

## Experience, Aesthetics and News Practices in Live Journalism Events

Live Journalism events, yet to be explored within academia, bring together journalistic values, stories, and professionals with elements of theatre and spoken word performances in order to engage audiences in a physical gathering. This article discusses this emerging format in its experiential and aesthetic dimensions, while also analysing how it sits with other journalistic practices in aspects such as news selection, use of sources and critique. Using two case studies from the UK, the journalistic festival *Sunday Papers Live* and the monologue *No Direction Home: Refugee Woman*, it argues that live events could potentially foster a slower and more in depth engagement with news content, provide the audience with an opportunity to understand aspects of the production and funding of journalism and, in the case of the monologue studied, present a new form of working with sources. Thus, they contribute to a more varied journalistic ecology in which different forms of production, distribution, and consumption of journalism coexist and audiences engage with them at different paces.

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## Introduction

Since 2013, the Cecil Sharpe House in London has been the site for *Sunday Papers Live (SPL)* a couple of times per year, typically April and September; the event has also taken place off-site on some occasions, for both the Wilderness and Citadel Festivals. Following a festival format (with performers, talks, workshops, and food), it engages participants in a communal experience centred on the presentation and discussion of current affairs by a journalist or writer, very often themed around lifestyle topics such as veganism or the role that tourists can play in combating poaching when travelling through Africa. Each section is presented in an oversized living room by a speaker, performer or group, who act as ringmasters for about fifteen to forty minutes. The British journalist Jon Snow, a regular speaker at the event, describes it like this: “No holds barred, lively, engaging, provoking - *Sunday Papers Live* is everything that alas most actual Sunday papers are not!...” (Sunday Papers Live, 2019).

*SPL* is not unique in trying to reengage audiences with current affairs, news, politics, and cultural issues through a live event. In London alone, there are a plethora of events akin to this, such as *Letters Live*, regularly held at the Union Chapel in Islington, and some of the activities facilitated by *The People Speak*, an organization that has also come, on some occasions, to moderate debates at *SPL*. Within the stricter realm of journalism, there is the *Financial Times Live* at the end of the summer, with on-stage interviews, presentations and panel debates, some with an entrepreneurial and business friendly leaning but very much following the same festival format embraced by *SPL*. For 2019, the *FT* expanded its live offering with a spring event inspired by the French *Live Magazine* founded by Florence Martin-Kessler in Paris, which stages journalists delivering stories in a theatrical premiere. Other examples include *The Guardian*, which hosts regular events for its members in the space adjacent to its headquarters in London, with topics as varied as ‘Preston: How to Fix a City’, about some form of guerilla localism, or ‘Brit (ish)’, about ideas of race, class, and nation. Or *Stylist Live*, an annual event during which the magazine packs three days full of interviews, talks, comedy, food, beauty, and fashion in London. With a very different tone and a more pressing subject, Camden People’s Theatre recently ran a season of the play *No Direction Home: Refugee Woman (NDH)*, a spoken

performance based on real events related to the portrayal of working class women in the media and budget cuts to domestic violence support services. The play was followed by a Q&A with local journalists who contributed to the research of the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, one of the partners that supported the staging of this event. In the U.S., the shows of *Pop-Up Magazine*, originally from San Francisco, sell out in minutes. According to Rose Evelev (2015) in a *Nieman Storyboard* dedicated to journalism live events, this is explained by the fact that people crave to have physical experiences and connect with others in real life, at a time in which our engagement with virtual communities has been expanded.

These examples, amongst many other live events in journalism, an emerging field that is yet to be substantially explored in academic research, share various elements of what James Gilmore and Joseph Pine (1998, 2011) influentially termed “the experience economy”, a fourth economic sector different from the third one that has been traditionally concerned with the production of services instead of end products. In this fourth area, experiences become props that engage individuals not just through entertainment, but rather “connecting them in a personal, memorable way” (Gilmore and Pine, 2011, p. 5). Value is, precisely, measured as the level of engagement that experiences produce.

This article firstly discusses the type of engagement these events can provide through the presentation of live and spoken word journalism; the modality of that engagement is also explored with regard to its aesthetic proposition and the content being produced. Secondly, it interrogates how this format of delivery sits with other journalistic practices and roles, in aspects such as news selection and use of sources. Lastly, it asks if live journalism has the potential to expand those traditional roles and practices, in terms of participation and critique.

There is an evident and very important commercial dimension to some of these events: for instance, in the UK, both *Stylist Live* and *FT Live* are joint enterprises

between the commercial and the editorial departments of those organisations and the spaces where the events take place are heavily branded, structured like a series of stalls or booths from different companies promoting their products. However, different journalistic live experiences have different business models, and some make substantial profits while others barely break even (Eveleth, 2015). Therefore, the focus here would be the experiential rather the financial. For this reason, I have explored in depth the two case studies in the UK that emphasise the spoken word elements more clearly and that are not primarily structured as a shopping experience, even though they are, to some degree, transactional: the audience needs to buy tickets to attend, drinks are sold in the venues that host them, there are some forms of sponsorship or associations with companies. Those two events are the festival *SPL* and the play *NDH*.

## Literature Review

### *Experience, aesthetics, and place*

Framed in the often-called ‘spatial turn’ in art, humanities and critical theory, Peters’ work (2012, 2015) has interrogated the spaces where we consume journalism: “The point is simply that the spaces of news consumption matter, and matter significantly, for how audiences experience journalism”... “News consumption is not just something we do, it is something *we do in a particular place*” (2012, p. 697). This matters ontologically, he continues, as it interrogates how we view ourselves as citizens participating in public life; epistemologically, in the immediate sense of how we come to know about news and events, and how that process shapes our understanding of them; and phenomenologically, as it has implications for how people experience and feel about the news and, therefore, how do they feel about journalism in general (Peters, 2012, p. 698). “[This] means first understanding how, where, and through what means people actually engage” (Peters, 2012, p. 698). Yet this is not a one-way process: the consumption of news and other products in physical and virtual spaces also gives meaning and form to those spaces.

The author’s concept of “journalism to-go” (Peters, 2012) is concerned with the

mobile consumption of journalism, and with how contemporary audiences consume it at a faster pace and through more multiple and convenient channels than ever before. This “journalism to go” therefore resonates with Sheller’s notion of “news now” (2015): active, live, immersive, pervasive and constantly updating, like an accentuated version of the 24-hour news cycle. Sheller (2015) discusses this idea of “news now” as the merging together of the event or news occurrence and the news about that event, breaking the traditional timing in which reporting of an event comes after the event itself. In this argument, the event *is* the news or at least where news is “performed” (Sheller, 2015, p. 20), a matter not just of news distribution but also of the shape of the content being distributed and the social space that is created through it (Sheller, 2015, p. 19-20).

Given that Peters (2012) and Sheller (2015) discuss the context of mobile, digital news consumption aided by the use of tablets and social media, to some extent their arguments stand at the opposite of live journalism in which audiences are invited to physically come to a place and engage with an event in a fairly set and immovable way. Yet the authors’ invitation to interrogate *where* journalism is consumed remains essential here, as this article also aims to unpack how space both affects audience engagement and is shaped by it. For instance, in a panel about live journalism during a recent version of International Journalism Festival (2017), speakers Florence Martin-Kessler from *Live Magazine* and Jakob Moll from *Zetland* gave detailed arguments about very specific decisions to do with where these events are hosted, audience capacity, break off spaces that would favour or not interaction, use of technology, recordings or lack of them, music, illumination, length of interventions, etcetera, and how those decisions have implications for the type of engagement that these events generate. Additionally, given that news, talks and other forms of storytelling are delivered in a stage or room, it could be argued that the performance of the story is the story itself, as in Sheller’s argument. In this context, performance is understood as an event that unfolds between actors/journalists and spectators who are bodily present and physically close to each other.

This engagement of the audience in a physical space is also discussed by Pine and Gilmore (1998) when they refer to participation within the experience economy: this is a spectrum that goes from the passive or observational form of participation of the symphony goer to the active role of a participant in the performance that creates a particular event. Something similar happens in live journalism events, where attendees might pose questions, be called up to the stage or, in the case of *SPL*, engage in the guided, conversational walks around Primrose Hill park, close to its regular venue. Or they might listen to the talks in a much more passive way. Yet according to the authors, participation is not defined just by these traditional forms of engagement: simply by being there spectators contribute to the production of events, helping to create the “visual and aural event that others experience” (Pine and Gilmore, 1998, p. 101), despite their sometimes limited participation in real terms. In the case of *SPL*, this form of production helps to constitute the physical space as a civic arena and terrain for debate, whereas *NDH* relies on a more traditional theatrical setting.

Pine and Gilmore (2011) also establish different realms for events in the experience economy: aesthetic, escapist, educational and entertainment. They acknowledge that organizers or companies can “enhance the realness of any experience by blurring the boundaries between realms” (Pine and Gilmore, 2011, p. 56) and, indeed, that the “richest experiences encompass aspects of all four realms” (Pine and Gilmore, 2011, p. 58). Events such as *SPL* or *NDH* have elements of all (the ‘escapist’ arguably less so) yet are brought together by the aesthetic dimension. In the former, the aesthetic dimension is structured around the festival experience themed as a journalistic space, with added period demonstrations, drink, food, games, and crafts. In the latter, the traditional setting and format of a theatrical play is used to tell the real story of a woman who has spent years moving through various refuges in different parts of the country, delivered as a monologue written and performed by the victim of domestic violence herself. According to the authors, in the aesthetic realm the audience is immersed in the event or environment but have little or no effect on it, as indeed happens in these two events: “While guests partaking of an educational experience may want to *learn*, of an escapist experience want to *go* and *do*, of an entertainment

experience want to *enjoy*, those partaking of an aesthetic just want to *be*” (Pine and Gilmore, 2011, p. 53).

This form of aesthetic engagement could then be understood as the suggestion of a particular sensibility to the audience, who is partaking in and also creating the event. As Alfredo Cramerotti (2009, p. 21) argues in *Aesthetic Journalism: How to Inform Without Informing*, aesthetics could be regarded “as the capacity of an art form to put our sensibility in motion, and convert what we feel about nature and the human race into a (visual, oral, bodily) experience”, in this case, the designed experience of a live event. Also emphasising the connection between experience and aesthetics, John Dewey (1980) has famously argued that all art is experiential: ‘experience’, as a notion and a preoccupation for philosophy, occurs continuously given the interaction of living creatures with their environment yet “*an experience*” is always composed, produced, created (Dewey, 1980, p. 36), like artworks. “Such an experience is a whole and carries with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency. It is *an experience*” (Dewey, 1980, p. 37). These individual experiences have a beginning and an end, and so are made of histories, plots, situations, episodes (Dewey, 1980, p. 37), as designed events also are.

### *A slow engagement*

The question of audience engagement, crucial in an experiential economy as described above, also dominates discussions in journalism. How to capture and keep audiences in the context of mobile, digital and platform-based journalism is a central concern for both academic research and news organisations in the field. Engagement of audiences can be approached in a variety of ways, from exposure to interactivity, consumption to dissemination (Ksiazek *et al.*, 2014, p. 504). Audience engagement has also been cited as a key dimension of the “journalism innovation wheel” developed by Posetti (2018): the author argues that, to deliver innovation sustainably, journalism industries need to move away from the “shiny things syndrome” (Posetti, 2018, p. 15), which encourages the adoption of any new technological tool or trend available. Instead, they should move to a model that sees innovation as a multifaceted issue including storytelling, business, leadership and management, audience

engagement, distribution, technology, and organisation.

Similarly, in a recent opinion article for *The Guardian*, Emily Bell (2019) highlights news avoidance as the crucial hurdle for contemporary journalism's capacity to engage audiences, a trend backed up by the findings of the annual digital news from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (Newman, 2019). Bell (2019) cites several examples of what she calls "outreach journalism" as the potential antidote to this problem, from The Huffington Post U.S. tours to the events and festivals held by *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic Magazine*, which are all live journalism events. She also includes the news startup *Tortoise* in this list, a company based on a membership model (it doesn't take money from advertisers) that delivers a form of slow journalism: no breaking news, no press conferences and an in depth look into a small selection of news stories. In its drive to widen its audience, *Tortoise* has now embarked on a series of live events through partner organizations such as schools and community centers.

The former does not appear to be an unusual combination, as it could be argued that the values and practices of at least a portion of live journalism events align themselves to those of "slow journalism" (Greenberg, 2007, 2012, 2016; Le Masurier, 2015; Craig, 2016), given that they privilege making sense of news instead of breaking it and emphasize reflection instead of instantaneous consumption: "slow journalism can be useful in making sense of a public life that is characterized by growing informational and conceptual complexity" (Craig, 2016, p. 463). Even though slow journalism has been primarily defined as a form of storytelling that equally values the discovery of facts and the narrative techniques, therefore coming closer, as a genre, to a form of creative non-fiction, authors such as Greenberg (2012) have also stressed other traits: one is the fact that the audience is kept informed about where and how the information is gathered and that the reader/audience spends more time on the consumption and enjoyment of stories. As Le Masurier (2015, p. 142) puts it, slow journalism "would lay bare the way stories are reported, by, for example, crediting all sources, being clear about what is original journalism and what is



reproduced PR copy, being clear about how information is obtained...”.

Another quality that has been highlighted about slow journalism is that it can open up a space for critique within the field as it is disentangled from demands of speed and instantaneity and therefore is not driven by ‘scoops’ (Craig, 2016; Le Masurier, 2015). Craig (2016), for instance, argues that this critical, reflective role could only be performed by journalism when it takes a distance. In those moments journalism is “both deeply implicated in the production and rhythms of the culture in which it operates while also fundamentally and importantly distanced or ‘estranged’ from such culture, always calling it to account” (Craig, 2016, p. 466). Even though instant delivery of news gives some advantage to news outlets, it can “sacrifice critique”. “Critique has value because it can undermine or strengthen the validity of information and contentions, and it can also generate new understandings” (Craig, 2016, p. 469). Le Masurier (2015) also writes about disentangling journalism from the news of the day or at least from “breaking news”, so that the “new” becomes a fresh, informed, reflective approach to events that might even include “the old”. Referring to the work of van Zoonen (1998), the author stresses the social role of journalism in terms of making sense of reality, particularly with regards to consumer affairs and private matters.

## Methods

The research was conducted through observational ethnographic work on site during three editions of *SPL*, which allowed me to experience the events and also observe and interact with the audience. I also attended two dates of the play in *Camden People’s Theatre* (London) and the Q&A with journalists that followed one of those performances, to have a similar experience. In traditional literature about ethnography, this would be considered a form of “moderate participation” (Spradley, 1980). This approach seemed appropriate given that the aim was to emphasise the experiential engagement with news content, rather than other forms of participation and/or interactivity that have been explored by various authors focused on on-line forms of sharing and discussing news (i.e. Ksiazek *et al.*, 2014; Broersma *et al.*, 2017, 2018). Also, the content of both events can only be accessed at the site where they

take place, as they intentionally have a very limited digital presence. To this extent, this research follows the argument of Chris Peters (2012, 2015) mentioned above, about the importance of paying attention to *where* news is consumed—consumption as something that we do in a particular space, either physical or virtual—to understand certain aspects of audience engagement and also, it could be added, news provision.

I also conducted three semi-structured interviews to have the view of professionals putting together these events: two individual interviews with the journalists of the *Bureau of Investigative Journalism* who were directly involved in the production and support of the play *NDH*. Through its *Bureau Local* arm, the organisation operates a network of local journalists reporting issues such as domestic violence, which forms the basis of the play in addition to the performer's own experience of it. The other conversation was with Ben DeVere—founder, organizer, and curator of *SPL*—, on the basis that his event is not affiliated to any particular news organization (even though has collaborated in specific events and limited ways with *The Economist* and *The New Statesman*) and therefore uses journalism as a vehicle or tool to bring people together and invites them to share a festival experience. All these were stand-alone interviews, carried out after the participation in and observation of the events, and were preceded by informal or unstructured interviewing during the events.

## Analysis

### *SPL*

The main venue of *SPL* is intentionally made to look like a giant living room, with mostly vintage, cosy furniture and some props—just “thrown together” says DeVere (2019)—that the organizers rent from the National Theatre. “This is a celebration of what you would do on a Sunday, as a non-religious person... You stayed at home, hang around the house, read the newspapers, eat a roasted dinner, go for a walk”, he describes (DeVere, 2019), a setting emulated through rugs, pillows, vases and framed pictures that try to recreate the Sunday feeling that you could “stay in your pyjamas” (DeVere, 2019). This is a very specific version of a Sunday, which would not apply to retail and hospitality staff working on weekends, doctors or nurses on duty and other professionals, or even teachers or office workers doing emails and extra work outside their regular hours. A vintage journalistic aesthetic is layered on top of this dreamed

Sunday imaginary, as both the website and the information given to attendees of the event—including a printed copy of a mock newspaper that is distributed at the reception—are designed to look like an old gazette. The company’s website also exhibits illustrations of old radio microphones and gramophones and is organized around sections such as ‘front page’ or ‘letter from the editor’. In the words of Fourth & Main, a lifestyle company that once had a now closed clothing store in Soho, the overall space and event present themselves like this:

...part carefully curated round-table, part village jamboree, the organisers have brought the Sunday papers to life in a full-day fiesta with all the trimmings. If one could bottle the essence of an apple orchard groaning with fruit on a balmy summer's day, then you would come pretty close to understand what they have managed to create here (Sunday Papers Live, 2019).

The event follows a miscellaneous or magazine format, with presentations by journalists grouped in themes that, broadly speaking, mirror the different sections of a regular newspaper: ‘news’, ‘culture’, ‘sport’, ‘style’, ‘business’, ‘dating’, ‘food and drink’, ‘gardening’ and others. There is a strong leaning towards lifestyle topics, plus others like ‘columnist’ or ‘crosswords’; these sections are retained from one edition to the next but can also change slightly. A series of successive acts that strike different tones and atmospheres gives a circus flavour to the event, the result of DeVere’s idea of having some form of ‘Live Magazines’ like he used to see in old TV shows. He argues that this style also expresses a desire to go back or emphasise the oral elements of journalism, the time when news was called out or proclaimed rather than read or watched on TV. In editorial terms, *SPL*’s website states that its policy is “proudly left of centre” (Sunday Papers Live, 2019).

In the words of DeVere, the sensibility of *SPL* is to do with “that festival feeling, the sense of inspiration, optimism, and possibility” (DeVere, 2019) that, for him, only live debates could provide. “There was this digital utopia that everyone will be engaged in a conversation and that the Internet will create this era of dialogue, and that has clearly not happened”, he argues (DeVere, 2019). “Live events are a space

where people can actually have a debate; you are not going to troll someone in a room with other 500 people. People will think that you are an idiot” (DeVere, 2019).

DeVere (2019) uses terms such as creating a “space’ or a “concept” and then “filling it” with “content”, alluding to the experiential elements of *SPL*.

As the programme of *SPL* is only announced a few days before the event takes place, sometimes months after the tickets have been sold out, it could be argued that attendees seek to participate in that space and experience created, rather than to hear about certain topics or from specific speakers. Therefore, they partake in the aesthetic experience more than anything else, that ‘being there’ discussed in the previous section. On site observations confirm the images posted in *SPL*’s website: attendees lay down over cushions, bring their own blankets and take their shoes off, come in and out in the middle of talks to get food, play board games and drink wine in the communal tables downstairs, from which it is not possible to listen to what is happening in the main scenario above.

As happens with many live journalism events, *SPL* has a small online presence but has intentionally decided not to populate its website with content, recordings or live streams –“noise” as DeVere (2019) describes it—, except for a handful of podcasts with past talks in the website. This emphasises the aim of engaging participants in a physical experience, where they might encounter content that otherwise would not seek; DeVere argues, for instance, that he prefers to invite recognizable journalists (mostly from print) but not “big names” to discourage attendees to come for a single talk and then leave (2019). Editorially, he states that he would not shy away from controversy –and some of the discussions are about topics openly political such as workers rights in the gig economy or the gender pay gap—yet would “not have Nigel Farage” (DeVere, 2019), arguing that he does not have the same responsibilities and constraints as legacy media, and is happy to show his own opinion: “I am not the BBC”.

In addition to the particular engagement of the spoken word format, *SPL* provides space for fairly long discussions of topics and debate, even if audience interaction and time left for questions is limited. For instance, the environmental journalist Louise Gray, author of *The Ethical Carnivore: My Year of Killing to Eat* (2016), was a speaker in one of the editions attended, where she talked extensively about her book and the research that went into it. This took place a long time after the actual publication of it. In this case, the talk is not about a new event as such or the novelty of her argument, as that information had already appeared in newspapers such as *The Guardian* months before and had already received reviews (i. e. Poole, 2016; Anthony, 2016). It is, rather, a more in depth discussion into aspects of research within journalism and perhaps a rare instance to reflect on and critique her work, things that went wrong and aspects of it that are still open questions, something that was also observed in other talks where columnists explicitly discuss how they have changed their minds about something or were proved wrong. In the same edition, a trio of freelance travel writers talked at length about how they finance their work, an opportunity for the audience to get a glimpse of the production and funding of journalism. To some extent, these conversations are the opposite of the dominant instantaneous news culture, where events and topics are disseminated quickly, at a time in which, as Craig (2016) has observed, might be desirable for journalism to move at different paces. In this case, the question about the space where journalism is consumed is also affecting the time and length of its reception, a noteworthy development within a field that it is determined by issues of temporality (Bødker and Sonnevend, 2017) and closely aligned to social constructions of time (Carlson and Lewis, 2018).

This slower pace is evident in many of the topics programmed by *SPL*, which very often have an emphasis on how very individual consumer choices—where we get our food from, how we travel, what services we use—connect with wider societal issues. For instance, a talk labelled ‘gardening’ in one of the observed editions had nothing of the usual tips and advice that are often found in similar sections in mainstream newspapers, very often under the umbrella of “lifestyle journalism” (Hanusch, 2014; Vodanovic, 2019). Instead, it was a reflection of what it means to belong to an

ecosystem, about love, work and how do we use our skills and gifts. This talk also included an implicit critique of how climate change is received and rarely acted upon by audiences when they encounter the subject through mainstream media.

This reflective aspect also includes several talks about the journalism industry. In one of the 2018 editions, for instance, the former editor-in-chief of *The Guardian* Alan Rusbridger held a conversation with journalist and broadcaster Hannah MacInnes, which provided some insights into the production of journalism and also space to discuss the future, potentials, and threats to the field. The regular section ‘World News’ is very often devoted to discussing journalism itself and might include speakers whose work sits in different genres. An example of this is a panel in which journalists and columnists Matthew d’Ancona and David Aaranovitch talked about the war on truth with the performer, playwright and campaigner Matilda Wnek, mixing opinion, information, and entertainment.

#### *NDH*

A critique of the production and reach of journalism is much more explicitly addressed in *NDH*, a monologue written and performed by Cash Carraway. Over the course of 16 years, Carraway moved through various refuges in different parts of England, witnessing events such as the suicide of a close friend, the collapse of the ceiling of a refuge in West London and numerous performances of *The Vagina Monologues*, which, according to the performer, seems to be favored by refuge managers as a form of political theatre that speaks of sexual consent, body image, gender and other topics that might be of interest for women staying in their shelters. *NDH*, full of both dark humor and very emotive passages, is inspired by Carraway’s own life experiences as a survivor of domestic violence and a mother trying to break free from its vicious cycle alongside her young daughter. Following an episodic structure based on the different refuges that housed Carraway, the play is narrated through flashbacks that give some details about her previous life with an abusive partner, alongside issues of child abuse, substance dependency, mental health, poor social housing, and others, some of which were part of Carraway’s life before she met

him. It also alludes to the false sense of security, achievement, and success that could come with the sudden access to some of the traditional markers of British middle class life, something that Carraway has also experienced: Boden clothes, a Rangemaster oven, Farrow and Ball paint, Le Creuset pans. Even though these flashbacks provide some glimpses of the type of relationship Carraway had with her boyfriend, the play's main focus is something different: it offers a window to the protagonist's sense of self, aspirations, desires, and politics, of her whole identity as a woman, beyond her experiences of domestic violence. In doing so, it portrays her as a multidimensional, complex, articulate, and empowered subject that could not be solely defined as a victim.

*NDH* is also a strong critique of the media representation of working class women and government cuts to support services. It makes comedy out of the formulaic ways in which women are sometimes spoken about and featured in broadcasting news, even in the case of well-regarded organizations like the BBC. The play is very explicit in its criticism of how mainstream news portrays women fleeing domestic and sexual violence, talking directly about how journalists are often only interested in the private stories of abuse and coercion rather than on the wider social and political context that determines victims' experiences. For instance, it offers the example of the collapse of a roof in a London refuge located in Kensington and Chelsea, one of the richest boroughs of the country: when journalists came with cameras to report on the event, Carraway says that she wanted to talk about government cuts to social services during the UK coalition government of 2010 – 2015, but they insisted on asking about the graphic details of her history as a victim of domestic violence. When she wanted to talk about refuges closing down or being in a poor state of maintenance during the austerity years, journalists wanted to get quotes about the abusive relationships that have led women to seek shelter in those places. Overall, the play suggests that this narrow journalistic approach denies any agency to those survivors and silence them as political subjects.

As Berkowitz (2009, p. 109) has argued, women and minorities have traditionally had limited opportunities to shape the meaning of news and to be active participants in the dynamics of representation. In contrast, *NDH* provides a direct “platform”

(McClenaghan, 2019) for Cash Carraway, who is the source of the story, to shape the meaning is what is being told in a performance; she is the news and also the event or occurrence. “I saw she had her own story to tell and a powerful voice that could –and should—carry her story alone”, states Maeve McClenaghan (2019), a journalist from *The Bureau of Investigative Journalism* who met Carraway while reporting on the closing down of women refuges. In her words, *NDH* merges journalism and theatre to reach new audiences and allows Carraway to tell the story in her own way (McClenaghan, 2018).

After some of the shows, McClenaghan curated and chaired a talk in which different actors of the news story (local journalists, refuge managers, charity workers) gave their views and stories and answer questions from the audience, both talking about the situation of refuges and victims of domestic violence in the country and about the opportunities and limitations of bringing these stories to mainstream news. As with *SPL*, this offers the public an opportunity to understand the wider ecologies and challenges of journalism, particularly concerning funding. Local journalists explained, for instance, some of the financial cuts that are affecting their work, and how a significant portion of the local news offering is not actual local news but pre-packed material coming from press officers and agencies, what Nick Davies has famously called “flat earth news” (2009). The audience could also hear directly from a shelter’s manager about how is it to run an underfunded refuge.

The collaboration between local journalists, the *Bureau of Investigative Journalism* and Carraway came about when *Bureau Local* was working with journalists and citizens across England to produce stories based on data about funding cuts for refuges and women and children being turned away from them. As part of a series of stories about different aspects of this crisis, in 2017 it had reported that funding for refuge centres had been cut by 24% since 2010 and that more than 1,000 vulnerable women and children have been turned away from refuges in just six months (The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, 2017). According to Megan Lucero (2019), Director of *Bureau Local*, this way of working allows participation of all players –the public, the victims—, which is necessary for accountability, for redefining the power structures within journalism and for reimagining its function in interdependence with other roles within civil society. “We were looking at the information but also telling it



from the perspective of those who are suffering”... “[The fact that] the journalist is the conduit, the storyteller, and has the power over the narrative, the sources, the subject and then distributes that... We are trying to figure out how to change that power dynamic” (Lucero, 2019).

## Discussion and conclusion

Unlike digital live news delivery, which tends to focus on breaking news or at least a constant updating of news (Thurman and Walters, 2012; Thorsen, 2013), the live events studied fostered a slower engagement with news stories. In doing so they might allow for spaces of reflection and critique to both journalists and readers/viewers, while also providing the audience with an opportunity to understand different aspects of the production and funding of journalism, some of the challenges that the industry faces and to encounter news that they might otherwise not necessarily choose. It is a very fairly passive form of engagement though, as the events studied do not necessarily constitute any significant realignment between journalists and the public, as journalism produced through social media can sometimes foster (Hermida, 2012). The interaction with the audience is limited to some questions and therefore the latter is not part of the newsgathering process.

The case study of *NDH* reflects a new way of working with sources, with the potential to be expanded to other forms of journalism. This appears to be particularly important, as it is one of the essential aspects of both the practice of working journalists and academic research in the field. Sources not just inform but also “ascribe meaning to the events of the world” (Franklin and Carson, 2010, p. 9). In the case of the play, these questions do not refer to traditional issues such as the reliance on elite agents (Carlson and Lewis, 2018), the privileged relationships between the media and government officials (Berkowitz and Beach, 1993) or how the use of authoritative sources –often male, and often white— tends to confirm power structures within society (Manning, 2001). Rather, the play presents an interrogation about the intimate dynamics between journalists and sources, about who is allowed to have a voice within this interdependence, about who can tell the story better and about

how the audience would respond to the unfiltered voice of the source. As Broersma *et al.* have argued (2013, p. 388), while “sources decide *what* could be published, journalists eventually determine what *will* be published and who *will* get a voice in the news”. The authors have described news as “a display of courtship between journalists and sources (Broersma *et al.*, 2013, p. 388), referring to the constant readjustment of power dynamics between them and to the fact that, without the support of a source, a story is generally cancelled. *NDH* goes further than this as it also allows its source to participate and even to take a leading role in both the representation of the story and in the creative process of making that story into an aesthetic form. The source decides not just the ‘what’ but also the ‘how’. As a result, the source is also involved in the creation of an aesthetic experience and the sensibilities that would be triggered by it.

The case of *SPL* is significantly different concerning this, as most of the speakers in the different sections are journalists. On those occasions the journalist becomes the source of a story his or her has already reported on, almost adopting the role of a correspondent on a live broadcasting news piece. If present, the original voice of the source is abolished and so the power shifts to the side of the journalist, who is in control of the narrative and might merge the voices of various sources in a single narrative or argument. Despite the potential to reflect on something about their work as journalists, very often the talks are set up in a way that provides speakers with opportunities “‘to get the last word’ about what ‘really’ happened and why” (Kroon Lundell and Ekström, 2013, p. 518)

Both of the spoken word events studied constitute a challenge to the traditional ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ news division (Tuchman, 1978), and particularly to the argument that the former lack a sense of urgency and have no social importance. Even though these divisions have been conceptualised in different ways, broadly speaking it is assumed that ‘hard news’ are “factual” and “newsworthy (Tuchman, 1978, p. 113), “serious” and “important” (Bender *et al.* 2009, 133), political and economical (Lehman-Wilzig and Seletzky, 2010) and of public interest (Baum, 2003). ‘Soft news’, on the contrary, are often described as “human interest stories” (van Zoonen, 1998) that entertain and evoke emotions in the audience (Bender *et al.* 2009, p. 134) and, generally, devoted to

topics such as food, fashion, travel, and others. Researcher Louise North (2016, p. 357 – 358) has also emphasised that ‘hard news’ is often given “male” qualities, whereas ‘soft news’ is given “female” connotations. As *SPL* does not rely on headlines to stress the importance of certain news over others, there is no hierarchy of topics or journalism areas. A talk about Brexit could take the same length as another one about a journalist doing a motorcycle trip around the world; a topic like intensive farming is approached with the same sense of urgency and relevance than one about business, poetry or self-publishing. In *NDH*, a personal and domestic experience is put explicitly in the context of wider social and political issues, breaking the distinction between the personal essay and factual news. They would correspond to Kristensen and From (2012, 2015) have argued in their body of work about the blurring of boundaries between lifestyle journalism, consumer journalism and cultural journalism (and, indeed, *SPL* privileges cultural topics and *NDH* uses a traditional theatrical format, the monologue, to tell a story). To this extent, both events confirm Graber’s (2003) argument about how the expectation that informed citizens would receive all political information in a hard news setting is neither sustainable nor productive, and Zaller’s proposition that dramatic and entertaining environments could engage audiences more readily.

Moreover, they both suggest that journalism can break the distinction between political content and other forms of content, in the context of an increasingly complex and problematic everyday life. As Eide and Knight (1999) have argued in their paradigmatic text about “service journalism”, the everyday has become a political space, which demands individual and collective forms of response to the issues presented. As emerging forms of political discourse and practice move away from traditional democratic institutions, media and journalism can operate in that space where “everyday life and its relationship to the political and economic systems are problematized, criticized and contested” (Eide and Knight, 1999, p. 545). While there are questions of reach and access yet to be explored, overall this research shows encouraging signs of the function and roles that live journalism events could play within a wider ecology of different forms of journalism production, distribution, and consumption.

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