

# The power of Pop-Up Magazine's live journalism

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**ON A NOVEMBER NIGHT LAST YEAR,** a group of journalists and artists gathered around a conference table backstage at the Davies Symphony Hall in San Francisco to toast their shared contribution to Pop-Up Magazine, which was scheduled to go live in half an hour. Not in the way that a digital magazine goes live, but in the most literal sense of the word: Live onstage, in front of an audience.

Senior editor Pat Walters thanked everyone for their hard work and sent around a bottle of Bulleit bourbon, which passed through the hands of over 20 contributors, including several print and radio reporters, documentary filmmakers, photographers, and a group of musicians.

As a so-called “live magazine,” Pop-Up presents nonfiction stories narrated onstage. Long features follow shorter, front-of-book style pieces, all of which are organized into familiar categories such as op-ed, sports, and education. Before they're performed, the stories' titles and bylines are projected onto a screen.

Kiera Butler, senior editor of *Mother Jones*, had shaky hands and sweaty palms as she took the stage that night. Standing in front of a sold-out crowd of nearly 3,000, Butler told a story based on research for her just-published book about 4-H and American farming. Her Pop-Up piece profiled a young woman who puts herself through college by herding sheep. Butler's narration was accompanied by sound

clips of the girl in her barn, recorded by radio journalist Ike Sriskandarajah, and projected illustrations of sheep and shepherdesses by artist Evah Fan.

*Are these live performances journalism? The answer varies.*

Butler, who's used to working in solitude by the light of a computer screen, couldn't see beyond the bright blur of the stage lights, but the noise from the audience echoed up to her. Sometimes she heard laughter, sometimes sympathetic *aaawwws*, and sometimes she was surprised by which paragraphs really resonated with the audience. It felt like a supportive crowd, and Butler's nervousness started to evaporate as the laughs multiplied.

Since it was founded in 2009, Pop-Up has been a huge success. Its shows routinely sell out, usually in under 30 minutes. In 2014, it spawned a monthly print publication, *The California Sunday Magazine*, and although Pop-Up started out as an informal experiment with no growth plan, both it and the print magazine are now part of a for-profit company. "Pop-Up more than supports itself," says senior editor Walters, its only full-time employee, who won't discuss numbers.

As news media experiment with new digital content and platforms in attempts to build audience engagement around their brands and products, journalistic live shows such as Pop-Up offer a different lesson, one that seemingly has real potential. This expanding genre, which might be called "performed journalism," uses the old and decidedly non-digital methods of the theater to draw people in. In some ways, these live shows fill the newspaper's historic role as a focal point for its community, a role that has faded as information sources have grown more diffuse.

When French political thinker Alexis de Tocqueville travelled to the United States in the 1830s, he was deeply impressed by how American society organized itself into voluntary communities. At a time when some 900 different printed papers made America the greatest newspaper country in the world, Tocqueville found that newspapers shaped communities by enabling collective thought and action.

"Newspapers make associations, and associations make newspapers," he wrote

in *Democracy in America*. The paper was a tangible artifact that tied people together in a community of ideas and knowledge, and through the consumption of one coherent package of information, those who read the same paper knew the same information to be important.

While the press landscape started changing shortly after Tocqueville's visit, similar feelings of solidarity and community lingered around some newspapers. Cornell University professor emeritus Benedict Anderson has called newspaper consumption an "extraordinary mass ceremony" and noted that the German philosopher Hegel likened the newspaper to morning prayer. Although the ritual of reading the news is performed in privacy, each reader is well aware of the numerous others out there, and is reminded of their existence in daily encounters around the neighborhood.

Today, journalism's role has radically changed. Information is scattered across digital platforms, where two people rarely read the same compilation of stories every day, and readers no longer feel as loyal to a particular news organization as they once did. The internet is not the only culprit. Newspapers started losing their ability to tie together communities when the commercialized, mainstream press began producing disengaged news, rather than the opinionated and discussion-based coverage of Tocqueville's time.

Hybrids of journalism and theater fall into an expanding field of highly popular initiatives that stage non-fiction stories in engaging live performances, from *The Moth*—a stage show and podcast made up of personal stories told live onstage—to the conference series TED or the Aspen Ideas Festival. While *Pop-Up* is the only US-based live show of its kind, public radio shows and podcasts *This American Life* and *Radiolab* have produced successful, large-scale live shows with theatrical elements for years. In Europe, a Paris-based stage show, *Live Magazine*, and a similar show produced by Danish publisher of digital longform stories, *Zetland*, were both inspired by *Pop-Up Magazine* and have proved highly successful.



*Next act* Radiolab producers say they have found a new form of storytelling in their live shows. (Matthew Septimus / Courtesy of Radiolab)

There's money in at least some of these variants. Events ranging from conferences to roundtable discussions and interviews take the bottom edge off the black-hole budgets of many legacy publications, and have been heralded as potential saviors within the industry for years. *The Atlantic's* event series reportedly made up almost one-fifth of the brand's total revenue as of last summer, and around 25 percent of *The Texas Tribune's* revenue comes from its festival, while *The New York Times* is expanding its lineup of staged interviews and talks. But these live events differ in important ways from the ambitious stage productions favored by Pop-Up, *Radiolab*, and *This American Life*.

Are these live performances journalism? In this experimental genre, the answer varies. For *Radiolab* and Pop-Up, the editorial process behind the shows resembles that of traditional journalistic platforms. Stories are researched, factchecked, and edited by professional journalists, editors, or producers. But other outlets are adapting journalism for the stage, and sometimes altering facts in the process. Last

year, *The Guardian UK* collaborated with the British Royal Court Theatre to produce six filmed theatrical plays based on conversations between journalists, playwrights, and directors. The three- to 10-minute microplays are fictions adapted from fact. Yet on its website, *The Guardian* treats them like journalism, embedding links to the plays at the top of articles on related topics. “To us, they are as much a response to issues as journalists writing a feature,” says Chris Wiegand, the stage editor of *The Guardian*, who coordinated the project.



*Open house* Last year, journalists from *The Guardian* teamed up with directors and playwrights from the Royal Court Theatre to produce theatrical short films on contemporary issues. (Anne Gry Skovdal / Courtesy of *The Guardian*)

In June last year, *This American Life* staged its biggest live event ever at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. The editorial processes for the radio shows and their live counterparts are usually the same, but this time stories that had already aired on the radio became operas and musicals, and for the sake of adaptation, were changed

slightly. “Probably 70 to 80 percent of what you’re about to hear is verbatim quotes from interviews, the rest is artistic invention,” host Ira Glass said onstage while introducing one of the stories.

Audiences are drawn to performed journalism because it is informative, entertaining, and emotionally engaging. At Pop-Up, for instance, the audience becomes a very real part of the magazine. Attendees and contributors have the opportunity to discuss the night’s show in person at an after-party, which was a highlight for Butler of *Mother Jones*, who usually receives online reader feedback through comments that are often anonymous and sometimes insulting.

Pop-Up founder Douglas McGray calls the live magazine “social media.” With a bit of creative thinking, that same expression could be used to describe Hegel’s newspaper.

Community development has been a big part of McGray’s mission since 2009, when he realized that journalists in different media live in parallel worlds. He founded Pop-Up to promote collaboration between writers, photographers, and audio journalists. Since then, the live magazine has partnered with *ESPN The Magazine*, publishing house McSweeney’s, and lately, TED. Shows have brought together journalists from different genres, and spawned new stories that wouldn’t have come to life otherwise, contributors say.

And for Pop-Up and others, the sense of community extends beyond contributors. A 2014 report funded by the National Science Foundation and based on surveys of thousands of attendees at *Radiolab*’s two latest live shows found that audiences were surprised and excited to discover a whole community of fellow fans. They reported that their affinity for the program grew as a result of the live show, while those who were less familiar with the brand indicated a desire to start listening. Though hard numbers are elusive, *Radiolab* staff experience the live shows as a highly effective way of expanding their audience base, says executive producer Ellen Horne.

Big media-run conferences aim to capitalize on the so-called Experience Economy, a commercial buzz-phrase from 1998 that refers to the notion that successful companies are increasingly providing experiences, rather than goods and services. But the business potential of performed journalism may still be unfulfilled, since most organizers say money is not the goal. While Pop-Up has become a sustainable business without an original growth plan, live shows don't necessarily turn impressive profits for *Radiolab* due to the scale of its productions, which can involve everything from professional dancers to elaborate puppetry. At *This American Life*, live shows usually make money and have sometimes proven an effective way to fill budget holes, although some of the more expensive productions generate no extra funds for the radio show. What the shows do, however, is allow producers to experiment, director of operations Seth Lind says.

Defining this phenomenon as performed *journalism* may seem provocative. But while the New Journalism raised eyebrows when it mixed the techniques of journalism with those of the novel in the 1960s and 70s, today's information environment shows an increased mingling of journalism and the arts, says Professor Barbie Zelizer from the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, who researches the cultural dimensions of journalism. "There's a growing recognition that these platforms offer an engagement with current events that perhaps isn't being attended to or provided by mainstream journalism."

*Making yourself vulnerable onstage is audience engagement at a whole other level.*

So far, performed journalism has barely been discussed as journalism; it is more often talked about as art or entertainment. That doesn't concern many supporters of the genre. "Part of the idea behind Pop-Up was not caring so much about these distinctions," says McGray, who defines the live magazine as a journalistic project that also falls within the categories of art and entertainment. But he and others do believe that the genre holds potential for journalism more broadly.

*Radiolab* reports stories from scratch, while Pop-Up stories often build on individual journalists' work in progress, but both only stage material that has never been performed before. Reported stories are structured and developed with the intention of being performed live, and visual, auditory, and performative elements are thought into the production of each piece. At the other end of the spectrum, *The Guardian* and *This American Life* have staged journalism as theater, and in 2013, *The Center for Investigative Reporting* entered a collaboration with a theater company to stage plays based on investigative stories. None of this is new.

In the 1930s, as a response to the Great Depression, unemployed journalists and theater workers teamed up through the Federal Theatre Project to produce the so-called "Living Newspapers," which staged current events for a popular, largely working-class audience. Reporters carried out research, and writers turned the information into plays that often focused on pressing social issues such as conditions in city slums, class politics, and lynchings.

The Living Newspapers were born out of dire conditions that forced people to think about new ways of engaging with current events; they saw the theater's role as both to inform and to engage audiences. Today's performed journalism is doing something similar. "We love putting pieces onstage that not only teach people things, but also give them an emotional experience," said Walters, the Pop-Up editor. "That not only tell them, let's say, what it's like to pay your way through college as a shepherd, but help them feel it, through specific details, recorded audio, visuals, music, and more."

Theater is a shared physical experience that creates a relationship between the audience and whoever is onstage. At Pop-Up Magazine, that experience is reinforced by the fact that the audience is asked to turn off all digital devices, and the show goes undocumented. In a 2009 [PBS interview](#) with acclaimed playwright and actress Anna Deavere Smith, known for documentary productions in which she has interpreted and staged real-life interviews with Americans about issues such as race and violence, Bill Moyers noted: "There is no way this small screen of television

can do justice to the power of what happens on your stage. . . . You took a houseful of strangers and turned them into an intimate community.”

“I suppose the intimacy comes from the audience having a shared experience,” Smith answered.

Memorable experiences are formed when individuals feel emotionally, physically, or intellectually engaged; indeed, the more senses an experience engages, the more memorable it is. In performed journalism, that personal, memorable experience seems tied to the audience-performer relationship that is so basic to the theater. When a journalist like *Mother Jones*’ Butler leaves her natural habitat and embraces the performative aspect of live storytelling, she becomes a real-life person to her audience. Journalists talk about engaging with their audience on Twitter, but making yourself vulnerable on a stage is audience engagement at a whole other level.

That is likely why performed journalism thrives in the world of radio and podcasts. The much-discussed success of *Serial* shed light on these platforms’ unique ability to foster audience commitment through the intimacy of the medium. The strong connection between Sarah Koenig and her listeners was based in part on her willingness to share thoughts and insights that journalists usually keep to themselves.

Like the social and political theater movements of the mid-twentieth century, performed journalism offers an opportunity to explain complex issues or ideas through sensory elements that help audiences visualize and remember stories. In September, Pop-Up went further, arranging a dinner show for just 120 attendees in which every part of the meal told its own story. The water glasses, for instance, were marked to indicate the water levels of various reserves in California, suggesting a narrative about the drought that has plagued the state. With more initiatives like these, Pop-Up hopes to become a “lab for live journalism,” Walters says.

*The Guardian*'s topical microplays took their inspiration from a popular *Guardian* article about English identity that appeared before the Scottish vote on independence, at a moment when nationalism and xenophobia were on the rise in Britain. In one of the plays, [Death of England](#), a grieving son's ranting, intoxicated eulogy for his father mixes feelings of loss with football fandom, nationalistic pride, and racism. The short plays allow for a density of detail and an unspooling of contradictory ideas that a short piece of newspaper journalism probably wouldn't, says stage editor Wiegand.

Amelia Gentleman, who writes on social affairs for *The Guardian*, says the microplay she helped shape achieved something that her journalism couldn't. [Britain Isn't Eating](#) satirizes conservative politicians' skepticism about underprivileged people's need for food banks by staging a TV cooking show in which a fictional politician attempts to create a meal out of sardines, bags of tea, raspberry vinegar, and a can of tomato soup.

Gentleman says she sometimes worries that new readers fail to connect with her journalism on austerity, and she found that the play's use of humor made it both thought-provoking and accessible. "Different people will be able to watch that and be forced to think about issues from a completely different perspective," she says.

*This American Life* did a similar dramatization of journalism with its June show at BAM. But while *The Guardian*'s microplays are a far step from the outlet's journalism, *This American Life*'s style of storytelling has previously been criticized for being too close to fiction, most famously when Mike Daisey's 2012 [story](#) about his alleged visit to a factory in China, where workers supposedly produced Apple devices under arduous conditions, was proven to be false. *This American Life* [retracted](#) the story, but Daisey, though apologetic, initially excused the fabrication by saying he has a background in theater, not journalism. The two disciplines, he claimed, "have different languages for what the truth means." In a later blog post, he conceded that he had broken the contract with his audience, who were expecting a true story.

While journalists obsess over factual accuracy, audiences may care less as long as they know what they're in for. Lind of *This American Life* says the dramatized show isn't problematic as long as things are labeled clearly: "If we call it The Radio Drama Show, then I don't think anyone thinks they're in the land of pure journalism anymore. That doesn't risk tarnishing the brand. The risk would be to not try new things and have people get bored with it."

It's that lack of concern for traditional categories that defines this whole range of live shows, and that enables them to partially imitate the effects of the newspapers Tocqueville found in 19th-century America, and the one Hegel described. As the modern media ponder how to convey news and engage audiences, inspiration might be found in the old-fashioned innovation of performed journalism.