



Dear Audience, The Journalist is Present

Performing Fairness through Multi Partiality

Author:
Stijn Postema

“Truthful, not Neutral,” is the motto of world-renowned American war correspondent Christiane Amanpour ¹. Her statement signals an ideological shift: a journalist is never detached, always involved. This acknowledgement is particularly relevant in the context of Live Journalism, an emerging genre in which journalists present news stories directly to audiences using artistic and performative methods ².

In Live Journalism, involvement is unavoidable: the journalist cannot hide behind a published article, podcast, or documentary. The journalist is present. Vulnerable and subject to scrutiny. Any ‘involvement’ any scent of partiality is tangible to all who attend. This raises a pressing question: how can a journalist be “truthful, not neutral” yet constructively involved when stakeholders – such as politicians, activists, and affected citizens– are present in the audience or on stage?

This paper proposes multi partiality as a method for moderating live journalism. Adapted from contextual family therapy ³, multi partiality offers a model of fairness that avoids both the limitations of traditional impartiality in journalism, and the ideological rigidity of activist theatre. Both will be explained further below.



¹ Amanpour and Rubin, Christiane Amanpour Presents.

² Adams and Cooper, “I Felt I Got to Know Everyone”; Postema, ‘Journalistic Theater’; Ruotsalainen and Villi, “A Shared Reality between a Journalist and the Audience”.

³ Ducommun-Nagy, ‘The Essence of Contextual Therapy, Its Place in the Field of Family Therapy, and Its Role in the Future’.





Three variants of engagement in Live Journalism

Against a backdrop of declining trust, the news industry becomes increasingly engaged: journalists move beyond factual reporting to provide contextual information ⁴, to be visible and transparent about their working methods ⁵, to reflect on their work ⁶, and to engage in dialogue with diverse audiences ⁷.

A variety of engagement practices blend in Live Journalism. The emerging practice builds (potentially durable) relationships between journalists and audiences ⁸ in which news makers enhance their journalistic visibility and accountability towards audiences ⁹. It provides opportunities to experiment with new narrative and expressive forms ¹⁰, and collaborations between journalists and creative disciplines such as theatre professionals and musicians ¹¹.

In terms of engagement, Live Journalism offers a collective experience in which shared time and space facilitate joint meaning-making. Practitioners at the International Live Journalism Festival 2023 in Canada highlighted this dimension as their key motivation. Yet, how such processes of collective meaning-making unfold within the Live Journalism environment remains to be systematically studied.

Before continuing to the promising method of multi partiality in such meaning-making practices, allow me to share three general modes of live journalism in the Netherlands, all of which involve a different degree of audience engagement:

As a platform providing background to existing publications: events extend journalistic publications by presenting context, demonstrating accountability and interaction with subscribers. For example, Investigative journalism platform Follow the Money went on tour in 2023 and 2024 to provide context to their publications, answer questions of their subscribers and, afterwards, converse with their audience, who provide them with ideas and sources for new research and publications.

As performance-as-news-publication: the live performance is the journalistic work, comparable to a podcast or documentary, but multi-sensory and sometimes interactive. In the award-winning performance *De Zaak Shell* by Bureau Vergezicht, the actors give voice to the various stakeholders evolving around a legal case of Milieu Defense against Shell. In five monologues, the stakeholders – Shell, the consumer, the government, the citizen, and a younger generation worried about their future – keep shifting responsibility onto someone else. The role of the audience is limited to post performance reactions and questions, and during drinks afterwards.

As performance with stakeholders participating: A Live Journalism pioneer since 2019 is the cultural centre De Balie in Amsterdam. The editorial team investigates pressing and neglected issues in the city on a half yearly project base. They publish articles with local newspapers and broadcasters, and organise live journalism gatherings where stakeholders – citizens, organisational representatives, and politicians meet. Each

⁴ Salgado and Strömbäck, 'Interpretive Journalism: A Review of Concepts, Operationalizations and Key Findings'.

⁵ Koliska, 'Transparency in Journalism'.

⁶ Kay et al., 'Between a Rock and a Hard Place'.

⁷ Hornmoen and Steensen, 'Dialogue as a Journalistic Ideal'.

⁸ Adams and Cooper, "I Felt I Got to Know Everyone"; Galloway, 'Theory-Based Evaluation and the Social Impact of the Arts'; Vodanovic, 'Aesthetic Experience, News Content, and Critique in Live Journalism Events'.

⁹ Tenenboim and Stroud, 'Enacted Journalism Takes the Stage'.

¹⁰ Adams, 'News on Stage'.

¹¹ Zelizer et al., *The Journalism Manifesto*; Adams and Cooper, "I Felt I Got to Know Everyone".





project concludes with a performance based on the investigative journalists' research findings. Stakeholders and audience are present and dialogue (with the makers, and between groups usually via a moderator) is a fixed part of the performance. Inspired by constructive journalism¹² these projects do actually lead to policy improvements in the city¹³. Analysis by Eva Selderbeek¹⁴ shows, among other things, that while the contact with the audience at the final performance often has a symbolical function – a deeper engagement with sources and stakeholders emerges earlier in the process in interviews and gatherings.

This paper focuses on the third variant: the live journalism as a performance where stakeholders are participating. Here, the journalist's role shifts from detached observer to facilitator, responsible for creating conditions of fairness in dialogue and debate.

Why journalism requires Active Fairness

In journalism, the discussion about partiality is often framed through related concepts such as transparency, objectivity, impartiality, balance, fairness, and multi perspectivity. Transparency is seen as a way in which journalists can show audiences their working process and their professional and ethical choices¹⁵. Objectivity and impartiality have been viewed as the profession's cornerstone norms, with journalists expected to present "all sides" of an issue without personal involvement¹⁶. Closely linked is the idea of balance and fairness, which focuses less on strict neutrality and more on ensuring that relevant voices are represented and treated equitably¹⁷. Recent scholarship has highlighted the role of journalistic stance – the positioning or perspective a journalist adopts in their reporting – which shapes which voices and assumptions are made visible¹⁸. In addition, the notion of multi perspectivity has gained attention, referring to the inclusion of multiple viewpoints in reporting, particularly those of marginalised or less-heard groups, to enhance fairness and representational diversity¹⁹. Together, these concepts illustrate how journalism grapples with the tension between neutrality and the practical need to recognise and represent multiple perspectives.

To say this stronger: journalistic efforts to appear neutral risk allowing dominant voices – politicians or industry leaders – to monopolise discussion while quieter perspectives remain unheard. Traditional impartiality thus proves inadequate. What is required is not disengagement, but a new stance of active fairness.

¹² McIntyre and Gyldensted, 'Constructive Journalism'.

¹³ Wagemakers, 'How De Balie Uses "live Journalism" to Engage the Public and Local Politicians'.

¹⁴ Selderbeek, 'In de spotlight – een onderzoek naar de ervaring van de journalist tijdens live journalistieke producties'.

¹⁵ Sambrook and Cushion, 'Impartiality in Public Broadcasting'.

¹⁶ Sambrook, Delivering Trust.

¹⁷ Benham, 'Best Practices for Journalistic Balance'.

¹⁸ Hanitzsch and Örnebring, 'Professionalism, Professional Identity, and Journalistic Roles'.

¹⁹ Wasserman and de Beer, 'Towards De-Westernizing Journalism Studies'.





How Theatre Methods Illuminate the Way

In that regard, journalism can learn from theatre practices. 'Theatre of the Real'²⁰ traditions illuminate possible pathways. Theatre as developed by Augusto Boal and Bertolt Brecht has been celebrated for its ability to democratise performance. Both sought to transform passive spectatorship into critical engagement. Brecht by disrupting illusion through the *Verfremdungseffekt* – an effect of alienation with the purpose of assuring the audience is not too emotionally absorbed in a story, so that they remain critically alert. Boal by inviting “spectators” to intervene in scenarios of oppression. Their intentions were clearly unilateral in their political agenda and both approaches embed predetermined ideological frameworks, rooted in Marxist critiques, which funnel discussion into binary narratives of oppressor and oppressed. Such structures may clarify injustice but oversimplify the complexity of current affairs, where issues such as climate change, migration or economic reform involve multiple intersecting perspectives that cannot be reduced to a single moral lens.

The methods themselves could however be transformed in ways applicable to journalism. In Boal's *Forum Theatre*, the “Joker” decides which interventions are staged and how they are framed, effectively guiding dialogue. As facilitator, the journalist could take on this “joker” role – while applying a fair approach to what interventions should take place. Similarly, in Brecht's *Epic Theatre* – which is more scripted and less improvised than the Forum Theatre – *Verfremdung* (alienation) can be prompted through a journalist who interrupts a reenactment or fictional performance and engages in a meta explanation or dialogue with the audience.

Why Multi Partiality matters in Live Journalism

The concept of ‘multi partiality’ (in psychology sciences referred to as multi *directed* partiality) is inspired by Boszormenyi-Nagi who developed a model of family therapy based on – what he called – ‘relational ethics’ in which the therapist validates each family member’s perspective, including quieter or absent voices, to acknowledge each member’s pain, needs and responsibilities²¹. By doing so, the therapist creates a foundation for relating to one another in a way that is fair.

Why multi partiality matters in live journalism, is, firstly, that it encourages equal validation. In current affairs debate, different stakeholders (policymakers, activists, affected citizens, experts) often fear bias or silencing. By giving each participant an equal chance to voice their perspective, the journalist ensures fairness, which builds trust among participants and the audience. This reduces accusations of favouritism or taking sides.

Secondly, quieter voices can be amplified. Because some voices naturally dominate, such as politicians and industry leaders, others risk of being overlooked, such as marginalised community members and victims. Multi partiality requires the journalist to intentionally amplify less powerful participants, making the

²⁰ Martin, *Theatre of the Real*.

²¹ Ducommun-Nagy, ‘The Essence of Contextual Therapy, Its Place in the Field of Family Therapy, and Its Role in the Future’.





dialogue more representative and balance the power dynamics.

Thirdly, the issue can be framed in relational terms. Where standard moderation can become transactional – a matter of question-answer, with multi partiality, the journalist highlights how one participant's views and experiences relate to others'. This also encourages participants to engage with one another – not just transactional via the moderator. Such a relational dialogue has the potential to uncover deeper relational dynamics, including fairness, responsibility, and accountability.

Fourthly, multi partiality avoids a winner/loser frame. In high stakes current affairs, such as migration, healthcare, climate policy, opposing groups often treat debates as zero-sum. A (now) historic example are the Charlie Kirk's debating tours – aptly analysed by The New York Times ²² – as a rule by both supporters and opponents explained in terms of 'winning' and 'losing'. Multi partiality instead fosters reciprocal recognition: each side hears their concerns acknowledged (by the journalist) before being invited to respond to others. This makes constructive dialogue more likely, even when consensus is impossible.

Lastly, multi partiality encourages active fairness. Facilitating public dialogue is, and always has been, a journalistic task alongside reporting facts. By practicing multi partiality, the journalist as moderator embodies journalistic values of fairness, inclusivity and accountability – not the neutral in the sense of disengagement, but a fairness-in-action that supports dialogue and debate.

Multi partiality thus has clear advantages: Compared to traditional journalism, it accepts inevitable involvement while upholding fairness. Particularly set side by side with journalistic talk-show style moderation, multi partiality prevents dominant voices from monopolising the conversation and ensures quieter voices are heard. While compared to the influential theatre methods of Boal and Brecht, it fosters pluralism rather than ideological binaries.

Of course, the format of live journalism privileges stories that are better told in a live environment, and multi partiality might not be applicable in all situations. For example, when a journalist investigates corrupt practices, the approach might be less valid; although the voice of perpetrators can be present on stage in the form of re-enactment. Furthermore, the method of multi partiality requires training and a deep understanding of relations between stakeholders. Both require a huge investment of the live journalism team or at least close collaboration with trained professionals.

²² Bensinger and Smart, 'See How Charlie Kirk's Debate Style Worked'.





Conclusion

In conclusion, multi partiality transforms live journalism from a form of coverage into a practice of democratic dialogue. It enables journalists not only to report, but as 'actively fair' facilitator: to create a shared ethical space in which fairness is performed, and trust is nurtured.

In live journalism, the journalist is present: visible, engaged, and inevitably involved. Neutrality in the traditional sense is neither possible nor sufficient. Multi partiality provides a framework for journalists to moderate fairly, balancing power among stakeholders and fostering constructive dialogue.

By adopting this stance, live journalism moves beyond presenting stories. It becomes a site of collective meaning-making – a democratic practice that models fairness, inclusivity, and accountability. This shifts the live journalism from simply covering issues to actively facilitating democratic conversation.

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For those who enjoy continuing the conversation, here are some teasing questions:

- Can Active Fairness be a way forward for engagement in Live Journalism?
- Do involved journalism practices such as live journalism need a foundation of 'relational ethics'? – What would such relational ethics need?
- What are the risks of multi partiality in journalism?
- Does society need journalists as conveners, not just watchdogs and factual storytellers, but as facilitators of civic dialogue?
- What other theatre methods can inspire live journalism?
- The article brings knowledge from contextual therapy into journalism. What other professional practices could inspire the next stage of Live Journalism? -- for example regarding research methodology, creating (safe spaces), collective truth finding, and understanding audience engagement?





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