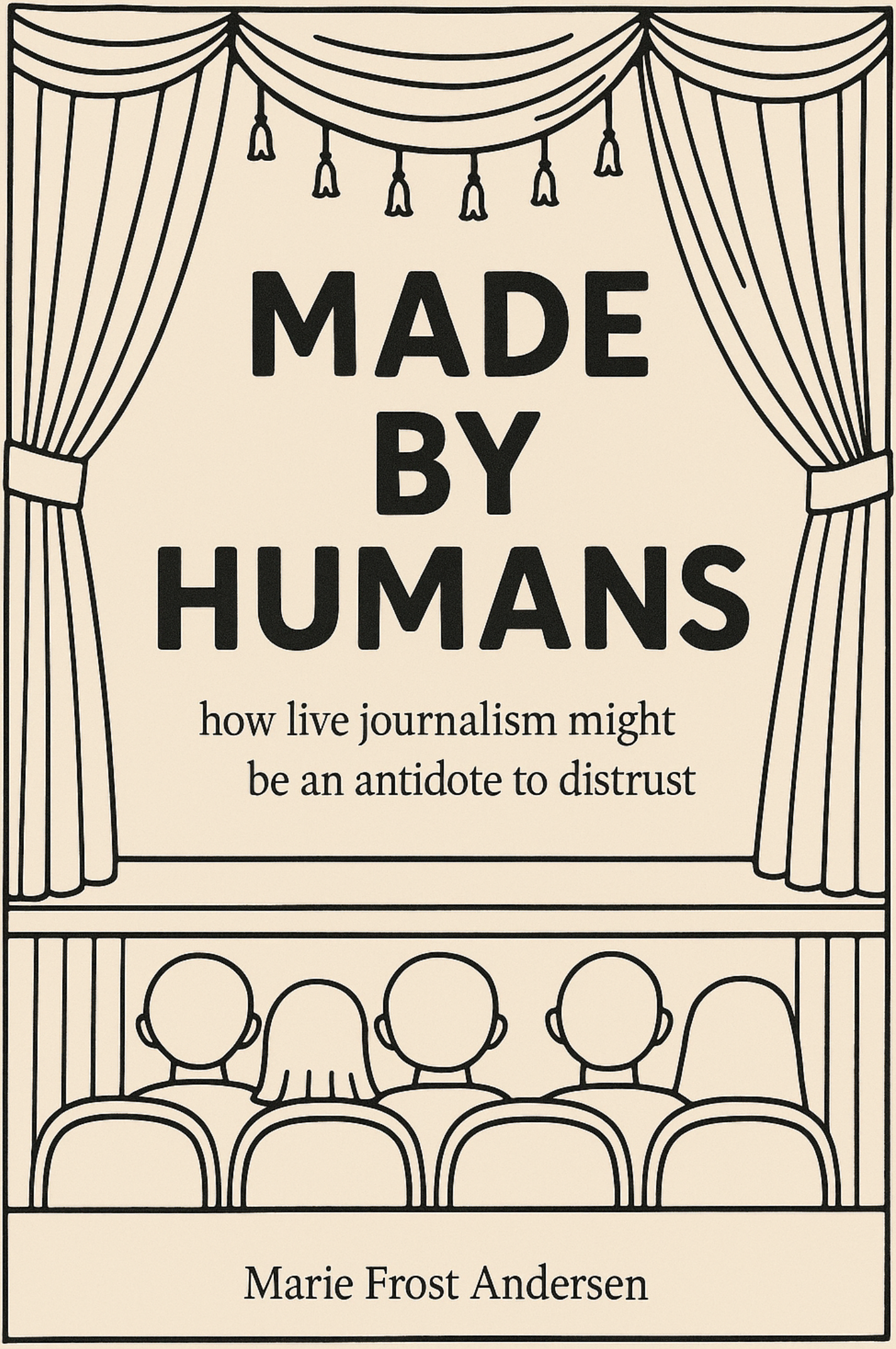


MADE BY HUMANS

how live journalism might be an antidote to distrust

Marie Frost Andersen

Table of Contents

Introduction: A big task 2
What this report is not about 3
What it is about then 4
Method 5
What even is live journalism? And what is it good for? 6
The gap issue 9
Engagement and power structures 10
Beware of false participation 12
Confirm that you are not a robot: What the literature says about live journalism 14
Black Box 14
The importance of being right here, right now, telling a story 15
Passion is contagious 16
The human factor: Credibility through imperfection 17
In conclusion: Dare to be open, dare to be human 18
Learning from the doers 19
Team spirit and planning: Q&A with Jaakko Lyytinen 19
Planning for the unplanned: Q&A with Avisen Live 21
Being real people: Q&A with Zetland 24
Conclusion-ish 26
Recommendations for doing live journalism 27
Literature 29

Left photo: Ibyens Brevkasse live event with artist Jeanett Albeck. Right photo: Audience at Politiken's stage at the Danish People's Dialogue Festival in Allinge. Photos: Marie Andersen

Introduction: A big task

Late in the fall of 2024, I was invited to be part of a workshop for high school students who wanted to start or revive a student media outlet at their school. I was there to tell them about live journalism as a form of publishing—that they could do talks, debates, and festivals as ways of telling stories relevant to their fellow students. I gave them an assignment: come up with an idea for a live event at your school.

The students had great ideas, but what struck me was their concern about actually getting anybody to show up. Many reported a social culture consisting of micro-units: everybody wanted to group with someone exactly like themselves, and they didn't care about the larger community. They were afraid to be different and to stand out from the crowd. Even when it came to choosing courses—everyone wanted the same ones, in fear of being seen as weird or nerdy if they, for example, chose science classes, as their teacher confirmed. And they didn't have hobbies, so who knows if they had any interests.

The students at the workshop had a challenge much bigger than we were able to solve in 30 minutes: how do you do journalism for a crowd that seems uninterested in anything but themselves and their closest friends? How do we get people to come out of their shells and bubbles? In this relatively small place that is a high school, how do we merge all of these groups into a real community—give people a sense of togetherness and belonging, and enlighten them as well? That's a lot of work to put on student journalists.

But, ahem, does this sound familiar? One would almost be inclined to think I made this up as an analogy to society. I of course did not, but it kind of sums up nicely the challenge that journalism is facing. How do we get people to view the world through other people's eyes? How do we combat polarization and the urge to avoid news and just concern ourselves with what is safe and close? For obvious reasons, it seems sad—and even dangerous—if we have democracies where people don't really engage with the world.

Democracy is not just something you adopt and then it can never be dismantled again. In the words of philosopher John Dewey, it is a way of life, and it needs to be maintained. Now, I do not have scientific evidence for this next statement, but engaging with the world and trying to acquire trustworthy knowledge about what is going on might be a very good starting point in trying to nurture democracy. Therefore, I want this report to be about engagement, and since I have worked with live journalism at the Danish national newspaper *Politiken* for close to a decade, I will zoom in on engagement—and how we can improve that—in that tiny field of journalism.

If breaking social bubbles is a big task for student journalists, then what about the rest of us? Because there seems to be a gap between journalists and the (shrinking number of) readers, viewers, and listeners. A gap where journalists are blamed for not knowing what is going on in the real world, for being out of touch with people's lives.

And too slow and too late did we discover that journalism and journalistic methods as we know them could actually be abolished by those very people. Are we not as important as we've told ourselves? Yikes. Horrible thought. What every journalism researcher, every media boss, every editor, every fellow before me, and probably every journalist all over the world is asking themselves is: how do we bridge that gap? Forever glory to the person who finds the answer.

In absolutely no way would I ever claim that I had found the holy grail and the solution to news fatigue, the decline in trust, or the overall displeasure with the media industry. However, in this report, I will try to explore whether my field of work—live journalism—can contribute a teeny-tiny bit to giving journalism a better reputation, one room at a time.

I can reveal that of course my answer to that is: yes. I do not believe live journalism is the answer to every problem in the business, but I do see how it can be used to build relationships, build communities, and introduce the most trust-building of all tools: the human factor.

What this report is not about

I originally thought my project at the Constructive Institute would be about increasing participation from media users. How can we, as media professionals, engage readers and potential readers in content through more active participation? And how could live journalism be the key ingredient in that process? Could we get them to be more vocal and express their needs and opinions more? Get them to ask more questions and perhaps even be more involved in the process of creating (live) journalism?

I had an idea that 'participation' and 'user involvement' are these buzzwords and concepts the media industry really wants to embrace, but can't seem to adopt wholeheartedly.

In my own line of work—live journalism—it nagged me that we would host an entire evening with guests on stage, only to end by taking questions from the audience out of a sense of duty. Is that really creating the feeling of engagement that we want? Or we would spend

days, weeks, even months preparing festivals, talks, and shows for people without ever asking them what they actually want.

I had this idea that maybe we should shut up and take a seat—and then readers, media users, potential readers, and so forth should take the stage. Enlighten us. Create content as equals—or something like that. Or at least be part of the process.

Oh well. I soon realized that my theory was a one-dimensional way of thinking about participation and engagement.

What it *is* about then

I still believe we could do much better when it comes to listening to our readers and audience. We should not be afraid to ask the question, “What do you want?” instead of either guessing or insisting that we always know what people want. And I think the mindset we have about the relationship between journalists and audiences is due for some big changes. Better reports than mine have already been written about the art of audience engagement and the importance of actually listening to your audiences.

But I had an epiphany, if you will, after talking to so-called ‘democracy worker’ at Aarhus Public Libraries, Julie Krog Vistisen. Julie organizes events for and with citizens and coaches librarians in how to create events and engage (with) users and citizens.

I vented my frustration to Julie: “I feel like we’re not really engaging with our audience when we make live journalism! Most of the time, they just sit there while journalists talk to them.”
“Okay,” she said. “Why is that a problem?”

And then she offered another way of looking at participation—one where you don’t equate silence with passivity. Listening is also participating. I’ll later unfold her concept of *The Democracy Tree*, which Julie introduced me to.

So what will I do on the following pages? I’m instead looking at participation and engagement as **being there**. Actually showing up to a place, being present, and dedicating yourself to what is going on in the room that you’re in right now is a great act in itself. If you, as a media outlet, can get a person to show up physically for an event, you’ve already come a long way in engaging that person. Now—how will you use that valuable, almost one-on-one time you have with your audience? How will you make it count and use it to build trust?

Therefore, this report is instead about **creating a room that (potential) media users want to be in**. It's not about getting people to raise their hands more or creating new formats for open editorial meetings. Not that there's anything wrong with that—I've just broadened my understanding of what engagement means.

These next many pages are, therefore, about using live journalism as a tool for trust-building and for improving journalism's reputation—by being in a room together and being, well... humans together. In a time when much can be replaced by AI, can live journalism serve as a bastion of humanness?

I believe the answer is yes, and I sought out people who could confirm that (confirmation bias is probably the method of this report). This past year, I've read reports and literature and met with people who were kind enough to tell me how they succeeded in creating both connections with audiences and sustainable business through live journalism. They've enlightened me on what works—and what doesn't—when the goal is to build a bond between journalism and the people consuming it.

I want to use this report to showcase what I've learned about the power of live journalism in a world where many media organizations can no longer assume that audiences trust them simply because they're the media.

This must be the longest build-up in history just to announce that the purpose of this report is **exploring the potential of live journalism as a means of giving journalism a good reputation—again.**

Method

This report is trying to answer two questions:
First, the rather leading question: "Can live journalism play a positive role in building trust in the media?"
And second: "If yes, then how?"

I wouldn't write this report if I didn't believe the answer to the first question was "yes." Therefore, I hereby declare my **confirmation bias**: I mainly sought out sources—whether literature or people—who were already deeply involved in the field of live journalism and who therefore, of course, believed in the concept's positive effects.

To answer the questions posed in this report, I have looked in two places:

- **Books, academic articles, and research reports**, to find theories and studies about live journalism. It's a relatively new concept, so the body of research is limited, and the few studies that do exist are often small and tend to cite one another. However, I have looked into the studies I could find.

- **Best practice**. I've spoken with practitioners of live journalism to learn what works, what doesn't, and what their goals are. I interviewed representatives from Danish media *Zetland*, the annual Danish event *Avisen Live*, and the Finnish daily *Helsingin Sanomat*.

In this report, I will walk through my takeaways from both theory and practice and, to the best of my ability, summarize some overall findings and recommendations.

Limits

Believing that live journalism could magically bridge the gap between non-media users and journalists or the media would be extremely naive. Engaging with live journalism requires a basic understanding of journalism itself. Watching a newspaper unfold on stage presupposes knowledge of what a newspaper is, how it is structured, and what it typically contains. To appreciate a creative twist on the opinion pages, you must first know what the opinion pages are. In short, fully appreciating live journalism requires a degree of media literacy.

Therefore, I do not fool myself into believing that live journalism will suddenly turn those who see journalists as out-of-touch, elitist snobs with no grasp of real life into loyal newsstand customers. But perhaps some of the people we lost along the way during the digital transition can be drawn back in. Maybe live journalism could help them realize that good journalism is worth both their time and money.

What even is live journalism? And what is it good for?

Defining live journalism is not an easy task. Even though I've been working on this subject at the Danish broadsheet *Politiken* for nine years, I'm still not entirely sure. Different producers of live journalism define it differently.

ChatGPT says this:

“Live journalism refers to a dynamic form of storytelling where journalistic content is presented directly to a live audience, typically in a physical or virtual event setting. It blends traditional journalistic principles, such as factual accuracy and narrative coherence, with live performance elements like visuals, sound, and audience interaction.”

That’s definitely correct—but also not quite sufficient.

I would define live journalism not only as journalists “performing” their stories on stage, but also as including interviews, moderating debates, or perhaps even reviewing something live. Most journalistic genres can be turned into live journalism if you’re creative enough. It’s the newspaper, the magazine, the podcast/radio show—or another traditional journalistic format—reimagined for the stage and performed in front of an audience. You’re welcome to record it or turn it into an article afterward, but the **performance is the main product**. In this report, I will use the term broadly: journalism performed on stage in all its forms.

Regardless of whether live journalism involves the unfolding of a big investigative story, dramatic storytelling, or hard-hitting interviews on stage, it seems to serve the same purpose: building relationships with the audience and creating a sense of community, belonging, and presence.

Different researchers and producers of live journalism seem to agree that it offers a way to connect with audiences and serves as an antidote to distrust in the media. I’ll later argue that—contrary to earlier assumptions—showing doubt, vulnerability, and personality might actually increase journalists’ trustworthiness.

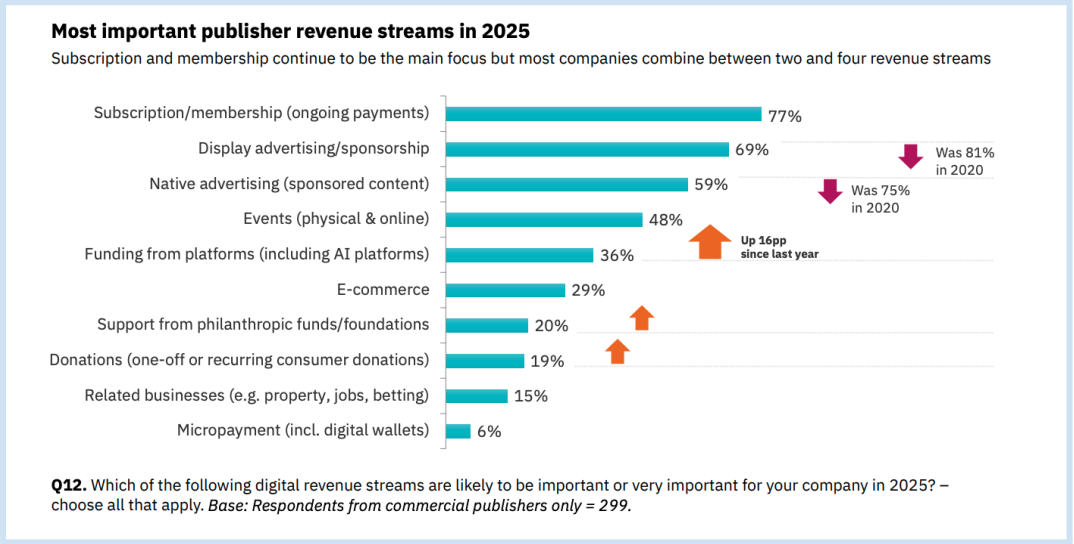
Of course, live journalism is also a way to increase brand awareness, convert non-subscribers into subscribers, and generate revenue through ticket sales and/or sponsorships.

In their book *Den journalistiske forbindelse* (*The Journalistic Connection*), Søren Schultz Jørgensen and Per Westergård include a chapter on live journalism where they outline five different event models:

1. Events where both audience and sponsors pay to participate
2. Events financed solely by ticket sales
3. Events that are sponsored but free for the audience

4. Events that are free and unsponsored, with the main goal of securing loyalty, increasing perceived value, and strengthening the bond between media and audience
5. Events as a central activity that later branches out into other types of media[1]

It seems publishers are exploring events not only as an investment in relationships with readers but also as a **viable business model**.
In the *Reuters Institute* survey *Journalism, Media, and Technology Trends and Predictions 2025*, **48 percent** of respondents said they consider events to be an *important* or *very important* revenue stream for their company in 2025.



It will be interesting to see whether publishers can actually generate profit from this. Economics is not the focus of this report, but it's worth noting that **live journalism is expensive to produce**—salaries for producers, venue rental, staff wages, props, potential fees for musicians or other performers, etc. Relying solely on ticket sales is difficult, and attracting sponsors can be both challenging and ethically complex.

In *Den journalistiske forbindelse*, Jørgensen and Westergård mention several successful European and American media outlets[2] that seem to profit from a combination model (ticket fees + sponsors). However, I have yet to witness a Danish media outlet achieve the same financial success with events.

[1] Jørgensen, Søren Schultz & Westergård, Per, 2019: Den journalistiske forbindelse: p. 151
[2] Ibid: Chapter 4

The gap issue

During this fellowship we find ourselves often confronted with the narrative that trust in news During this fellowship, we've often found ourselves confronted with the narrative that trust in news is declining—and that this represents a democratic problem. Tables from the Reuters Institute show graphs moving in the wrong direction (though stabilizing in the latest report) and statistics indicating that people are giving up on news. The questions surrounding this issue are many:
What is the difference between trust in *news* and trust in *media*—and in *specific* media outlets? How do you even measure trust in the media? What does trust entail? Global surveys on media trust are often too broad to draw specific conclusions, so can we use Nordic data in a more meaningful way? Some studies have even suggested that trust in news may not be a particularly relevant indicator of democratic health.

Still, one might reasonably ask: would it kill us to try increasing trust in media—even though the Nordic countries are doing relatively well?

Scholars Jacob L. Nelson, Zeve Sanderson, and Seth C. Lewis made an important point in an article published last year in the *Columbia Journalism Review*::

"There is a growing disconnect between how journalists see themselves and how people see journalists. Instead of perceiving journalists as watchdogs acting in the public's best interest, people increasingly see journalists as elites who are acting in their own interests. Indeed, there's been an explosion of research focused on news distrust over the past decade, and the consistent findings are that people increasingly feel compelled to discount the journalism they encounter because they believe it to be politically biased, economically compromised, or simply produced by out-of-touch elites. People believe journalists knowingly attempt to sensationalize the news to make more money or misrepresent the news to suit either a liberal or conservative perspective."[3]

What I find interesting in their analysis is the portrayal of journalists as disconnected elites—out of touch with the real world. Ouch. For obvious reasons, it would be beneficial to bridge that gap. How do we make potential buyers of journalistic products believe that what we do is actually in the public's interest and not riddled with hidden agendas?

---

[3] Nelson, Jacob L., Sanderson, Zeve and Lewis, Seth C, 2024 https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/people-trust-themselves-more-than-they-trust-the-news-they-shouldnt.php

Of course, my answer to that question is: **live journalism**. And no, of course live journalism can't solve the entire issue of distrust in media—but baby steps are still steps.

As I will argue throughout this report, meeting physically with journalists—and experiencing their transparency about workflow, doubts, and biases, as well as their passion for their beats—*does* resonate with audiences.

I'm fully aware that the audience attending live journalism events is likely already inclined to engage with journalism. If you show up to a room where journalists promise to give you an "alternative journalistic experience," chances are you're already familiar with more conventional forms of journalism.

Still, as I'll explore in my Q&A with *Avisen Live*, this only makes it more important to make live journalism as accessible as possible.

One comment that stuck with me this year came from former fellow Nanna Holst, editor for engagement and dialogue at TV 2 Kosmopol. When she visited our cohort at the Constructive Institute, she said:

> "We have all these reports saying that trust in the media is declining. Where are the reports examining whether the media trusts their audiences?"

Trust is a two-way street. So if an intended side effect of live journalism is building trust with audiences, this must also mean that we as journalists learn to trust the audience more, too. And isn't that a good thing?

Engagement and power structures

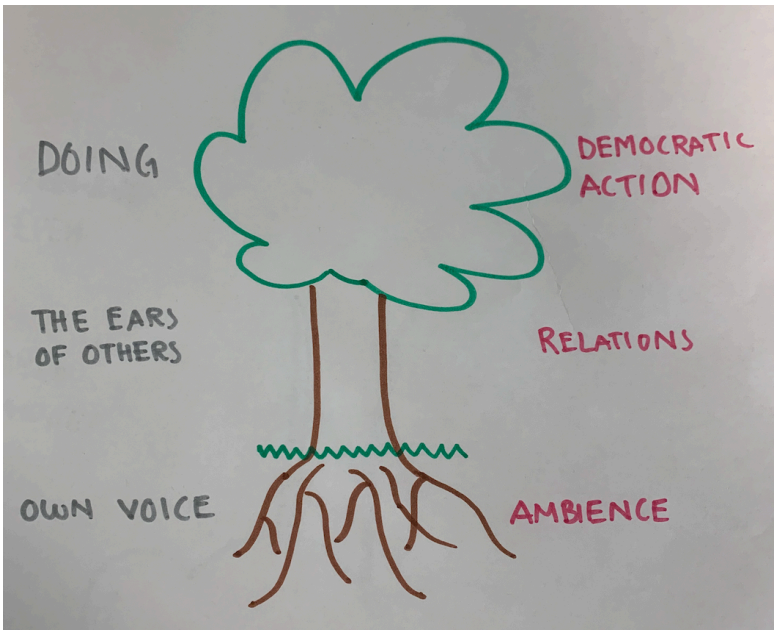
This brings me back to Julie Krog Vistisen from Aarhus Public Libraries.

Even though this report is not *about* participation as such, I can't ignore it entirely. It seems to be a hot topic—and live journalism is an obvious piece of that puzzle. The general logic seems to be: if we include audiences in the idea phase, engage with them in the comments section, set up user panels, go out to meet them, etc., then they'll feel more like co-creators of the product—and perhaps be more inclined to buy, share, or use it.

That may very well be true. But we need to be aware of at least two things:

1. What do we mean when we say "participation" and "engagement"?
2. What are the pitfalls when using audience participation?

First of all, what even is participation? You could write dissertations on this, citing Habermas and public sphere theory. I won't go down that road. Instead, I'll say this:
Perhaps we shouldn't see participation and engagement only as voicing your opinion or performing an action. Because before doing either, you need to **form** an opinion. You need to learn how to **articulate** it—perhaps even in a room full of strangers. And already there, you've excluded a large number of people. So whose voices are actually being heard?
Julie Krog Vistisen introduced me to the **Democracy Tree**—a model for understanding how democratic confidence is built. You can't perform a democratic act—like voicing an opinion—if you don't have the foundation to do so.



This little amateur drawing is my own version, to avoid copyright infringement

The model essentially shows that reflection is part of the participation process. First, you need to find your own voice **(the roots)**. You must believe and discover that you have something worth saying, and this requires a safe learning environment. Next, you need to feel that someone wants to listen to you **(the trunk)**. This is where dialogue with others takes place. Only then can you "do democracy"—through voting, public debate, speaking on panels, etc. **(the crown)**.

As a producer of events, you can cater to any level of the Democracy Tree. Participation doesn't necessarily mean what happens "in the crown," where people speak publicly. Reflection is also engagement.

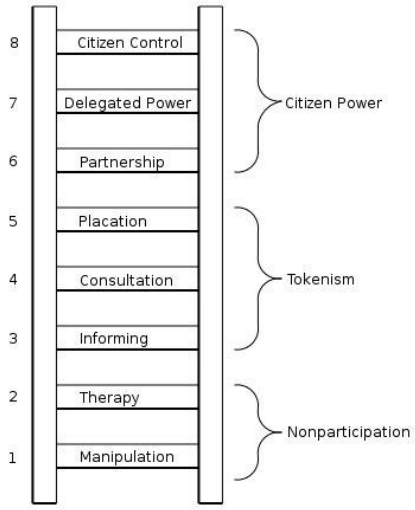
If we, as media, revise our understanding of participation, then we've already made progress by simply getting people to show up. That's already more time spent with us than the time

most people spend reading or watching the news. a lot of time spent with us compared to the time people spend reading or watching the news.

Beware of false participation

We also need to consider the pitfalls of glorifying participation as a universal good.

Professor Birgit Eriksson at Aarhus University's School of Communication and Culture has done extensive research on participation culture. In her article *Cultural Participation*, she argues that participatory processes are always shaped by power and are inherently political.[4]



Eriksson refers to The Ladder of Citizen Participation as thought out by Sherry Arnstein. In this view of participation the underlying premise is that there is an everlasting inequality between people with and without power and that people with power control how much influence participants in a project actually have.
The problems occur in the middle and at the bottom of the ladder, where you only have so-called 'false participation'. The power holders give citizens an impression of decision power, but in reality it is only for show. Eriksson exemplifies this with civil hearings during an urban development process where decision makers consult citizens to gain leverage and legitimacy, but never actually use the input they get.[5] One could fear that the media might risk doing exactly that if they do not really mean it and listen when involving audiences. Not necessarily with bad intentions but because they haven't understood how many resources it takes to actually involve people in a meaningful way.

Another pitfall, or at least something to be aware of, is that the people asking for participation and the people participating do not have the same goal with that process and do not hold the same power. There is a difference, says English anthropologist Andrea Cornwall, between invited participation and self-created participation. When invited to be part of something, the project is owned by the ones inviting and that means power and status is not distributed

[4] Eriksson, 2019, Kulturel deltagelse [in] Ny Kulturteori: p. 200
[5] ibid: p. 200

equally amongst everyone in the room[6]. The people owning the project hold all the real power.

Additionally sociologist Sarah White has developed a typology to tell different forms of participation apart and to connect them with interests. Because even though everyone may take interest in a project they do not necessarily have the same goal for participating. White argues that there are four types of participation: Nominal, instrumental, representative and transformative. They each have their own interest and those interests are furthermore different depending on whether you are the project owner or the participant[7].

Form	**Top-down**	**Bottom-up**	**Function**
Nominal	Legitimizing	Inclusion	Showcasing
Instrumental	Efficiency	Costs	Means
Representative	Sustainability	Influence	Voice
Transformative	Empowerment	Empowerment	Means/goal

[8]

For example a media could ask a specific group of readers to participate in developing a new section for the paper. For the media as product owners the interest is seen as sustainable, since they are trying their best to create a product that will actually be used for a long time. However the participants may be willing to spend their time on this because they gain influence. This would be representative participation. However, you could also argue that the media is using the readers to legitimize a new project (“Look, we are really catering to the reader’s needs”) and that the participants are joining because it shows that they are let in an otherwise closed process and thereby giving them some status, and then it would be nominal participation.

I will not go further into the model but I am including this to show that the media must be very aware of their own intentions when choosing to engage audiences in different types of processes. Do not be blind to the fact that the power structure is not flat and that people have different reasons for being in the room.

[6] ibid: p. 204
[7] Ibid: p. 205
[8] Ibid: Fig. 7.2, p. 206

It's important to keep Arnstein, White, and Cornwall in mind as we chase a sense of "community" and aim to reduce the distance between journalists and audiences. Participation is not just about helping develop a new journalistic product, voting at a live event, or posting in a comments section. It's also about intentions, power, and exclusion.

That doesn't mean we shouldn't embrace more audience participation in media—it just means we need to use it wisely and with open eyes.

Confirm that you are not a robot: What the literature says about live journalism

Not much research has been conducted on live journalism, as it remains a relatively new concept. However, in this chapter, I will review some of the articles, case studies, and literature published on the subject.

Black Box

Musta Laatikko—Finnish for "black box"—is the name of Finnish daily *Helsingin Sanomat*'s live journalism format. For nine years, they have produced live journalism shows so popular that tickets sell out as soon as they go online. And that is something to be inspired by.

Fortunately, the team behind *Musta Laatikko* is generous with their knowledge. They have published a 60-page handbook on live journalism, and one of their producers, Jaakko Lyytinen, has been a fellow at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, where he published a report on the subject.

With their big show, *Helsingin Sanomat* has found a formula that works repeatedly. Each show is like a newspaper unfolded on stage: various journalists perform untold stories from their field of expertise. A culture journalist has spoken about the use of AI in music while a pianist played examples live; a photographer presented his work from the Winter Olympics dressed in full skiing gear; journalist Heli Saavalainen shared the story of her son, who died of an overdose. The topics range from deeply personal stories to seemingly impersonal subjects like the EU or caffeine production. However, every story must stem from a personal engagement—and must be presented that way on stage.

The most important ingredient in *Musta Laatikko* is enthusiasm. Because enthusiasm is contagious.

They tour with the show in various Finnish cities, always in theatre spaces. Most acts feature just one journalist alone on stage with a microphone, visuals, and sound bites. The storytelling drives the show, and a host ties the performances together, guiding the audience through the experience.

So what can Musta Laatikko teach us about live journalism?

The importance of being right here, right now, telling a story

“For the audience, the essential aspect of the Black Box show was the opportunity for them to experience the show with the performers in the same physical space. Sharing a common space awakened a sense of togetherness in the audience: they found joy in the fact that they were also among others who wanted to experience high quality journalism.”[9]

The theatre space proved critical. It offers a distraction-free environment—one of the few remaining places where phones stay in pockets. Being “forced” into immersion created a kind of presence that is increasingly rare. This is, of course, also true of cinema and theatre, but as the *Musta Laatikko* handbook points out, people take joy in being among fellow news consumers. It’s a place for collective learning, and experiencing journalism live adds both power and intimacy to the stories.

Audience members also value that the performance happens “right here, right now.” It is not pre-produced. You have to be present—physically and mentally—and that adds a sense of exclusivity.

At its core, *Musta Laatikko* is about storytelling. When someone tells a truly good story, you lose yourself in it. Borrowing narrative techniques from fiction to structure journalistic stories is something we increasingly see in writing—but it works even better live. The audience feels the journalist is speaking directly and confidentially to them. And confidentiality breeds trust. The handbook states that the audience really enjoys the sense of an almost spontaneously told story, even though they are well aware that it is well-planned:

“Despite the audience knowing that the show was scripted, that the performers were all well-rehearsed, the respondents revealed that they wanted the show to kindle and maintain the illusion of a camp-fire-like moment, one where a speaker spontaneously narrates a story”.[10]

[9] ibid: p.6
[10] ibid: p. 8

In his report from The Reuters Institute, Jaakko Lyytinen has interviewed several producers of live journalism across Europe and USA. One of them is François Musseau from Diario Vivo, a live magazine in Madrid. He also emphasizes the value of telling a story "...We are sharing human experiences (...) It's all about stories. We as humans understand things in the deepest way through a story", he says[11] and explains how the private expands to the universal when you use this alternative way of approaching people with body language and telling stories without intermediation. As Jaakko Lyytinen puts it in his report, when starting to work on a story for the stage you have to ask yourself "What does my talk reveal about the world?"[12].

Passion is contagious

Another key element in *Musta Laatikko*'s success is passion. That may sound banal, but it is not a given that a journalist is passionate about the story they are presenting on stage. Perhaps it's part of their beat, or they've done similar interviews many times before. Perhaps they're not particularly curious about the topic.

For that reason, *Musta Laatikko*'s producers don't assign topics. Journalists must pitch their own ideas, just as they would for a written article. And they must genuinely care. When presenting the story, they are expected to explain why this particular topic grabbed their attention. Sometimes it's a deeply personal reason. Sometimes it's the result of a long investigation or a tip-off from a source.

"For the audience, it is key that the journalist has some kind of personal connection to their material. As revealed by the respondents, they wanted the journalists to speak with enthusiasm, passion, and motivation, and such passion could be evident in the performers' voice and gestures.[13]"
Jaakko Lyytinen further explains in his report, that "A personal touch doesn't mean it is necessary to reveal intimate details of the speaker's private life. It simply means that the speaker has a vested interest in the topic. This interest can be clarified with the following questions: Why is this idea special to me? Why do I want to tell you this? And what is my gift to the audience?"

[11] Lyytinen, Jaakko: Pulling back the curtain: How live journalism is re-engaging news audiences, 2020: p. 26
[12] Ibid: p. 37
[13] Haikarainen, Riikka et al.: The power of live journalism: A handbook, 2023: p. 8

In a 2024 study, Glenda Cooper and Catherine Adams asked similar questions to mine: Can "face-to-face journalism" increase trust in journalism?
They conducted practice-based research and designed a *News on Stage* concept with two events, followed by in-depth interviews with attendees.

They too found that a personal connection with the story helped increase the trust in the journalist:

"A key way in which connections were made appeared to be through the passion, humanity, and personalisation of stories by the performers. One audience member said, 'I like personal stories that suggest a wider picture of the world[14]'."

And the same goes for the genuine passion for the story:

"Passion was evident in the approach to the whole project by those involved. One journalist performer said of another: 'you could tell that she really cared, felt so passionate about it ... you felt like you could trust her because she cares so much about what she's talking about'[15]."

The human factor: Credibility through imperfection

Transparency is the last important concept I will unpack in this section. Letting the audience in on the journalists' work process and journey from idea to product is actually more interesting than it sounds. A journalistic research phase can often feel like one step forward then two steps back. Revealing the doubts, the disappointments, the frustrations as well as the victories and the eurekas does not take any of the credibility away from journalism - if anything it adds exactly that.

"The behind-the-scenes information provided by the journalists was very much liked. The audience was interested in knowing about the ideation of the story, the interviews that did not end up in the paper, and the stages the journalist went through during data collection. Offering such transparency to the editorial process was felt to increase credibility and bring journalists closer to the audience. Moreover, the respondents felt that a show like Black Box offers journalists more freedom to express their opinions and share background information than a newspaper story[16]".

[14] Adams, Catherine & Cooper, Glenda, 2024: I felt I got to know everyone, p. 755
[15] ibid, p. 756
[16] Haikarainen, Riikka et al.: The power of live journalism: A handbook, 2023: p. 9

Agreeing on that is reporter at Süddeutsche Zeitung Cornelius Pollmer, whom Jaakko Lyytinen has also interviewed for his report. He says that we as journalists falsely think that the public of course knows how journalism is made. They do not, and explaining the process is actually quite interesting and reduces the distance between journalists and audiences[17].

Cooper and Adams actually also found that the audience felt more inclined to trust the journalist if they showed some personality:

"Our data suggested that the credibility of the journalists in the eyes of the audience depended partly on the perceived truth of the stories, but also on the trust they felt towards them. According to our questionnaires, trust levels in journalists increased after the event. Most of the cast and crew who responded also said they believed events like this could increase trust in journalism "a great deal". This may have been helped by the biographical information we provided about each journalist, but audience comments suggested it was more about getting to know the journalists as people[18]".

In conclusion: Dare to be open, dare to be human

Looking at experiences from *Musta Laatikko* and similar live formats across Europe and the U.S., I think it's fair to say that fallibility can be an asset in building trust. When doing live journalism, don't be afraid to:

1. Show that you are human, not a reporting robot.

2. Demonstrate that you care. Showing emotion or interest is not unprofessional—it shows passion and makes the audience care too.

3. Acknowledge your biases. Being transparent about your perspective doesn't make you vulnerable to criticism—it makes you credible.

In an age where AI has the potential to take over many journalistic functions, maybe—just maybe—live journalism is one of the few things that can't be replaced.

The human touch isn't a flaw. It may be the core value in building trust between media and audiences.

---

[17] Lyytinen, Jaakko: Pulling back the curtain: How live journalism is re-engaging news audiences, 2023: p. 28
[18] Adams, Catherine & Cooper, Glenda, 2024: I felt I got to know everyone, p. 752,

Learning from the doers

In this chapter, I will share what I've learned from interviewing other producers of live journalism. What drives them? What are their challenges? And what are their keys to success—or failure?

Team spirit and planning: Q&A with Jaakko Lyytinen

Following up on Jaakko Lyytinen's report and the *Musta Laatikko* handbook from *Helsingin Sanomat*, I asked him if he would do a Q&A with me—and luckily, he said yes. While the report focuses heavily on the *why* of live journalism and the handbook touches on both *why* and *how*, I wanted Jaakko to elaborate more deeply on the *how*. How does it actually work when you need to mobilize so many people, all with busy schedules?

> "It is actually quite tricky, even though we are a big newsroom with around 300 journalists. It's still very hard to get people to do it, because they work shifts, they have families, and maybe their editors aren't too eager to 'give them away'," says Jaakko.

He explains that it's not about always getting the biggest stars or most extroverted personalities. "We want the shy people as well," he says. The aim is to find the best topics that journalists are genuinely passionate about. That's why they have a stage training programme, including a speech coach who helps adapt the story for live performance.

> "It's about thinking for the stage from the beginning. When training people, I tell them: start thinking about the stage from the very first step. You report for the stage—not just for print. Think about how this story should be told, and also 'report on your own reporting.'"

The journalist's own reactions to their findings are part of the performance:

> "When things start unfolding for you, remember that and bring that emotion to the stage. Reestablish it for the audience. Show them what happened to you when you were covering the story. It's a kind of storytelling about storytelling."

Jaakko stresses that dedication is key:

> “The workload is huge. You need to learn a new skill—even the second time it’s still stressful because it’s a new medium, and no one is a total pro yet. That’s why you need eagerness to tell the story.”

The Musta Laatikko team after their show in the Spring of 2025. Photo: Mika Ranta / Helsingin Sanomat

After my talk with Jaakko and other producers of live journalism this year, it has struck me that we are all dependent on one very important thing: The willingness of the journalists to actually do it. We as producers are not the faces and bodies of our media on stage, we are not out there doing the stories and putting ourselves on the line. The journalists are. And to do that, they need to

1) Feel safe and guided in every aspect of the process
2) Have the time and ressources to do it.

It is our job as producers to take care of the first part, but the second part is a big organizational matter. Should it appear from the journalist’s employment contract that so and so many hours should be spent on live journalism? Should they do it in their spare time because it is considered con amore? Should you just work your way around schedules along

the way and hope for the best? It doesn't really seem that many have found a solution for the anchoring of live journalism in their daily work.
Moving forward with live journalism, this is a task that needs to be faced. If we want the best and most carefully produced performances, we must know that we have the time and dedication to do it. Not just the producer teams but the stars of the show, namely the journalists.

Another key point Jaakko emphasized is planning. Every second of *Musta Laatikko* is rehearsed. It needs to appear natural and effortless, but that illusion is only possible through rehearsal, rehearsal, rehearsal. Behind the scenes is a well-oiled machine that budgets, plans, coaches, and manages logistics.

That sounds obvious—but as we'll see in the next section, not all live journalism relies on rigorous planning

Planning for the unplanned: Q&A with Avisen Live

Avisen Live is a yearly literature festival in Albertslund, organized by Albertslund Bibliotek, Forbrændingen, and MusikTeatret Albertslund. Rather than traditional book readings and author talks, they've taken inspiration from the structure of a newspaper. Avisen Live describes themselves like this[19]:

"AVISEN LIVE is a lively literature festival with room for free thought and an informal community. We present the best writers, musicians and performers as sections in a Saturday newspaper. From the front page's view of the big ideas to the back page's anarchist cartoons and the regular columns with the day's weather and headlines.

At AVISEN LIVE you will experience interviews and well-organized panel debates with prominent cultural figures, thinkers and writers. There will also be literary performances - such as poetry slams and sharp satire – and musical features, such as communal singing, musical readings and a cool closing concert. (...) AVISEN LIVE gives you a literature festival in a new way."

Even though they are not a media outlet doing live journalism, I was interested in meeting up with the people behind a festival that actually thought an old fashioned newspaper was worth using for inspiration. I met with festival leader Ditte Nesdam-Madsen and team leader at

[19] From https://avisenlive.dk/om-avisen-live/

Albertslund Bibliotek Niels Offenberg to talk about their views on user involvement and about planning in such a way that you can let the unplanned happen.

The very informal setting at ‘Avisen Live’. Photo: Jon Bjarni

For Avisen Live user engagement is not just asking people what they want and letting them ask questions. It is a basic understanding of the audience’s mindset and behaviour.

You have to be careful not to exclude people with the way you design the event and the tone of voice you use, says Niels:

“First you have to enter the room, and you have already excluded someone if they cannot enter the room physically, if you for example have a big staircase and someone with a walking disability. But when you are sitting there, how do you avoid the audience sitting and thinking about whether they feel really wrong when they pose a question?
If an author on stage says: “Well, I have written this book, you have probably read it, and you know me really well”, then just like that, you excluded 80 percent of those who were supposed to be engaged, if they did not read the book.”

Ditte: “I've tried to be at other literature festivals as a moderator and there is a very big difference in how much control there is.
In some places you can get the feeling that the authors already had a conversation beforehand. It's fun to experience, because we don't do that. It's very much like ‘Do you want to do this interview?’ And then the communication stops. We put the task in their hands, so we don't have to define in detail what to ask about, or what to read out loud, or something like that.”

Niels: “When I got into the book business, I was surprised that people perceived interviews on stage as something that had to go from A to B, and that had been planned in advance. There are some very smart people on stage, and they really want to be sure that they know what they are going to give the audience.
I simply had to counteract that! The cool thing for the audience is that you can feel that these people are meeting each other for the first time, and it is safe and trusting.
The fact that the conversation can change depending on the audience, *that* is audience involvement. It is feeling who is sitting down there, and then working with that.”

In my conversation with Avisen Live I have learned mainly two things about how the so called magic happens on stage:

1) When both the people on stage and the people in the audience feel comfortable and feel that there is space for them. Comfort concerns both physical and mental well-being. You can’t really listen (or speak) if you are constantly distracted by bad sound, an uncomfortable sitting position or the room being unfit for the situation. You also can’t listen if you do not feel that you are among friends or if the conversation is excluding for various reasons – assuming that everyone has the same frame of reference for example.

   That does not mean you cannot have a conversation that is fit for a specific target group or that you cannot assume anything about your audience. It just means you have to read the room. Learn to somehow talk with and not to your audience all the time. Signal that you are also available for conversation off stage after the talk (maybe not everyone has the courage to ask a question in public). Perhaps create a stage that is levelled with the audience and have people sit closer to that stage. With furniture, tone of voice and body language create a room that invites openness and not ‘a place to be seen’.

This is actually backed up by a paper by Catherine Adams, who made a case study of two live journalism events in 2021, one of them a Financial Times festival. Here, she found that audiences loved the idea of live events as a public space for debate (in the Habermasean sense), but if fails if the audience is alienated by an unwelcoming tone or architecture:
"The chair and FT editor, Lionel Barber, describing himself as an 'enlightened despot', interrupted one audience member, saying 'we can't have two questions', nor were follow-up questions invited. (...) They described the event as 'very welcoming' but complained of 'not enough public discussion', or that it 'felt more like a formal talk because they had a metal barrier between them and audience and on a raised stage'.[20]"
If you invite people, and even have them pay, then make them feel invited.

2) Plan for the unplanned! Do not control the conversation. If you have invited interesting people, trust that they will say interesting things. And in important addition: If possible in the setting, ask people to choose their own topics. People on stage are so much more engaged if they are not told to have an opinion on something the producers of the event think they might have an opinion on. And on top of that: Let them choose their own partners for conversation. Let them know that they cannot choose someone they have already had a similar conversation with. The wonder happens in the surprise.
   This is both completely opposite and completely aligned with the method of Helsingin Sanomat. Opposite because at HS they plan the events on stage down to every second. They rehearse and rehearse until it sounds unrehearsed. But they agree that the magic lies in the surprise – they just leave that feeling to the audience whereas Avisen Live prioritizes that the people on stage have the same feeling.

Being real people: Q&A with Zetland

If you're looking for Danish inspiration in live journalism, *Zetland* is unavoidable. As a relatively new media outlet, *Zetland* incorporated live elements from the beginning and now has extensive experience.

Zetland describes their live activities like this:
"We usually say that Zetland Live is the meeting of a TED Talk, cabaret and the High School Songbook. It is an evening where journalism and stage show meet, and you can experience

[20] Adams, Catherine, 2021: NEWS ON STAGE: Towards Re-configuring Journalism through Theatre to a Public Sphere, Journalism Practice, 15:8, 1163-1180

Zetland's journalists who convey fascinating, nerdy, entertaining, funny and important stories on stage - with music and magic added. Because something magical happens when we bring journalism to life on stage."[21]

Zetland hots big shows similar to Black Box from Helsingin Sanomat, but a lot less frequently since it is a big and expensive operation. In addition they also do smaller events with talks, music and a sort of open editorial meeting where members can voice their opinion and ideas.

I met up with strategic project manager at Zetland, Ida Mortensen, to ask her how they view their members at Zetland and what she believes the members gain from their live events. This is Ida's reply:

"The members love being included and being a part of what we do. I think we are really good at reaching out and using their input, both in journalism, but also in all sorts of other formats.

I think Zetland has been extremely good at building a brand as a family. Here, you are part of something where you are heard, seen, and understood. We hear what you say, and we listen to what you need.

I think Zetland is extremely good at that. And we actually do it. It is not empty talk, and I think that is where the whole difference actually lies. The majority of the big projects and stories come from tips from members or someone who is wondering about something.

I also think that inviting people in and completely leveling with the members really works. Being transparent and being real people. And asking for advice if you are in doubt. Show your doubts.

You can compare it to being a good boss: The best thing you can do as a boss is to come and say 'Listen, I'm simply in doubt about this, I need help'.
We do the same with the members, we ask for their help. It's a huge declaration of trust. We trust you; you trust us. We are nothing without you."

The take away from my talk with Ida Mortensen is that taking participation seriously is what makes it work, and that circles back to my chapter on the participation ladder. You have to

[21] From https://www.zetland.dk/historie/soV99K4a-aO0VARz6-792a6

actually make use of the input you get for the participants not to feel foolish. Zetland is known for their engaged so-called members, and that is because they nurture the relationship, and they know what they want from it. They also know that it is good business.

Conclusion-ish

In modern media everything is measured. Clicks, reading time, traffic, engagement etc. So how do you explain to media bosses that it would be a good idea to invest in live journalism where one of the core values is intimissy, meaning not too many people in one room? If 300 people read an article we call that a failure. But if 300 people show up at a journalistic event we call that a huge success! Why? 300 people spending 90 minutes listening to and engaging with us: That's 450 hours of concentrated media time (and then I haven't even mentioned all the marketing and visibility around the event). Spend that time wisely and showcase exactly what journalism is capable of and maybe one room at a time we can renew the audience's understanding of journalism.

From doing this project I have learned that most people doing live journalism have the same experience: Live journalism, when it is good, *does* decrease the gap between journalists and audience. It borrows some of theater's magic and intimissy, but holds on to journalistic methods and a goal of informing and making the audience smarter. The live element makes it impossible for the journalist to hide. No matter how professional you are, you do bring your mannerism to the stage. And that is a good thing. Showing your quirks, flaws, doubts, hesitations is a trustbuilder to a certain extent if your material is professional.

However, I have also learned that most people doing live journalism struggle with the same thing: Time and money. Live journalism is expensive: Venue, marketing, fees and salary for the people on stage, producers' time, interior and so on. Ticket sales can cover that if the events are successful enough, but I find that the real challenge is accepting live journalism as a part of the journalists' job, and then actually giving them the time to do it and not having to work extra hours voluntarily because it is *con amore* for the journalist. I think that is the real cost and real challenge. Because the journalists have the good stories. And they must know that performing those stories live is a valid form of publishing.

The last thing I will do in this report is give five recommendations to media who want to start doing live journalism, based on what I have learned doing this report.

Recommendations for doing live journalism

1. Define what audience engagement means to you. And be aware of power structures.

Don’t equate silence with passivity. Getting people to **physically show up** and be mentally present is already a significant act of participation in today’s distracted media environment. What kind of participation are you looking for? And remember: You can have different goals for different occasions.

Also: Consider why you want to engage with the audience. And then consider why they want to engage with you. This will make you reflect on the power balance between you.

---

2. Embrace Transparency and Imperfection

Depending on the nature of the event, let the audience in on the **journalistic process**—including doubt, bias, frustration and breakthroughs. This vulnerability can enhance trust, not weaken it. It is not self-evident how journalists work, so show people your process.

---

3. Design for Emotional and Physical Safety

Create inclusive and **inviting spaces**—both architecturally and socially. Consider sound, light, proximity, tone of voice, and framing of conversations.

Don’t assume shared knowledge or status among audience members. In many situations it is a good idea to avoid alienating language and elite staging (e.g. raised podiums, distant panels). Make the space feel shared and navigable.

---

4. Make Passion and Relevance Prerequisites

Stage stories that the journalist deeply cares about, and let them tell why. Engaging stories are told by journalists with **personal stakes**—not necessarily autobiographical content, but

authentic curiosity or emotional connection. **Enthusiasm is contagious**, and trust grows from visible care.

---

5. Anchor Live Journalism in Organizational Structures

Treat live journalism as a core journalistic method—not an extracurricular hobby. Allocate **time, resources, and institutional support** for journalists to do it well. If media organizations want the benefits—trust, engagement, brand identity—they must integrate live journalism structurally into job descriptions, planning cycles, and budgets.

Literature

Books

Eriksson, Birgit (2019), Kulturel deltagelse [in] Ny Kulturteori, 1. ed., Hans Reitzels Forlag

Jørgensen, Søren Schultz & Westergård, Per, 2019: Den journalistiske forbindelse, Gyldendal

Journal Articles

Adams, Catherine (2021) NEWS ON STAGE: Towards Re-configuring Journalism through Theatre to a Public Sphere, Journalism Practice, 15:8, 1163-1180, DOI: 10.1080/17512786.2020.1771754

Adams, Catherine & Cooper, Glenda (2024) “I Felt I Got to Know Everyone”: How News on Stage Combines Theatre and Journalism for a Live Audience, Journalism Practice, 18:3, 744-761, DOI: 10.1080/17512786.2022.2052345

Jakobsson, P., & Stiernstedt, F. (2023). Trust and the Media: Arguments for the (Irr)elevance of a Concept. *Journalism Studies*, *24*(4), 479–495. https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2023.2169191

Reports and online articles

https://avisenlive.dk/om-avisen-live/

Haikarainen, Riikka et al., 2023: The power of live journalism: A handbook: https://livejournalismi.fi/gallery/The_Power_of_Live_Jounalism_Handbook_FINAL_2023.pdf

Lyytinen, Jaakko: Pulling back the curtain: How live journalism is re-engaging news audiences, 2020: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-08/RISJ_Final%20Report_Jaakko%20Lyytinen_2020_FINAL%20%281%29.pdf

Nelson, Jacob L., Sanderson, Zeve and Lewis, Seth C, 2024: People trust themselves more than they trust the news. They shouldn’t.: https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/people-trust-themselves-more-than-they-trust-the-news-they-shouldnt.php

The Reuters Institute survey 'Journalism, media and technology trends and predictions 2025': https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2025-01/Trends_and_Predictions_2025.pdf

The Reuters Institute ‘Digital News Report 2024: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-06/RISJ_DNR_2024_Digital_v10%20lr.pdf

https://www.zetland.dk/historie/soV99K4a-aO0VARz6-792a6