

The media's coverage of the outskirts of Denmark - a report written after 10 months at the Constructive Institute 2021/22 in Aarhus.

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In autumn 2021 I started as a fellow at the Constructive Institute in Aarhus, and I have for 10 months immersed myself in the eastern part of Jutland under the heading: The media's coverage of the outskirts of Denmark.

My focus has been on forms of housing and living conditions outside the big cities, and how media can give the citizens there a clearer voice so as many as possible feel seen and heard.

One of the big questions is whether the areas outside the big cities get the attention they should - the areas where the big newspapers have closed their local editorial offices and where only a few journalists live. Is there a way we can ensure that we remember to tell stories from ALL of Denmark? And how do we refer to those areas? Is outskirts the right term?

As a journalist at DRP4Østjylland my focus has been my coverage area, which goes from Randers in the north to Horsens in the south and Silkeborg in the west. And what is "outskirts" here in East Jutland? Those who decide such things say that it is Norddjurs Municipality and the islands of Anholt and Samsø that fit in that category.

Starting with my own newsroom we cover East Jutland by, among other things, having divided our 10 municipalities between the journalists in the newsroom. In this way, at least one journalist has the responsibility of knowing what is happening in that municipality. With the municipal merger in 2007 the municipalities suddenly became very large. It is therefore a big task to know what the almost 100,000 inhabitants of Randers think is a significant and important story.

At P4 our focus for many years has been to involve the listeners in our stories. We have done this with the help of East Jutland cases and by asking for experiences via SMS, when the stories have been broadcasted. We have also actively used Facebook to involve listeners. But like other media we ask ourselves how we can be relevant to the users and how they can feel that we are THEIR radio, a way to be heard.

We are not alone having these considerations. In 2021 a few newspaper houses have gone very local by hiring journalists in the small towns publishing the stories in a newsletter. They have done this, because local content is something that is very popular in the smaller towns. However, no one has found a business model where they can make a profit.

The newspaper Midtjyllands Avis, headquartered in Silkeborg, publishes a newsletter with local content about Kjellerup, which has 250 recipients. It is content from the newspaper's pages, which can be bought as a newsletter if you are not interested in the whole newspaper. They have just hired a debate journalist who will be involved in creating stories on what concerns the citizens of Silkeborg and the surrounding area and who will actively create debates with the newspaper as the sender. Part of editor-in-chief Hans Krabbes day is spent meeting readers at events to create what he calls a RELATIONSHIP HOUSE. A beautiful word that more medias could think of in their contact with users.

Relevance and user involvement:

At the media Zetland they focus on how contact with the readers is not only sender-receiver. They call their subscribers members. They hold open editorial meetings and ask about the members' experiences when a story is about to be published or even before a story is written. They are still developing their medium. They originated in writing but found that users want to listen to their articles. So now they make audio-files of everything and have actually ended up with 80 percent of all articles reaching users via audio. In a way they have become a small radio station, although the goal was different; And this happened by listening to the needs and wishes of the recipients.

Another example is TV2Fyn, who have gained more user involvement by installing Hearken on their website. It is basically a form and a mindset that should make it easier to get the users' ideas and thoughts. <https://wearehearken.com/>. A simple grip on a website.

Perhaps we are not fully aware of that we as journalists still think that communication primarily goes one way: namely from the journalists and towards the users. I think we need to think in new ways, how we can be relevant to users and how accessible we are. At my own medium, DR, it is possible to write to DR by pressing the word "contact" on the front page of dr.dk. Here you can choose whether you want to ask DR about something, whether you have criticism or praise or have found an error. A fourth option is for an idea or a tip.

When we talk about representing a large group of citizens and covering their lives so that they feel mirrored, we must also look inward: How is the group of journalists in the newsroom composed. At Swedish Radio and SVT they want the newsroom to include young and old and journalists with different origins and backgrounds. Today, many journalists live in owner-occupied housing in areas with people like themselves. So how do we know what is going on in, for example, areas with many rental properties? We can ask, but what answers will we get when we come by for half an hour with the microphone. Perhaps we should not have quotas for types of employees, but an awareness of who we are and what strengths and differences we have. In the same way as the latest media settlement from May 2022 states that the media must have "an increased awareness of gender inequality in the media industry".

Now let me go back to the word OUTSKIRTS.

What does the word "outskirts" do for the cohesion of society. Are there ways to talk about the smaller towns and communities that might be conducive to people moving there? By using certain words, journalists may be helping to maintain an image that good life is living in the big cities and that only people with little money move out in the countryside.

One might think that the word outskirts itself is wrong in the context of Denmark, since most people do not have more than an hour's drive to the nearest big town. Professor Gunnar L.H. Svendsen has described that the word "fringe Denmark" only really began to be used in the media and the debate during 2010. This is calculated based on how often the word appears in articles in eight nationwide newspapers. Until then, in the 00s, "outlying areas" has been referred to at a certain extent, but the word had not yet been generally used.

In 2009 the word was used 31 times, while in 2010 it was used almost a thousand times. A contributing factor to the spread of the word is probably that DR broadcasted the theme "Denmark is breaking" that year, which was precisely about the great differences between the cities and the periphery in Denmark.

A new search in Infomedia now in 2022 shows that it is still a word that is being used: I got 1625 hits. But among the articles that appear are also several sources that relate to how we as media refer to "the

outskirts". Among others the Danish politician Søren Espersen, who is married to an English woman and has himself lived in England, notice that there is a different vocabulary about living in the countryside:

"It is completely wrong when in Denmark you choose to designate rural areas outside the big cities as Outer Denmark. In England, these areas are some of the most attractive, because living there is for the English the epitome of the good life", says Søren Espersen.

Journalism IS being made about the good life in the countryside: And when you ask one of the families in the TV program "Årgang 2020" a mother Lena Gram Thomsen from Als says that they signed up precisely to focus on the good life in the countryside:

- We are open people, and we think we have a lot to offer. We want to show our everyday life in our village. Show how well you can also live in rural Denmark, says Lena.

But before it all becomes too shiny and positive it is still important to talk about the differences that also exist in this country:

Our former Home Secretary Kaare Dybvad (S) has written about the differences in Denmark in a book called "The Periphery Myth" - how the centralization of Denmark destroys our economy and social cohesion" (2015).

It is on his mind how the country is connected. And that focus IS important when decisions are made in the Parliament.

And numbers can be exciting to delve into when we need to understand the motives for moving. A new major report from the department of the built environment Build at Aalborg University shows that the areas outside the larger cities make a big effort to attract more citizens. Helle Nørgaard, senior researcher at BUILD and lead author of the report, says:

"It is important how we talk about things. Unfortunately, a very unvarnished picture of reality is often given, and a negative image can affect both moving in and moving out. In fact all municipalities experience young people moving out, just as in all municipalities there are both arrivals and departures - which in many cases are roughly equal in number".

"We focus a lot on the young people, who typically move to bigger cities for education, but it is worth taking a closer look at the migration of families with children. It is especially these families that the municipalities would like to attract, because they contribute to the rejuvenation of the population, more children to the local schools and daycare centers as well as participation in association life. In addition, they pay council tax".

BUILD wants to dig deeper into the numbers and is in the process of carrying out the first major survey of the reasons people give for moving from one city or region to another. That report is currently not complete. When I have spoken to researchers and professors at the School of Architecture in Aarhus, they also point out that settlement consultants are important players on the market when it comes to telling the good story that is often needed to attract new citizens to an area. And then it's probably a generational thing that big cities are just more attractive when you're young. As Professor Tom Nielsen said to me: "When I take the young people on a study trip to the little town Langaa and they get off the train, they look around a little bewildered and think - what are we doing here".

But there has been a greater focus on stories that deal with the good life in the countryside. Many newspapers have noticed that tiny living in houses that are typically between 20 and 50 m² and downsizing, where you get rid of everything that is no longer in use, is of interest to the readers.

I wrote in my application for the fellowship that I wanted to try to learn more about what a living community can do to people: Instead of sitting alone in a big house or an apartment how about seeking a community with others?

For many people just the thought of living with others is too challenging. But this new way of thinking about living together, eating together when you like, in individual homes of a reasonable size and with common facilities, has opened many people's eyes to the possibilities in this particular form of housing.

This applies to both young and old. A newly built housing community like Kløverbakken in the little town of Odder is very popular. Here young families live together with other young families. But grandparents are also welcome here. In other housing communities elderly are seeking company and a good life. I visited Balancen in Ry. It is a relatively new residential community where the residents rent their house. It is a senior housing community and the four women I met had either lost their spouses or were divorced. They had actively chosen the community. What I experienced during my visit was a friendliness and a willingness to get involved with each other.

And there is a huge interest in learning more about the community. Quite often, the residents open their homes to delegations from municipalities who are on a study tour to hear more about the advantages and disadvantages. Architects also stop by to get inspired before they sit down at the computer to design yet another community. However, one thing is certain: there must be a discussion about which values you want to put into a community. And they spend a long time on that in Balancen in Ry. Things don't happen by themselves just because the buildings are there.

Where do we go from here:

If you ask the futurists, in the next few years and towards 2030 there will be an improvement in the housing market in the smaller urban communities and rural areas all over the country. That part of the country will attract young people and seniors, as written in an article in Jyllands-Posten from January 2022: "There is a false narrative that all growth happens in the big cities", says Jesper Bo Jensen from Fremforsk - Center for Future Research.

First of all, young people cannot afford to settle down in the big cities, where the prices of owner-occupied housing have skyrocketed. But they may also want a different work-life balance. Who says you **MUST** work 37 hours a week and only see your children when they are tired and ready to be fed and cuddled.

To find the good places to live outside the big cities, the tourism industry can give us inspiration and show the qualities of an area. The settlement consultants in the individual municipalities can do the same and ask themselves: "What do **WE** have that the others don't?". And it's probably not something that hits the front page of the newspapers. But it's worth keeping in mind when we try to find good stories.

In the book "Despite bad odds: international inspiration for Danish outlying areas" you can find examples from other European countries where they have seen opportunities in for example a closed mine excavation in south-west England, which is now a huge botanical garden and in six years has given the region a huge income, or the village in northern Germany where three women have created a town festival focusing on glass art. Before, 100 tourists came annually, now 20.000 come.

Many of the projects have only come into existence on commitment from a few passionate people. The aim of the book is to inspire a broad and open debate, where the Danish outlying areas are seen not as poor versions of Denmark's central urban areas but as sustainable alternatives with other qualities and development opportunities, as Karen Schou writes in the foreword of the book. These areas have become a part of the project "The Land of Opportunities". This project was a partnership between Realdania and the three municipalities of Bornholm, Lolland and Thisted. The focus is on tourism, settlement and cultural heritage. The goal is to show new paths for development in Denmark's outer regions. The criterion for success is not necessarily economic growth, but to support and strengthen the existing qualities of the area.

The book was published in 2010, I still think it's good to read to become historically wiser and to be inspired.

And exactly these kinds of stories can act as inspiration for journalists. If we look for the stories where someone has succeeded in solving a problem, they can be used as examples for others. But these stories have to be told. Use both eyes - and listen louder. Then journalists have an opportunity to be relevant in the future.

Five pieces of good advice:

- 1) Find resourceful people and ask them to tell their story
- 2) Seek for figures from Statistics Denmark that can be used as take off for new stories
- 3) Talk to settlement consultants - what are they proud of?
- 4) Ask people about their interests - everyone has a story
- 5) Explore Realdania's website – a gold mine of information