
Research

Exploring the Matrix of Social Reflections: A New Model of the Living Newspaper

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This article discusses a new model for the Living Newspaper method, which focuses on exploring and understanding society and its unconscious motivations and the driving forces under and behind the group dynamics matrix (Foulkes, 1964). When Moreno (2010) used the Living Newspaper, he primarily aimed to demonstrate that the performances in his theater were not rehearsed or planned. This approach was an experiment in spontaneity and an attempt to find a new form of theater, rather than a method for exploring society. Moreno (1953) also developed other valuable tools for working with society, such as sociodrama, social atom, and sociogram. These structured methods and techniques can address various social issues and problems, including conflict resolution, racism, sexism, discrimination, climate change, sustainability, etc. These topics can be even more tailored to the specific needs and interests of the group participating in the sociodrama. All these methods have in common a predetermined topic that the group explores (Djuric & Veljkovic, 1998). The Living Newspaper method detailed in this article is a potent tool for identifying and addressing societal issues, particularly those that may be unconscious. This approach is closely related to group analysis and its techniques, such as conducting large groups, social dreaming matrix, listening post, and reflective citizens. It uses psycho/sociodrama techniques and community theater to explore a matrix of social reflections, promote open dialogue, and work with the group as a whole.

KEYWORDS: Living newspapers; matrix; group as a whole; sociodrama; society.

After participating in the Reflective Citizens and LP workshops led by Marina Mojović in Serbia for several years, I felt motivated to create a platform for addressing social issues through dramatic performances on stage, rather than just discussing them in a circle. This led me to the concept of the Living Newspaper, which initially I thought was simply a reflection of Moreno's (2010) work. However, I soon realized that Living Newspapers, as I envisioned them, was a unique and powerful concept in its own right. I aimed to regularly provide a platform for addressing important community issues.

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I felt that this platform needed to be in a public space where everyone is welcomed and every voice is heard. Some people would come for the workshop, and some would be there by chance. This inclusive dynamic would ensure that we had perspectives from people who might not have been engaged otherwise. However, it was necessary to have some people invited to the workshop so that we could start quickly. We needed structure while also requiring openness for all the potential subjects that could emerge; we had to stay open to the unconscious.

I invited my colleague Bane Djordjevic to join me, and he agreed. We chose Cafe Gavez on the river island Ada Ciganlija in Belgrade. This unique location was known for attracting interesting people, making it an ideal setting for our project. The owner's openness to new ideas and willingness to host our "community performances" made it even more perfect.

The plan was to have a Living Newspaper once a month. We hoped, it would become an interactive community theater where dialog with people who think differently would be possible and where we could gain a deeper understanding of the societal dynamics.

BACKGROUND

A Living Newspaper is a form of theater that presents factual information on current events.

It all began in Russia during the Bolshevik Revolution with the Blue Blouses, a well-known group that used to give performances based on newspaper news. They aimed to make current events more accessible to illiterate workers, much like someone reading news to them, but in a more engaging manner. A similar theater group existed among Italian communists as well.

In Moreno's (2010) surrealist theater, Theater of Spontaneity, the Living Newspaper was one of the techniques he used. Moreno's "Living Newspaper" technique meant that the performances were based on the day's current events to delve into the conflicts that had caused them, probe the motivations of the people involved, and try to project the final solutions of the dramatized stories. Their central task was "to bring about a revolution in theater" and "eliminate the playwright and the written play" (Moreno, 2010).

Performances in Moreno's (2010) surrealist theater, where the public was invited to think about who rules with them, can also be considered as the first sociodrama. The experiments of the Theater of Spontaneity gave Moreno (2010) the chance to observe the therapeutic effects of specific roles on the actors' private lives, thus bringing to life the idea for psychodrama that he developed after he had moved to the United States in 1925.

Independent of Moreno's work, the Living Newspaper was initiated in the United States in 1935 as part of the famous Federal Theatre Project. It was the first federally supported theatre in the United States, and it was meant to create jobs for unemployed actors and directors. The Federal Theatre Project believed in the value of drama as an instrument of social change. It became the most compelling new theatre form. Famous productions were *Triple-A Plowed Under*, *Injunction Granted*, *One-Third of a Nation*, *Power*, *Spirochete*, etc. The

Living Newspaper's communist leanings were one of the reasons why the Federal Theatre Project was canceled in 1939 (Britannica, 2013).

Boal (1993) introduced the concept of the Theatre of the Oppressed, which encompasses three forms of activist theatre. In Image Theatre, performers represent an oppressive situation; spectators are invited to interpret and suggest changes. In Invisible Theatre, actors perform a written and rehearsed problematic situation in a public place to provoke responses from passersby, who are unaware that they are participating in theatre. In Forum Theatre, the audience is not just a passive observer; they are actively involved in the performance, as actors perform scenes from life that involve oppression. Spectators are not only encouraged but empowered to suggest and enact solutions to the problem in the scene (Boal, 1993). He also experimented with a form of Living Newspaper.

Boal's Newspaper Theatre transforms news articles into performances using various methods, such as reading articles together, adding missing facts to news stories, and combining news with historical sources or other performances. The goal is to challenge how news is presented and to connect it to what is left unsaid. Meanings are redefined using techniques such as rhythm, repetition, and improvisation. News is fictional; concrete images and actions can supplement repetitive stories to restore their emotional impact. The idea of this exercise is to make people read texts more actively (Meir, 2018).

International Listening Post Project is a series of regular meetings that take a "snapshot" of society at a particular moment. It explores the idea that a small group, when studying the behavior of the wider social system that is society, unconsciously expresses some of its characteristics, and these are discernible from the themes and patterns emerging from the discussion.

This method of exploring the underlying dynamics in society is unrivaled as a piece of social science research, with data now available from over 30 countries worldwide. These Listening Posts serve as platforms for people to share their perspectives, insights, and concerns about global issues. They provide valuable data for understanding common themes and patterns across different regions.

The Reflective Citizens Method of creating reflective spaces "with and for" citizens started with work carried out by informal citizen-led groups in Serbia during the "horrible nineties," initiated by Marina Mojović and Jelica Sataric, psychiatrists and group analysts. These spaces include everyone regardless of background, nationality, social-political history, ethnicity, gender, class, age, and profession.

The workshops usually last for 4 hours and combine large and small group work. They start with social dreaming, and the experience develops into spaces where all participants can discover connections with each other (Mojović, 2019).

The Social Dreaming Matrix is a method developed by W. Gordon Lawrence and his colleagues. It is sharing and working with dreams within a social space. The purpose of the matrix is to transform one's understanding of the dream by associating with the dreams offered in the matrix, finding links and connections between them, and discovering something new (Lawrence, 2005).

METHOD

Our concept of the Living Newspaper is a form of community theater performed in a public space, preferably a cafe. Some participants are invited, while others happen to be there. This creates two circles: the “fishbowl” in the middle with active participants, and the surrounding group of observers and standbys. Any passive observer can become active at any time if she/he choose to. Before the workshop begins, participants can look at newspapers prepared in advance containing various daily news articles. During this warm-up period, they can sit comfortably or walk, talk, and comment. They then are instructed to write a headline from a current, past, or even future newspaper. Headlines can also be real or imagined. The only rule is that the headline must be personally significant to the writer. Newspapers provide an excellent platform for engaging with society, covering a wide range of topics crucial to society, such as politics, economics, weather (climate), culture, sports, and even horoscopes, enigmas, and comics, all of which can provide insight into one’s attitude toward the community. The instruction could be to choose from the actual headlines of the daily newspaper, but that could direct the discussion to be more political, actual, and narrow. We wanted to detach from daily politics. The idea was to stay open to feelings about our common social context (daily politics is just part of it), which can include past and future events and circumstances. Before Social Dreaming became a regular part of Reflective Citizens, there was instruction at the beginning to talk about psychosocial issues from our lives (not only actual political issues but anything about living in society that is personally important to participants). This is very similar to it, but more in the spirit of psychodrama: it is concrete enough, has an obvious task—to write a headline—and it takes creativity to express thoughts about psychosocial issues in one sentence.

When everyone contributes headlines, we display them in a visible area. The group chooses the first headline, and the writer presents a short descriptive scene on stage based on that headline. From the initial scene, we create another headline on the stage, or build on the first image with doubles and associations, and some of the associations become vignettes on stage. It is like a free-flowing discussion in group analysis, only dramatized.

In the end, participants share their personal feelings, thoughts, and memories inspired by the performance, and then reflect on the whole workshop. We try to answer the question: “If what was played on stage was a theater performance, what would it be about? What was the theme of the performance as a whole?”

The first workshop was held in Cafe Gavez’s beautiful garden in the summer of 2013. In all, 14 people attended. Around 10 more people curiously followed the course of the workshop from their tables, but did not involve until the end, although they were invited. We were happy that the participants were very different from one another. There was one teenage boy, some students, some middle-aged people, people that had different occupations and lifestyles, women and men, and even one dog.

We created a great atmosphere. Participants talked, mingled, read the newspaper, and wrote headlines. The first headline chosen by the group was “River

Despotovica is vanishing.” It was not something important at that moment in our society; nobody had heard about the issue prior to the workshop. The young woman who wrote the headline came to the improvised stage and used scarves and participants to create a scene. Initially idyllic, the scene quickly transformed to depict the impact of pollution on the once-thriving river, symbolizing environmental degradation. The focus shifted to the people polluting the river, starting with a poor Roma woman washing laundry in the river. What began as an ecological theme slowly evolved to include influential politicians and greedy people destroying the environment not just for plants and animals but also for the well-being of our children and our future. The scene took most of the workshop and appeared as a political cabaret, with participants laughing at recognized characters. Eventually, the laughter grew quiet as the group faced helplessness, and the only hope left was in the European Union and its standards and values.

The second and final scene featured the second headline, “Everyone hates rock and roll.” The youngest participant, a teenager, put on the stage scene from his personal experience, as being different from his classmates because of his preference for different music, leading to him being loudly humiliated. He liked rock and roll, they liked turbo folk. Turbo folk in Serbia is associated with the 1990s, including the war, aggression, sanctions and inflation, corruption, and the old regime.

In the reflection at the end, the group concluded that the central theme of the performance was pollution, both literal and metaphorical. It highlighted the feeling of powerlessness in the face of loud, negative influences, with the notion that “the worse you are, the louder you get.”

When the workshop is focused on ecological issues, the participants frequently discuss solutions such as not littering, using reusable grocery bags instead of plastic ones, and other ways to reduce environmental impact. Through these Living Newspapers, we concluded that ecology is closely connected to power distribution and that societies in transition are especially facing tough challenges. We also saw splitting, idealization, and devaluation: the group fantasized about help somehow arriving from the outside, through the values of the European Union or rock music. As if there is nothing good inside, as if we are an innately corrupt people who only like lousy turbo folk music. During the previous year, a new government was elected in Serbia, which in a way meant the return of politicians who were advocates of wars in the 1990s. It is possible that the play showed the fear that we would abandon the path of European integration and that we as a society would return to that period.

There was just one more workshop in Cafe Gavez. Without previous experience, we hoped that more and more people would come every time, but we were very disappointed when we realized that that was not true, so we quit. We thought that people were having trouble coming to Ada because it is slightly out of the city center, so we tried to find a place more accessible; however, we couldn't find anything in a timely enough manner, so we stopped.

The next time I attempted to revive the Living Newspaper was in 2015. This time, we offered a workshop in Cafe Galery Polet on Cetinjska Street, a famous

place very similar to Cafe Gavez but in the center of the city. There was a small stage with reflectors in one corner, which we used for our performances. The group wasn't much bigger than the one in Cafe Gavez, but I discovered that sometimes it's possible to work even with fewer than 10 participants. However, the staff could have been more enthusiastic about our workshop. Sometimes we arrived prepared to perform, only to find out that the manager we needed to speak to wasn't there and had not informed anyone about our scheduled performance. There were some other issues with our performances, and I ended this series after the fifth performance.

During the performance, there was music in the background or background sounds, such as the whirring of a coffee machine. People who were not engaged sometimes were quite loud, but it contributed to the crowd's atmosphere, just the way we preferred. Some people from the public occasionally joined us on the stage. Once a man from the public came to the stage to sit by the piano and accompany the action on the stage. That was beautiful!

Some art students sketched all the processes, like in a court. The idea was to capture exciting moments and display the drawings in Polet as a teaser for the next performance. They lacked experience, so it was a rather difficult task for them and they only did it for the first performance. Unfortunately, Polet never displayed those drawings, despite promising to do so.

Participants were mostly activists or people interested in psychodrama; it was sometimes hard to motivate them to think about social issues, but the results were interesting nonetheless. For example, one of the first headlines was somewhat mysterious: "Chair 40/4." The protagonist said that the text was about a new type of chair made from three materials. She was fascinated by that chair. She proceeded to make the chair on stage, like a sculpture, and she gave the layers of material a voice: she said that she mostly likes the chair because it captures her attention, and she does not see anything else around. From there, the role of "Around that she doesn't want to see" inspired her to become our president, Vucic, in one of his characteristic poses. Someone wanted to double and stay on the stage, then someone else did the same, and someone else too, and soon we had people "around" him saying his characteristic phrases and adjusting his glasses.

We then put on stage some of the associations in the form of vignettes: one vignette about young people leaving the country, and another about arrogant sons and daughters of wealthy parents. But the group was tired of it very soon and wished for something far away from politics. Then, one participant was inspired to make her headline: "Everything will be different when ecoactivists win the election and start to rule the country."

Her vignette was about an ordinary day in a regular person's life. The person is on a bus with everyone else, except for the spoiled daughter from the previous scene, who is taking a taxi (the group laughs at that because "some things stay the same even when everything is different"). At each bus stop, the passengers who disembark are greeted by the driver, and the passengers say "Thank you" to the driver. That is all. She and the group are satisfied with that image. Suddenly, she remembers one such driver from reality who stops waiting for a

running passenger, explains where to get off, and behaves politely. She tells the name of that driver and the bus line he is working on. The audience is pleased because there are those bright examples in the dark. In reflection, we find that the central themes were apoliticality, parental protection, dependency, and searching for a good leader.

We were really surprised to find out in the end that even young apolitical people who dislike the dictator Vucic were in search of a leader. This means that changing the political party of the government or the president is not enough; our authoritarianism is based on deeper layers of the social unconscious.

EVALUATION

This Living Newspaper was successful in identifying and addressing societal issues, particularly those that may be unconscious. In these two limited attempts, it proved to be playful and engaging, and it also provided a very deep understanding of social unconsciousness.

However, both attempts failed to establish long-term community theater. It seems that it takes much more confidence and patience to accomplish something like that than we had at the time.

Also, participants of our Living Newspaper differed in many ways, but not so much in their political or apolitical views, values, and attitudes. It would be better if we could reach out to people who are more different from us.

Although it took work to attract participants to the performance, once they came, they participated, and we always had many vignettes, humor, aesthetic scenes, reflections, and valuable group interpretations in the end.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This text describes two attempts to establish a community theater that combines the social matrix and the living newspaper. A small group of participants represents a larger group and society. It occurred at public spaces and cafe galleries in both of our cycles, but it could also be elsewhere.

The first task for the participants is to creatively express personal issues that resonate with society using newspaper headlines as a format. Then, those headlines are brought to life on stage in the form of a psychodrama vignette. The next vignette is the next headline or association with the first one. In the end, there is sharing and then reflection on the whole process.

Despite never having established a series that ran longer than a few months, this method proved to be dynamic and playful and at the same time retained a depth of interpretation and possibilities for dialog.

In order to do Living Newspapers this way, organizers have to be prepared for the fact that people are not that much into thinking and connecting with the social unconsciousness ("working group"; Bion, 1961). It seems that they are primarily interested in politics or activism, meaning they have goals to achieve or enemies to fight ("basic assumption group"). It is necessary to be persistent and patient until a community is built; performances are done every time they are scheduled and can continue for a long time.

Some considerations for future groups could include performances that do not occur at public places to start with; in addition, it could be helpful if the core group is established before conditions start to look like a crowd.

Living Newspaper might look easy because it appears as a play most of the time, but it's far from true. So it is better to work in therapeutic pairs so that therapists can contain each other and contain the group together.

The sessions end with sharing, and making connections between the personal and dynamic matrix possible. Then there is reflection, which enables group interpretation of the whole process and connections between the dynamic and fundamental matrix (Foulkes, 1964). There may be opportunities at the ending of the encounter to be improved. It could be interesting if reflection were not just verbal; it would be great if the performance ended with Medli, like in playback theater (Salas, 2019). Also, for now, it requires some group analytic knowledge and experience to reach a deeper interpretation as a conclusion.

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