

NiemanReports

NIEMANS @ WORK

August 16, 2017

Nieman Reports
Summer 2017

One of a Kind: In creating a one night-only live magazine, Florence Martin-Kessler, NF '11, finds a storytelling innovation that sparks excitement

ARTICLE BY

FLORENCE MARTIN-KESSLER @florencemk



Editions of Live Magazine, such as one last fall at the National Theatre in Strasbourg, France, attract enthusiastic crowds J. Delay

On a sunny Saturday afternoon in October 2013, I entered a conference hall at the Charles Hotel in Cambridge to attend a roundtable that was part of the Nieman Foundation's 75th anniversary celebration weekend (<http://nieman.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/pod-assets/microsites/NiemanAt75/SessionVideos/InnovationsInStorytelling.aspx.html>). The topic: "Innovation in Storytelling."

Over the 15 years that I had spent directing documentaries for French public television, I had given a lot of thought about precisely that question: how can we be more creative with form, while staying journalistic in the stories we tell? I was grateful that public funding made it possible to get films made in France, but classic formats—voice-over, interviews, experts, archives—felt increasingly imposed on us. A great number of promising projects would never come to light because they'd been

deemed too personal for the current affairs shows (or too journalistic for the few auteur slots). There was very little flexibility, and any fresh idea had little prospect. Meanwhile, I love online short docs but there didn't seem to be a revenue model for them and the nonlinear narrative possibilities offered by the internet with web-docs never delivered on their promise.

So, back at that Saturday afternoon panel, [Douglas McGray](http://niemanstoryboard.org/stories/5-questions-pop-up-magazines-doug-mcgray-and-the-pleasures-of-live-storytelling/) (<http://niemanstoryboard.org/stories/5-questions-pop-up-magazines-doug-mcgray-and-the-pleasures-of-live-storytelling/>) started to explain how he invented [Pop-Up Magazine](https://www.popupmagazine.com/) (<https://www.popupmagazine.com/>) in San Francisco five years earlier, “as a hobby.” He’d wondered: “What if the future of journalism was not online but onstage?” And had come up with a format of unrecorded news stories, told live: a dozen journalists and authors would stand on stage to narrate their articles. In [the contributor’s guide](https://www.popupmagazine.com/contributor-guide/) (<https://www.popupmagazine.com/contributor-guide/>), he states: “Pop-Up stories are true, and most are based on reporting the contributors have done about the world around them. Pieces can be adapted from a big work in progress; or drawn from fantastic, unused material from some past work; or it might be new work produced specifically for the show. Pieces can be just talking, or talking with pictures, or audio, or film. They can be cross-disciplinary or collaborative—a radio producer can team up with an illustrator, a photographer with a musician. Pop-Up provides an ideal stage and supportive audience to explore work that challenges professional pigeonholing.”

So many of the questions that I’d had in mind—how to bring closer the different shades of journalism, bring first-person voices into outstanding journalism stories, experiment with nonfiction narratives, capture an audience—seemed to be answered. I loved the clarity of the concept—it was a eureka moment. In hindsight, I realize that it also resonated very much with the Nieman Soundings, a cornerstone of the fellowship experience where journalists humbly come in front of their peers to share the stories that are fundamental to their personal and professional life.

Later that day, I introduced myself to Doug and he encouraged me to start a show in Paris. I put on the first [Live Magazine](http://www.livemagazine.fr/) (<http://www.livemagazine.fr/>) to an audience of 300 at the Gaité Lyrique Hall in Paris in April of 2014. I followed his principles scrupulously—no announcement of the lineup, no recording of the show whatsoever, a diversity of profiles, a touch of wonder—and added my own touches as I felt necessary. The fact I couldn’t watch a replay of the original proved liberating.

Our 24th edition will take place this September before an audience of 1,500. We have produced more than 230 stories in all, each carefully curated and edited, yet ephemeral (though some authors have been so energized by the audience response to turn them into articles, films, or podcasts). We have teamed up with France’s biggest traditional media groups—Le Monde, Les Echos, Bayard—for co-productions. We also have launched a series for a younger audience, an outreach program for vocational school students and started shows in Belgium. And Pop-Up Magazine and Live Magazine have inspired shows in Denmark ([Zetland Live](https://www.zetland.dk/live/) (<https://www.zetland.dk/live/>)), Romania (Decator Live, associated with the magazine [Decât o Revistă](http://www.decatorevista.ro/)) (<http://www.decatorevista.ro/>), Poland, and soon in Spain.

So why do audiences keep coming to our sold-out shows? As Guillemette Faure, a columnist, said: “You can hear every breath in a living newspaper.”

Help advance the Nieman Foundation’s mission “to promote and elevate the standards of journalism” by making a donation (<http://nieman.harvard.edu/about/make-a-gift/>) .
