

How do we inform, discuss, and engage with young people in journalism in the future?

This was the complicated question I raised a year ago, when I began my fellowship at Constructive Institute. I've learned more than what can be told on a piece of paper this year, but one thing is clear to me after spending a year looking at journalism with a new pair of glasses. There are more than one answers to the question.

While writing this I'm optimistic, because I see opportunities for media that we have not yet taking in. But also, I am realistic, knowing that we need to work hard in order to succeed giving the new generation an honest and dedicated interest in journalism.

Before revealing *three key findings* from my year researching on journalism for future generations, let me take you a little bit closer to *the core of challenges* we face as journalists with an interest in young audiences.

We got 99 problems, but talking about one

A Wednesday in September we had an online meeting on statistics at Constructive Institute that unexpectedly became a super important milestone in my fellowship. The meeting was with Nic Newman, Senior Research Associate at Reuters Institute, who presented their new digital news report from 2022¹. This year the focus had been to investigate *news habits of young audiences* and *news avoidances* in general. Some of the interesting points was:

- **The youngest audience represents a more casual, less loyal news user.** They are born with social media and drawn to information that is curated for them on these platforms.
- Young people² **are more likely than older groups to believe media organizations should take a stand** on issues like climate change and to think journalists should be free to express their personal views on social media.
- **Young people increasingly choose to avoid the news, mainly because it makes them in a bad mood.** Many are looking for more diverse voices and perspectives and for stories that don't depress and upset them.
- At the same time, **younger audiences are also particularly suspicious and less trusting of all information in general**, which also makes them more skeptical of news organizations' agendas.
- All age groups see the news as equally important for learning new things, but young users³ are slightly more motivated than older groups by how entertaining and sharable the news is. They are also **less motivated by a sense of duty to stay informed of news or by its personal usefulness to them.**
- Young people like a broad range of formats and media, from text to video to audio, but **they are just as different when it comes to need and interests as any other audience.**

These findings may not be groundbreaking or unexpected information if you are used to work with a young audience. But the session with Nic Newman made me realize how complicated a matter it

¹ <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2022/young-audiences-news-media>

² Between the age of 18-24

³ Under the age of 35

is, trying to capture young people's sincere interest these days, because there are so many aspects to solve within the overall challenge to win young people with journalism. It's a conversation which are often being simplified I think, maybe because it's a natural part of our job as journalists to angle, simplify and focus. But what I realize in the company of Nic Newman and the fellows was this; If we simplify our challenge covering journalism for a young audience, we move ourselves further away from a solution.

We need to tell ourselves it's a long, patient journey and not a five-minute-tutorial we have thrown ourselves into. But with that mindset, we can begin changing many, smaller details in the way we form and communicate our stories and the way we approach and include young minds.

Mediapanic⁴ has always been a part of our business, when a new medium or platform emerges. But the different challenge now is that the digital development is faster than ever. We compete with big international streaming- and social media-platforms that entertain and uses the magic of technology to make the audience stay longer and engage them in ways that are beyond what traditional media can deliver.

My point is not to drown you in these facts, there are plenty of materials out there to do that. But I want you to see the challenges we face as journalists for what they are. Complex. Which is not necessarily a bad thing. It also forces us to make an effort and keep developing as journalists and create outstanding products.

When I return to my job in a few weeks, I will force myself to practice complexity in my communication, for instance in the feedback I give myself and others. Way too often I've been too black and white when giving feedback on products that didn't work very well or on the other hand I've praised content blindly that did well in our feed. My fellowship has made me think, I need to doubt more when analyzing content. Stay critical, but mirror my audience's needs better by embracing nuances, be more transparent and work less like *this is the only answer*.

Looking differently at my problem has made me look for different solutions the past year. On the next pages I will give you my reflections on three of them.

1. Take back the control on platforms

Let's begin with one of the biggest dilemmas that traditional media faces all over the world. Social media platforms and the lack of control that comes with them. The eternal recurring issue that keeps knocking on our door, and most media pretending they don't hear it.

A few years ago, it was controversial when news media entered the world of Facebook. Today the headache is called Tik Tok, and as the most downloaded app worldwide in 2021⁵ and a rise in users that no media has ever seen in history before⁶, you would have to be stupidly stubborn not to consider this platform as relevant for your journalistic content in a near future.

⁴ "Aktuelle forskningsemner: Medieindhold til børn og unge". This was one of my spring-classes at Aarhus University

⁵ "Tik Tok Boom – Chinas Dynamite App and the Superpower Race for Social Media", Chris Stokel-Walker

⁶ <https://influencermarketinghub.com/tiktok-growth/>

No one can really blame media for doing what is part of their DNA: to be where their audience are. But a price comes with the use of social media-platforms as a primary channel, and the price is already too high in some aspects, undermining democracy and the core values of journalism⁷.

I've added a layer to my own opinion on this issue during my fellowship. More and more I see a need for media to stand up for ourselves and evaluate our own role on social-media-platforms. Taking the consequences seriously and look for possible solutions to push ourselves and other media in a better direction.

This year the Norwegian public service media NRK took a huge and difficult decision to close their Facebook-page "NRK Nyheter". With more than 520.000 followers it was the largest in the country. The news editor Espen Olsen Landfeldt explain⁸ that among other things they found the comments and the discussions more destructive than constructive because the algorithms are obviously made for Facebook and not Norwegian democratic values.

This is not necessarily the right decision seen from a public service point of view, but it's a brave and rare move among traditional media that deserves recognition. If we really want to succeed with changing the power-mechanism in today's media landscape, we need to act united as media though.

Identify your real competitors

One of the best examples newer history has seen on journalists cooperating is the Panama Papers. Over 100 media outlets from almost 80 countries worked secretly together for a year on a big leak that would expose financial chicanery and political corruption, hitting the public in April 2016. Five years later the coverage still have big impact⁹ on how corruption is handled individually and globally.

The coverage was acknowledge a lot afterwards because it had set a new bar for cooperation in journalism¹⁰. But what is also interesting in this particular case is how some of the biggest media around the world like The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal and Washington Post weren't a part of the coverage. For various reasons they couldn't agree on sharing material in the way it was needed¹¹, which shows very well that it's not an easy task to cooperate with other media when you come from different newsrooms, cultures or countries. It takes compromises and a high level of transparency and trust, just to summaries a few ingredients.

The results on the other hand are beyond what any media could have delivered by themselves in this case, and that's what we need to remember when we find it tempting to dance alone because it's simply easier.

⁷ "Key social media risks to democracy", In-depth analysis from the European Parliament, 2021

⁸ <https://nyheder.tv2.dk/2022-05-22-norges-svar-pa-dr-vil-dele-faerre-nyheder-pa-facebook>

⁹ <https://www.icij.org/investigations/panama-papers/five-years-later-panama-papers-still-having-a-big-impact/>

¹⁰ <https://mashable.com/article/panama-papers-media>

¹¹ <https://mashable.com/article/panama-papers-media>

For many years the Danish newspapers have seen each other as competitors and the same goes with the big television stations and radio providers. But it's about time we start seeing opportunities in each other as media, instead of fighting against each other and realize that the alternative could be not to exist. With companies like Meta, Google and Disney+ winning our audience's attention introducing another purpose with content, we should remind ourselves how much we have in common as journalists. We exist to enlighten people and we might be better at doing this in the future, if we help each other along the way.

I have been thinking about how we could reach our young audience better than we do today where we are locked to platforms, we cannot really control. The greatest achievement from my fellowship is a platform I've created together with another fellow, Bjarke Calvin, who seek exactly to give back the power to media and people in close co-creation with a young audience.

A school paper of the future

If we cannot fulfill our mission as media within the platforms we are giving, we have to build it ourself. That's how the idea of an app for high school students started, when Bjarke and I met each other at Constructive Institute a year ago.



Many interviews, workshops and meetings with teachers and students later, we created YouJournalist. *The school paper of the future* is made in close relation with the students. It was clear that they needed a tool that allowed them to use their full potential and competences in school. And we need them to help us create the future of journalism. Through the app they can both create their own stories on topics they find relevant and interesting, but they are also nudged to upskill their storytelling-techniques by learning from the best journalists and storytellers in the media-world.

From august 2022 we are starting a Pilot project together with TV2 Funen and one of the most innovating high schools at Funen. This will allow us to test the app and the potential of taking journalism into the schools, which we are looking forward to. You can read more about our project here: <https://youjournalist.co/>.

My startup-adventure has also made me reflect on how to make journalism a well-functioned business again. Because after all this is crucial for us to fulfill our purpose.

2. We are a business, remember?

In 2006 the Economist had a frontpage with the text "Who killed the newspaper?". Inside the paper the answer was "the internet"¹². Along came social media platforms and since then media have had

¹² <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2006/08/24/who-killed-the-newspaper>

a real time finding a suitable business model. You can argue that the suit on the host in the television-studio is the very last bit we have left of the businessman we once were.

You might argue, you didn't become a journalist because of money. Maybe you did it because you are curious or want to change the world for the better. Either way, you need an audience and a salary to achieve those goals.

In march this year¹³ UNESCO stated that *the business model of the news media is broken, and our fundamental rights to information is at risk because of it*. Their report finds that Google and Facebook now soak up half of all global digital advertising, while global newspaper advertising has fallen by half in last five years.

There are smaller and bigger steps to take when it comes to innovating on media business models. A tool that has worked for the danish online magazine Zetland, is being transparent along the way¹⁴. That experience came with a crisis where they needed more members to sign up in order to survive, and therefore they asked for help from their members. It gave them an enormous rise in new memberships, because many of them asked their friends to help, and today it's a strategy to be transparent about issues like these, when they appear.

Many media like Zetland also experimence with more flexible business models, different type of memberships or micropayment. But it is rare and almost impossible to find media who came up with a whole new way of thinking business.

Embracing and understanding crypto technology

A few months into my fellowship I was introduced to crypto technology because Bjarke Calvin, my co-fellow and new business partner, was suggesting we could consider building our Younralist-app on blockchain. Realizing he was not joking, I started looking into crypto, in order to have my arguments on point when defending why we shouldn't.

As a result, I've listened to almost any danish podcasts¹⁵ explaining crypto technology, NFTs and blockchain the past six months. There aren't many though, which might say something about how little media still have of interest in this field. But I must admit I was completely surprised after just a few randomly picked episodes. Even though there are still many things that are complicated to understand with this new economic system, it's clear that the technology has a huge potential. Especially if you dig into NFT's potential in a media perspective¹⁶.

NFT means non-fungible tokens. They are unique digital items that are bought and sold online, using cryptocurrencies. It uses blockchain technology to provide proof of ownership of digital assets like a photo, memes or even a tweet.

¹³ <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/unesco-business-model-news-media-broken-our-fundamental-right-information-risk>

¹⁴ Meeting with CEO of Zetland, Lea Korsgaard in June 2022.

¹⁵ Relevant danish podcasts about crypto; "Kryptopia", "Kryptograferne" and Zetlands sound-articles on blockchain.

¹⁶ <https://the-media-leader.com/too-big-to-ignore-why-attitudes-over-nfts-in-media-are-changing/>

The first famous NFTs created were pictures of a cartoon monkey wearing different accessories*, but recently the NFT-world has broadened, and a few media has started testing its potential the past year¹⁷.

One of them is *South China Morning Post* who with big success turned historical content (images and articles) into NFTs and sold them through an independent tech startup created to profit from this work¹⁸. The interest from the audience was overwhelming and the NFTs were sold out in two hours. In an interview with Journalism.co.uk the CEO, Gary Liu, says that eventually all media organizations will need to understand blockchain and the potential of NFTs:

"Ignore the hype and the noise around NFTs, it's about the fundamental change that NFT technology can offer to the media industry. At its core, what they are is a tech advancement that brings real value to digital content – verifiable, authentic value. That solves the business model problem of digital media".

A rising, potential business model is one thing. But what is at least as interesting seen in a media perspective is the system around blockchain that track ownership of media content. This takes transparency to a whole new level and makes it very hard for Fake News to survive in the form we know of today.

Working with blockchain in a media perspective is still on a very early stage though. The technology is still young and could be compared with how the internet was in the 90's before it was made relevant for the wider population. A place for nerds and programmers. But in its 14 years of existence blockchain has shown itself relevant for the future. And with Spotify, Youtube and Twitter already testing and hiring people in the field, I don't see why media outlets should not (for once) be first movers testing its potential.

3. The experts are your audience

A few months into my fellowship I experienced a shift in focus concerning my research method. For a long time now, also before my fellowship, I've had a list of people that inspire me to do better storytelling. It contains names of photographers, actors, politicians, brands, film directors, athletes, journalists, influencers and artists. In common they all have managed to include or engage their audience in a way that I think is different, brave and inspiring. For years I've added to this list, because when you do journalism for digital natives, it's simply not enough to find inspiration within your own business.

This year my plan was to talk to as many people on my list as possible. By learning from the best experts I know of, I would spread their ideas and good advice when working with future generations and media.

¹⁷ <https://www.wipro.com/business-process/meet-nfts-media-industrys-shiny-new-cash-cow/>

¹⁸ <https://www.journalism.co.uk/news/are-nfts-the-future-of-digital-media-business-models-south-china-morning-post-thinks-so/s2/a912354/>

And then one day, sitting at my desk, my brother called. He is 16 years old and having his first year in high school. We talked about him taking drivers lessons now, at the same time as juggling tennis, parties and singing at the school musical.

I told him about my list and it turned out he didn't really know many of the names on it. A bit disappointing taking into consideration I have used years building it. Instead, I had him do a quick list of people he found interesting to follow. Some tennis players, sports-brands, his favorite gamer, a comedian and also a few international and national media (thank god) was on it. But this would change pretty often because he liked to current happenings, he explained. Last week he followed French open, but it is done for now. Instead he follows Wimbledon. Selective news-culture-kid, I thought to myself.

When I hung up 20 minutes after, I looked with mixed feelings at my own list. I wrote down my little brother's name on it. How could I forget that he's the real expert?

And this is how it started, *the conversations with my little brother*. Once every week or second week I would call him, just with the purpose of getting into his head for a bit. It seems weird when I write it down, because it sounds like I never talk to him. We are very close, but I have never consciously used him to get to know more about the audience I work with, even though he is spot on the target group. But it really is key to content in eye level to have someone representing your audience who can validate your journalistic thoughts, ideas and stories with throughout the process.

The trick is to make it easy for yourself to tune in on your audience. Don't create too many rules around it or tell yourself you need to take notes and ask clever questions. Remember, this is not an interview, this is not a representative study, this is a conversation you have on behalf of your audience which hopefully makes you understand their need and values better the more conversations you have.

I put my curiosity first, when my brother picks up the phone, and it's deliberating that I do not need to use his answers to anything else than understanding, reflecting, and perhaps let my brain develop new ideas afterwards. It feels good being on track with your audience, and your stories get sharper.

It's an important duty, working with journalism for young people, that you meet your audience regularly, because unless you hire high school students, no journalists have the age of the young users. When I return to my job, I want to make it a part of my monthly routine to meet someone representing my audience. If I don't succeed, I will remind myself to feel a bit guilty. The same feeling I get when I haven't called my grandmother for a while, excusing myself I have been too busy.

Use the best sides of social media

I still use my list of experts even though my brother and other young people I met through the year is now on it. Some of them have proven that using the best side of social media can take user involvement to a whole new level.

One of them is the 29-year-old mayor of Holbæk, Christina Krzyrosiak who at last year's election set a national record with taking 46 percent of all votes in the municipality.

She includes her audience daily and make them have influence on decisions in the municipality by using social media. Four times a year she moves her office out in the municipality and each time people can vote on where they want her to stay¹⁹. Schools, kindergartens and local companies have played offices for a period, because it gives her a better understanding of the people she is serving²⁰. This could easily be implemented in media outlets as a way to make sure you connect with your audience.

A person who has also upgraded his product to young people by using the very best of social media are the danish film director, Jonas Risvig. In spring 2020 he wrote and directed the youth series *Centrum* who had as a purpose to express and put light on the numerous feelings many young people sat with during lockdown. The special thing about this creation was that it was co-written by the audience through votes and comments on Youtube and Instagram*. Also, every episode was filmed within a week and published shortly after. *Centrum* was made without a budget, and it became the first of a handful youth series released during the last couple of years, all with a high level of user-involvement as a natural part of the writing- and production-phase.

When I interviewed Jonas Risvig this year, he said that one of his biggest findings was that user involvement is not only letting in the audience through as many steps as possible. It is also showing them in the end how you have used their feedback and input.

"As soon as I realized this, it went quickly with the interest and engagement on my platforms. I was lucky to have some amazing ambassadors in the actors I worked with during my first project, and I used them a lot to validate my script and the story in general. When they experienced that I used their feedback, they spread the word to many of their friends saying "if you have an idea, write it to Jonas, because he will use it".

Transparency, patience and trust is also key-words in the way Jonas Risvig work with his audience. And even though it can be both time-consuming and difficult engaging with young people, it's worth the journey, he said.

"You should not expect to get praised for your hard work. Young people are confused, show up late because they went partying last night or something, but they really don't do it on purpose. On days like that, I remind myself that they are the most important group of people to serve, because they will form the future of society".

¹⁹ <https://www.sn.dk/holbaek-kommune/efter-afstemning-borgmester-flytter-sit-kontor-til-denne-by/>

²⁰ <https://www.information.dk/moti/2021/11/christina-krzyrosiak-bare-fordi-styr-paa-shit-behoever-vaere-gammelklog>