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Lights, camera, journalism: The Boston Globe's newest money-making scheme is a live show

BY BILL MITCHELL · MAY 17, 2017



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The Boston Globe this week unveils the latest step toward figuring out its future: onstage storytelling.

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An advance peek at some of what [Globe Live](#) has on tap:

“Depth of a Salesman,” a segment featuring deputy Washington bureau chief [Matt Viser](#) and recordings of his telephone conversations with candidate Donald Trump

“Printed — Man, Machine and the Final Days of the Globe’s Dorchester Presses,” a documentary short by video producer [Taylor DeLench](#) and multimedia editor [Scott LaPierre](#)

“True Confessions of the Celebrity Beat,” a tell-all by columnists [Meredith Goldstein](#) and [Mark Shanahan](#)

[Scott Helman](#), a versatile Globe veteran cast as editor/director of the show, says there will be no “microwaved newspaper copy,” insisting instead: “We want to play to our strengths as storytellers and conveners in this city in some entirely new ways.”

The online blurb for the show puts it this way: “Through spoken word, video, audio, and more, the Globe’s award-winning writers, photographers, and producers will showcase original, unpublished work in real-time.”

All 581 seats in downtown Boston’s Paramount Theater were sold more than a week before curtain time, some of them at \$45 each and the rest at a special Globe subscriber rate of \$35.

[Tim Marken](#), chief growth officer for Boston Globe Media Partners, deflected questions about the cost of the hall and other financial particulars, noting: “It’s safe to say this will not be a big money-maker.”

Instead, he outlined a scenario that in some ways mirrors the old newspaper model of big ad dollars compensating for more modest revenue from circulation. Assuming Globe Live’s debut goes well, he said, the paper will have the evidence it needs to attract sponsorship of subsequent productions.

“When we move to sponsorship,” he told me in a telephone interview, “we’ll have a much bigger opportunity.”

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organization survival: reaching crowds that skew considerably younger than its print audience.

In the Globe newsroom, Helman has worked with staffers and their supervisors to carve out time for a still evolving editorial process. Last week he brought in a theater director to help with some of the pacing, elocution and other skills more associated with stages than keyboards.

The segments or acts — Helman uses the terms interchangeably — will range from serious to the less so. In “I Am Not This Box,” reporter [Mark Arsenault](#) will explore the story of a prison lifer deciding how much space — physical and otherwise — a person needs to live. Framing one of the self-deprecating bits about celebrity news will be some big text on a screen: “Biggest Interview Fail.”

No stranger to platform-stretching, Helman has produced [multimedia projects](#) and [authored books](#) along with more conventional reporting and editing for the Globe.

In rehearsals conducted in the old auditorium in the basement of the paper’s [soon to be former Morrissey Boulevard headquarters](#), Helman and his performers have been re-discovering how stories differ when written vs. uttered aloud.

“We’re changing the ways we think about a lede, about anecdotes, about how many characters to include,” he said by phone last week.

The idea of journalists telling stories on stage has been around for awhile, [perhaps as long as the 1917 Russian Revolution](#) but certainly since the [Living Newspaper project](#) launched during the New Deal in the 1930s.

The Arizona Republic’s storytelling initiative [has been underway since 2011](#), and USA Today Network and other Gannett outlets have been [building on the idea since](#).

Helman pointed me to [Pop-Up Magazine](#), a production of live storytelling first staged in San Francisco in 2009, and to [Live Magazine](#), a similar venture that has put on 19 shows since launching three years ago in Paris.

Live Magazine founder Florence Martin-Kessler, a former documentary filmmaker and a 2011 Nieman Fellow, sums up the content she seeks like this: “Stories, real stories, no exposés, no blah blah blah.”

([This video](#), from last month’s International Journalism Festival in Perugia, provides a good introduction to the concept of onstage storytelling or live journalism. Martin-Kessler’s segment begins about 10 minutes in.)

In a phone chat over the weekend from Paris, Martin-Kessler said the most compelling segments address topics that are “very sad or very funny.” Both Pop-Up Magazine and Live Magazine make a point of stressing the one-time nature of their productions, with no recordings.

“The idea is to be present for it...it makes people (show up),” Martin-Kessler said, noting that the absence of a recording encourages a level of candor not always found in journalism that’s forever retrievable. “It’s not off-the-record,” she said, “but it is more intimate and people say things they might otherwise not.”

Marken, the guy in charge of growing the Globe, says the company’s efforts at innovation remain rooted in news. “Our biggest driver is the journalism we do,” he said. “It’s the journalism that drives engagement, relevance — it’s the foundation of our relationships with clients.”

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