known for having subjective elements (O’Toole 2006) but we followed other scholars in tackling this project with a strongly reflexive approach (Harding, 1991; Steiner 2018; Wahl-Jorgensen 2025) and systematically examining our own beliefs throughout the process.

We started by drawing up areas of interest we wanted to research, as outlined in the three sections above, which had either not previously been studied, as far as our review of the literature could ascertain, or not to the extent or in the way we wanted to examine them. We then devised and produced our show as a tool to explore these aspects. Our data fell into four categories: surveys of audience and participants; audio interviews,

feedback and a journalistic review; ethnographic diary notes, video recordings and photos of meetings, rehearsals and the show itself; and finally, the texts written by the journalists. From the seven pieces of drama, we used purposeful criterion sampling (Palinkas et al. 2015) to pick the four most dramatic and challenging to look at in more detail. We used thematic analysis to study all this content, from the text to the discourse and interactions of those involved (Braun and Clarke 2006), coding our material and using an inductive model and constructionist approach (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011).

## The Show

We used our directing, scriptwriting and reporting experience to plan and co-produce the two-hour event of live journalism for the Wandsworth Arts Festival Fringe, London, on 8 July 2021 at the Woodfield Arts Pavilion. Our aim was to produce a magazine show of contrasting journalistic stories presented in a variety of forms and styles. Our professional networks helped us to look for contributors among freelance journalists, the local press, charities, and “about-to-graduate” journalism course bodies and acting schools. We also worked with a comedy improvisation group to devise items on news themes.

The selected cast and crew ranged in age from 20 to over 60. We developed and produced the eight pieces of drama performed either by the journalist(s) themselves, or with/ by an actor or actors. The script for the show’s host linked the items and included an original cabaret-style song and instructions for audience participation. It included three blank slots for breaking news and sport stories, to be filled in on the day. Seven stories were performed (one was dropped because the journalist contracted Covid) by nine journalists and four actors, plus two sketches by the “*Column Inches*” improvisation group. We secured funding from the Journalism Research Committee at City University of London for resources and paid token fees to the cast and crew. Two work experience placements were created for students at Nottingham Trent University to facilitate stage management. Tickets were distributed to the public via the festival website, while we organised publicity, design, staging, and wardrobe, as well as directing rehearsals, editing scripts, holding meetings and setting up audio-visual recordings. Throughout the production, we promoted our imperatives for journalistic integrity and news values in line with our project as laid out in previous papers (Adams and Cooper 2024, 2025). These values included the intention that representation be as wide as possible in terms of content, and those taking part.

We also had to abide by Covid social distancing regulations so that our venue, which rapidly sold out, could only accommodate 30 people in the audience, seated at cabaret-style tables with atmospheric décor and lighting. The show opened with a humorous, introductory song with accordion accompaniment. This paper focuses on the four following acts.

- (a) “**Not Quite Blind Date**” was a sketch parodying a TV dating show *Blind Date*<sup>1</sup>, where the host, played by Journalist 1 (J1), questions two gay, male contestants competing

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<sup>1</sup>“*Blind Date*” was a popular dating game show produced by London Weekend Television and broadcast 1985–2003 on ITV presented by the 1960s pop star Cilla Black. It was revived by Channel 5 and ran from 2017 to 9 with Paul O’Grady as presenter.

to take out a prospective date who is gay, male and South Asian, played by actors. J1 based the script on journalistic material he had gathered from interviews with men about the queer South Asian dating scene, revealing insights about prevailing ignorance, prejudice and racism. They are sometimes woven into exchanges such as this, between the contestant Clive (played by Actor 1), who is not expecting to meet an Asian man and the guest, Rakesh (played by Actor 2):

CLIVE: Look—It’s nothing personal, I just don’t think Asians are hot, they’re a little bit too hairy and exotic for me.  
 RAKESH: Oh God, not again.

J1 periodically comes out of character to report his research directly to the audience and at the end of the sketch, he directly addresses the journalism in the item:

J1: (as himself) As a journalism student, I did a six-month investigation into sexual racism in the gay community. All the answers given to Rakesh in this piece ... were actual verbatim quotes that Asian men have received on the dating circuit.

- (b) “**Gender Fabrication**” tackled the issue of conformity to stereotypical dress conventions by staging a catwalk show with male actors modelling flamboyant, subversively “feminine” costumes. It is narrated by the Journalist 2 (J2), using comedy for effect:

The look he’s chosen for autumn/winter 2021 collections is powerless, feminine, funny and ... some might say disgusting? Certainly, a disruptive element to this look—although mainly because of difficulty walking in them [heels]

J2 starts the scene in a role as a job applicant planning her interview outfit, before demanding that the audience to consider the dilemmas she exposes:

When a woman wears something considered masculine, it’s considered powerful. But when a man wears something considered feminine, it’s disgusting. So, men are powerful, and women are disgusting?

- (c) “**Shaping Up Theatre**” was a monologue delivered by Actor 3, about experiences of being “fat-shamed” and driven to malnourishment in drama school and the theatre industry. The script is an amalgamation of verbatim quotations from research by Journalist 3 (J3), who was present but did not appear on stage herself. It includes graphic detail and testimony from a number of sources:

This became my day. Get up, go to the gym. Attend acting, singing, dancing classes from eight in the morning until eight at night. Then go to the gym again. Skip dinner. I was living off Diet Coke and bananas ... One [drama student] said their teacher told them they should be eating toilet paper for dinner in order to look good.

**The Plague Doctor**” was a monologue performed by Actor 4 (A4), who appeared to the sound of eerie background music, dressed in a mask, cloak and staff. He addressed the audience as though they were living in the Middle Ages, informing them about the plague using historical research, but with obvious allusions to the Covid-19 pandemic. During his spot he reported the real breaking government statistics about local Covid infection rates:

Today across the country, there have been 10,633 cases of the pandemic reported. Here in Streatham, 16 tested positive today. And the R number in London now is 1.1 to 1.4. That's from your government this afternoon.

The three other items were a satirical sketch acted by Journalists 4 and 5 about absurdly high London house prices and changing levels of stamp duty; a story of the discovery of a long-lost printing press on the banks of the river Thames written by Journalist 6 (J6) and a mock obituary of a war correspondent, narrated by himself (Journalist 7). The comedy improvisation actors "*Column Inches*" presented two scenes. In one, attendees were asked to offer anecdotes about a time when they had been in the news, from which the group created a skit on a trip by an English rugby team to Swedish-speaking Finland. In the other, the trio asked the audience to pick out stories from the day's local newspapers placed at their tables. They then wove together a sketch using snippets of topical information, focusing on a surreal-sounding headline about a man who could not see clothes. After the performances, the audience was invited to ask questions and cast, crew and audience mingled and discussed the event. The journalists and actors were also able to interact during and between rehearsals and performance.

## Results

Seven themes emerged from our inductive thematic analysis as contrasting pairs: acting and reporting; fact and fiction; the real and imaginary, an event both playful and serious; actors and journalists both in role and breaking the fourth wall; an audience sometimes distant, yet close; and a performance with immersion but also critical discussion. The themes naturally aligned within our three areas of interest, often running through all three.

### *The Trust Relationship between Audience and Journalists*

The audience survey completion rate was high compared to the project's previous productions<sup>2</sup>, perhaps because paper surveys were placed physically at individual seats, making their completion a simultaneous and communal activity, or because "*we had built a relationship*" with the audience. Reactions of those present centred around the themes of closeness, playfulness and reality. Members of the audience (representing a range of ages and occupations, from student to chief executive<sup>3</sup>) were asked about their perceptions of seeing/hearing journalists in person. One highlighted how important it was, "*to connect to real people especially after so long apart*", (referring to lockdown). Other audience members' comments indicated that trust was high because of the close, face-to-face experience: "*makes the stories valid*", "*brings stories to me*", "*allows for higher levels of trust*", "*the story seems more real. More likely to be believed.*" Feedback from the in-person event also included the words "*warm*" "*engaging*" and "*playful*",

<sup>2</sup>In our previous shows Unrelated Stories and Up and Coming Stories which were held on line because of the pandemic, there were survey completion rates of 22.2% and 25% respectively – see Adams and Cooper (2024).

<sup>3</sup>Not all those who completed the survey gave us full biographical information. Of those who did, six were aged 18–30, three 30–45, eleven 45–60 and two over sixty. Eleven identified as female, five as male, one added that they identified as queer. Twelve identified as white British, one Swedish, one Welsh, one Italian. Occupations were as follows: journalist; programme manager; freelance arts maker; freelance technician; practice manager for architects; student; public sector; artist; manager; chief executive; ceramicist; decorator; civil servant; head of IT; lawyer and another civil servant.

echoing the work of Stephenson (1964) and more recent comments about news as play (Ferrer-Conill et al. 2020). Audience respondents described that it was “good to hear direct from journalists—give them an unedited voice”. The audience reaction was to see the journalists as individuals with comments such as: “I liked—I kind of want to hear the journalists themselves” and the experience of “getting to know the stories more intimately”.

All the cast and crew surveyed (online) said that they thought the show had increased trust in journalism (of which 50% said “a lot”) and created a public space for debate (44% said “a lot”). The journalists themselves indicated in their surveys that the content of their stories and experiences of interviewees reached the audience with fewer filters, partly due to the use of verbatim techniques.

From our written observations as producers, we noted that the event was “building a *News Cabaret* community”, and had “created interest, fondness”. Our diary entries also reflect the importance of involving a high number of trained actors: we noticed enthusiasm among cast and crew and strong bonding between journalists and actors, perhaps due to the number of young people involved or the actors’ skills in rallying the performers. We noted a “good vibe in the Green Room and chats between all performers”; “great camaraderie after show, led by the drama people”. One other observation from *News Cabaret* was that the producer/host made the decision to drop an unsettling story from the breaking news section. Noting in the diary that the intimacy of the event had turned the producers into “friends of the audience”, she decided not to use a local story about the murder of a local boy in case it upset anyone who might be connected. She observed that this was “because I’m seeing the audience face-to-face, as humans”, in a move counter to journalistic norms, which dictate the immediate reporting of stories that are “new and of substance” (De Beer and Merrill 2008; Ray 2003, 23).

Overall, reactions were favourable, and the surveys and interviews suggest the event appears to have succeeded in creating a sense of community, and that the novelty of the content, delivered in person by the storyteller (unlike other journalism experiences), meant that the news felt more “real” to the audience. However, we did not ask for a direct comparison between conventional journalism, where it is not a face-to-face experience and live journalism, which might be something to consider in the future. The quality journalism criteria were met, except for the moment in which integrity arguably lapsed when one producer got too “close” to the audience to deliver a breaking news item.

### **Use of Theatricality**

There were mixed views among the audience about the effectiveness of drama/theatre in the pursuit of quality journalism and several issues were raised around the themes of fact/fiction, acting/reporting, immersion and role-playing. All those who answered the question said the use of drama and actors was “very” or “extremely” interesting, one calling it “unique and powerful”. However, another respondent highlighted a perceived “disadvantage” of the “emotional volatility” of drama, and another commented that the audience “might not have enough time to receive all the facts/information” through this format. In the post-show Q & A the first question from the audience was, “How much of the scripts were from interviews and how much made up?” even though, for example, J1 the journalist in *Not Quite Blind Date* had made it clear that the material was verbatim. Another respondent suggested that the production could be improved with “more journalists to

*balance out drama*" and we noted that *"perhaps more emphasis was needed on the news content of these stories"*. There were positive comments on the show's approach from the audience's survey responses including: *"the blend of the arts and journalism provides a refreshing take on the news"*, *"made it more fun to take in the news and news information"*, *"actors bring the stories to life"* and stating that *"more theatre didn't detract from the stories"*. In particular, the audience reacted well to the use of comedy in several of the items, such as the use of exaggerated glamour by models in *Gender Fabrication* and the parody persona of the *Blind Date* host. Pitcher's review describes the show as:

always on the edge of chaos—as the best newsrooms are—which gives it all a dramatic edge. That's exciting—and not just for the audience, which can sense the common energy that actors and journalists share, as well as other traits. (2021)

All of the cast and crew who responded to the surveys said they found the idea of using actors and drama to tell journalistic stories *"very interesting"*; elsewhere they commented on it as, *"a new way"* to *"encourage change"*. The drama allowed for moments of immersion, eliciting comments such as: *"actors bring the stories to life"*; *"I felt very involved"*; *"drama is a good way to get people engaged."*

As former journalists, we edited the show as if it were a publication, and our aim was to support the journalists with minimal interference in the content. We noted in our diaries that the production was *"pushing boundaries"*: journalists were taking on new roles and stories were taking on different *"narrative arcs"* and *"dramatic structures"* from conventional print/online or broadcast stories as we re-versioned them for the stage. What also emerged distinctly from *News Cabaret* was a sense of team spirit, performing, and something *"coming to life"*. One producer put this down to the enthusiasm that often comes with a dramatic production: *"actors led the positive spirit ... perhaps because they are by nature more "out-going?"* than the journalists. She also acknowledged the element of surprise happenings and the serendipity of a live event. It should also be noted, however, that without careful stewardship, there is a danger of the material having a *"life"* of its own.

As producers, we realised from their questions at the end of the show that the *"audience weren't clear always who the journos/actors were (which were which)."* In retrospect, we concluded that we should have stated clearly on the programme which performers were journalists and which actors, so there was clarity in the audience's minds as to whom they were watching. It was also significant, although not unexpected, that the improvisation group managed their slot in accordance with their art and without conforming to the journalistic *"rules"*. *"Can't control the improv people"* is the producer's diary observation during rehearsal. As such, this raises questions about whether improvisation can be a valid part of a live journalism event and highlights the problem of style over substance. In terms of quality journalism, the area of theatricality clearly poses certain problems with regard to integrity and truth-telling.

### **Democratising the Aesthetic Space**

To be classed as applied or political theatre one would need to prove that the script challenged norms and consciousness, or provoked action and thought, to which the audience reacted to. Not all seven items did this, but the authors of *Not Quite Blind Date*, *Gender*

*Fabrication* and *Shaping up Theatre* were all interested in confronting pre-conceptions about their topics and directly addressed the audience with their ideas, balancing immersion with critical discussion afterwards. In his role as game show host, J1 wrapped up the proceedings with the following comments:

Well, that's all we've got time for I'm afraid, so I hope you've enjoyed Wandsworth's Not Quite Blind Date where Rakesh didn't find love but classic stereotypes.

In *Gender Fabrication*, the author/presenter J2 made direct reference to social and political systems:

His layering of skirt and shirt is a clear nod to threatening established power structures. Styling the cuff with the boots encapsulates his identification with women and their subjugation in the patriarchy.

She later challenged the audience to question these norms: "*I don't know about you, but I don't want to live in a world where people can't freely express themselves.*"

*Shaping Up Theatre* ends with the actor A3 reading out a personal and feminist declaration from one of the author's [J3's] interviewees:

My size shouldn't stop me from being that leading lady up on a West End stage, falling in love or just kicking ass with a big, beautiful ballad. And I'm ready to prove it.

The *News Cabaret* cast was representative of UK society in terms of background, ethnicity, gender and story content. However, the lived experiences and views that the younger performers presented jarred with one member of the audience, who criticised the show for being "woke" and "polemical". There was not as much time allocated for discussion of the issues raised by the stories as we intended, due to the venue's scheduling constraints: only one Q and A session was introduced at the end of the performances rather than after each act, which was the original plan. We asked the audience what they found out from the stories that was new to them. Survey responses mentioned "*Their real-world experiences*", "*facts and figures—awareness*" and said the show "*was very insightful*". The story which drew most comments was *Not Quite Blind Date*. A typical reaction was, "*I had no idea before tonight about the dating problems for young South Asian men*". Others referred to *Gender Fabrication*, mentioning an "*interesting take on gender and clothes*" and "*gender presumptions and effects*". *Shaping Up Theatre* also opened the audience's eyes, as intended, to the "*pressure on female drama students from such a young age*".

Most audience survey respondents (19 out of 24) said there was evidence of "*campaigning journalism*" in the show, like applied theatre, which seeks to elicit "a desire for change". When asked whether the event would result in them taking any action most did not agree, two were not sure, but four responded in the affirmative, writing, "*I should read more newspapers*"; "*continue to read quality News/journalism sources (Tortoise etc.)*"; "*I'm going to read more and not just skim through headlines*"; and "*seek out similar venues*". Another commented that the production "*brings critical reflexion to topical news. A certain level of distanciation is achieved whilst at the same time making the story more personable*", echoing Brecht's ideas about alienation. Interviewed after the show a journalism lecturer in the audience recognised that the journalistic process itself had been challenged, saying he welcomed "*new ways of storytelling, because that's what we need—reaching new audiences*".

Members of the cast and crew seemed more galvanised than the audience. One said they would “pay more attention to news, the issues, consider joining more campaign, continue conversations” and another said they enjoyed the “community, sharing ideas”. One of the assistant stage managers, a media student, commented,

I see great potential in News on Stage. People my age don’t normally bother to read an article. But those people who are interested in theatre might get involved, get interactive, meet journalists and therefore build an interest in journalism and the news industry.

Aspects of quality journalism such as challenging the status quo and serving the public interest were addressed through the stories told by the cast. The collaboration between actors and journalists performing together was experienced and received warmly and has not been the subject of scholarly attention until now, to the authors’ knowledge. Moreover, the impact of the show on the performers themselves emerged as a fruitful topic for study, and the potential of live journalism models to appeal to new, hard-to-reach audiences, is a discovery that would surely benefit from more research and investigation.

## Discussion and Analysis

With regard to our research question, the surveys, qualitative comments and interviews showed that most of those present felt that this format of live journalism could be perceived as engaging and powerful due to the enthusiasm and intensity between journalists, actors and audience. The people involved reported a sense of togetherness, freedom, easy interaction, intimacy and playfulness, reflecting the experience of the Finnish live journalism project *Black Box* and what Lyytinen calls the “essential magic” of the physical show (2020, 54). As producers we observed that the live audience was “closer and more committed” than during previous online live journalism events. As Pitcher commented in his review, “*News on Stage is making human contact again with the news agenda,*” and that it was a “welcome move back to live, interactive theatre [which] serves to underscore the importance of journalism being a visceral human interaction, rather than one distanced by screens and keyboards.” (2021). However, two respondents to the cast and crew survey pointed out that a possible disadvantage of a face-to-face presence was that “if (the audience are) not enjoying it or they don’t agree with a viewpoint—it’s obvious to see” and “could break the veil of authority and mystery”. Of course, building rapport is only one way to build trust in journalism—producing reliable copy obviously needs to be part of the solution too—and we continue to be aware that *humanising* journalists also has the potential to create a loyal but unthinking audience, although our research has not shown this. On the matter of the host withholding a breaking story to avoid upsetting the audience it could be argued that this sensitivity is also a sign of quality journalism: in order to be trusted, journalists need to show empathy, “integrity” and “benevolence” to their audience, as well as “ability” (Blöbaum 2014, 14). In general, the in-person show was harder work and more complicated and costly for those involved but appeared to build a better relationship with the audience.

Our second point of interest was concerned with possible problems arising from the blurring of journalism and theatre, fact and fiction. Journalism always needs to engage its audience effectively (Rosenstiel et al. 2007) and the use of entertainment or drama

can help this (Golding and Elliott 1979, 115–118). The show also established that breaking stories, like the latest Covid statistics, were received and understood by the audience, revealing that this format can be a platform for news, as well as features. Theatrical devices did not appear to detract from quality journalism. There were some unexpected positive outcomes from including young actors, such as their drive, teamwork and performance skills. We noted that the roles of journalists and actors overlapped, pushing at the boundaries of their normative practice. Bringing the two professions together produced novelty, enthusiasm, creative tension and a mutual interest in each other's craft which added to the performances.

Our seven apparently contradictory theme pairs, (acting/reporting, fact/fiction, real/imaginary, playful/serious, in/out of role, distant/close and immersion/critical discussion) or *coincidentia oppositorum* echo the *unity of opposites* (found at the heart of Hegelian dialectics), which, like alchemy, lead to the production of something new and revelatory (McGill and Parry 1948, 419).

The least successful area we observed was that identities of actor and journalist and the source of the show's content were not always clear to the audience; one attendee commented that the use of drama "*needed more explanation beforehand*". Some introductory guidance by the host and information in the programme would have been useful here. We learned that the use of improvisation and satirical devices also need to be clearly framed, monitored and managed. When asked how things could be changed for the better, three members of the cast and crew surveyed suggested that the next event should be bigger"; another mentioned "more resources" and with "more stories to challenge people".

In the spirit of radical or democratising theatre, the sketches brought some previously untold stories and unheard voices to a public place in a free performance. Scenes such as the catwalk in the *Gender Fabrication* piece mirrored the Brechtian approach of using theatre to highlight the normalisation of something absurd, as Barnett explains (2015, 269): in this case, gendered fashion conventions. Some aspects of Brecht's ideas about alienation are also evident in the show, such as the use of magazine format with frequent intervals to break up the action; hearing real stories straight from the mouths of those affected or "oppressed"; the use of music and the breaking of the Fourth Wall. "Knotting", or disruptions which give the audience "a chance to interpose judgement" on the subject matter (Brecht 2014, 15), were evident briefly as the host moved from one story to the next. One member of the audience said they would have liked more breaks, saying the show was "*rushed, needed to take a break between acts*".

News Cabaret clearly fell short of classic "politically interventionist" Brechtian theatre (Reinelt 1994, 4), where "true A (alienation) effects are of a combative nature" (Brecht 2014, 17). The performers also tended to "embody" emotions, rather than "represent" them in authentic epic style (Barnett 2015, 283). But the show was "simultaneously objective and subjective" as Boal says (political) theatre should be (1998, 58): the scenes engrossed and then alienated: one spectator used both the term "*distanciation*" and "*personable*" to describe the event.

The topical nature of the show, with its stories on racism, bullying and housing issues, echoed the work of playwrights such as Piscator, who wanted to "encourage playwrights to deal with the significant issues of contemporary existence" (Innes 1972, 8). He believed that drama should "cause the audience to consider their social environment critically"

(30). Our audience learned new things but were also challenged to think; the stories chosen and produced by these particular journalists made some uncomfortable and prompted others to action, albeit in a limited way. It should be remembered the producers did not seek challenging stories; indeed, some of the stories were not: the content was simply what our journalists wanted to produce at the time.

The use of comedy produced an audibly positive response from the audience, appearing to manage to, as Boal suggests (1998, 56), “intensify” the play and “throw light on the oppressive situation” referred to in, variously, the catwalk parade, game show sketch, plague doctor skit and improvisation scenes. Among his ideas for Newspaper Theatre, Boal suggests juxtaposing stories with history or other news for irony and humour (1998, 234). The experimental improv sections, planned as light relief, did actually bring the audience real stories (from local newspapers and the audience’s experience) and made them think about news from fresh angles. They spoke truth to power, as journalism is supposed to do (McQuail 2013, 112), specifically by satirising petty local politics and parodying a recognisable business mogul.

As “resistance to global capitalism” (Boal 1998, 37) the show was successful in that it challenged some hegemonies and prejudice. Neither was it “imprisoned inside theatrical buildings” (Boal 1998, 19) but took place in a converted community arts centre; a more public, possibly outdoor, space would be worth considering for a future event.

To sum up, we contend that the event did momentarily democratise an aesthetic space and encourage change with regard to certain social and political norms, due to the material selected, but more importantly with regard to journalism practice, challenging and changing the journalism process *itself* and therefore (a part of) society.

## Conclusion

Previous research on this subject has shown the potential of journalism that engages directly with its audience through live events and discussion with journalists afterwards. Audiences reported experiencing the stories in a “visceral way” (Tenenboim and Stroud 2020, 5), a “self-transcendent” experience which induced a sense of community (Ruotsalainen and Villi 2021, 169) and a making sense of news (Vodanovic 2022). With the events they analysed, however, they were either journalists performing their work without actors involved (Ruotsalainen and Villi 2021; Vodanovic 2022) or more conventional plays inspired by journalistic reporting (Tenenboim and Stroud 2020). In none of these cases have journalists and actors simultaneously performed new and previously unheard stories together allowing for more diverse forms of storytelling; nor were the researchers part of the *process* of the live event progressing, as performers developed their ways of storytelling and interacting with the public.

As a result, we believe the *News Cabaret* live journalism format has developed our *News on Stage* project in terms of showing how it is possible to 1. increase trust in journalists, 2. use theatre to build community and 3. inspire social action. While the news has always had “performers” (Westgate 2013, 996), we found that we could increase the drama and performance further to good effect, while retaining high standards of journalism and reaching new audiences. *News Cabaret* was “political” theatre due to the journalists’ choice of material and showed that the medium can allow lived experiences to challenge audiences. Its challenges were in finding the right mix of immersion and discussion and making it clear to the audience what was verbatim and what was created. There were limitations because

of the timing of this event: while it had originally been planned for a much bigger audience, the ongoing Covid restrictions meant that the health and safety regulations restricted us to 30 audience members, while the venue we had booked could have comfortably seated at least double if not more than this. This necessarily restricted audiences to those who (a) felt confident about taking part in a communal experience (b) were closer to the event venue. The other approach, however, to think about is whether there was more enthusiasm for this venture than perhaps there would be otherwise because of the desire by some to take part in live events again. However, subsequent events staged by the authors (Adams and Cooper 2025) suggest that enthusiasm for live journalism remains. There are also obvious problems with finding funding and resources, although live journalism in a few other countries already plays to sell-out audiences, such as *Black Box* in Finland.

We have pushed forward the concept of *live journalism* and developed the roles of audience and journalist (Ruotsalainen and Villi 2021; Vodanovic 2022), synthesising ideas used in *applied theatre* and discovering that this format can be creative without creating fiction. *News Cabaret* was not a triumph of “form over content” (Vodanovic 2022), neither was the event “a rehearsal for revolution” Prentki and Preston (2009, 131), but it acted, we believe, as a kind of public and democratic service, in that “*It’s also showing that journalism is universal and commonly owned, rather than the exclusive property of media groups and digital platforms*” (Pitcher 2021). In fact, a new journalistic format takes shape altogether in live journalism productions, as the producers of *Black Box* have found (Lyytinen 2020, 41).

Events like this, which can turn passive citizens into active ones, are needed more now than ever before due to society’s fragmentation, offering “collective activity” at a time of neo-liberal oppression (Prentki and Preston 2009, 364). This example of live journalism only succeeded in a small way in making “the familiar world of neoliberalism strange” (365), but it did try to treat audience as citizens not consumers in order to use theatre as a tool of “critical social analysis”, to show the value of play, creativity and imagination and encourage community-building (366-367). One audience member reflected: “*I think we take journalism for granted.*” Another commented on the event, “*I love thinking about things in a different way.*”

*News on Stage* could be developed in the future by furthering its “political” content and approach and exploring its power to instigate “a desire for change,” or at least increase critical public space and discourse. It might evolve with the support of a big sponsor or news brand; events could materialise at festivals or on the street as pop-up theatre, news slams or soapboxes in the public sphere or shows could be targeted to organised groups such as schools, colleges or trade unions.

In any case, if our experience with *News Cabaret* tells us anything, it is that this type of format can indeed allow journalism to reassert its authority through live performance (Larson 2015, 445) and increase discourse in a critical public space.

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