

## Project report

How do we reach more young people? The question echoes in most legacy media, not least around the opinion desks where editors – like me – are struggling to find voices and world views from this century. As a fellow at Constructive Institute, funded by Trygfonden, I have had the chance to ask the young people themselves. What do they honestly think about writing op-eds in newspapers like Politiken? And is there anything we can do to engage more of them?

Below, I'll briefly present some of – but far from all – the takeaways I've got from 10 months of listening. It's based on both informal conversations and in-depth interviews with dozens of people between the age of 16 and 26 at high schools, folk high schools, debate seminars and Aarhus University plus a few opinion editors and journalists (see full list on last page).

Important disclaimer: This is not research. The people I've talked to are *not* a representative sample of young adults in Denmark, and their experiences are merely anecdotal. Also, I'm insanely biased. This may have affected the questions I asked and the answers I got.

### Problem? What problem?

Jane, owner of a hybrid car, is fed up with the lack of charging stations in Copenhagen. Torsten can't stand the smell of charcoal grilling around his summer house and thinks the world should know. Bjarne from Valby is puzzled by a months-long delivery of a Christmas card and suggests, sarcastically, that the national postal service, PostNord, changes its name to PostMord (Post Murder). John, a psychologist, worries about children's use of TikTok, while Jytte attacks the journalists at Politiken for their excessive use of swearing. In the first weeks of 2022, Jane, Torsten, Bjarne, John and Jytte shared their thoughts and frustrations on the opinion pages of Politiken.

Here's a quiz: What's the average age of the five contributors? The disappointing answer: We don't know. They might be – and most likely are – above 60 years of age and fit the profile of the core reader of Politiken on print. But they could – in theory – just as well be an odd sample of 20-year-olds with old-fashioned Danish names.

As far as I know, no Danish newspaper asks for people’s birth year in the template for submitting comments. Nor am I aware of any research data on the age of Danish opinion contributors. Consequently, we can’t say for sure if there’s an underrepresentation of young people and a skewed age distribution on the opinion pages of mainstream newspapers.

Surveys suggest, however, that things are improving. Since 2011, The Danish Youth Council (DUF) has been asking a representative sample of young people between the age of 16 and 25 if – and how – they are engaging in so-called political activities. In 2012, only 1 percent said that they had written an opinion piece within the last 12 months. In 2021, that share had climbed to 8 percent<sup>1</sup>.

Year	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Share of young people who have written an opinion piece within the last 12 months	3 %	1 %	3 %	5 %	8 %	5 %	5 %	3 %	8 %	8 %

Source: Demokratianalysen, DUF

The positive trend resonates with the answers I got when interviewing two opinion editors about the issue. To my question ‘Do you think there’s lack of young people on your pages?’, Vanessa Pröschold, journalist and opinion editor at Kristeligt Dagblad, replied:

»If you’d asked me 10 years ago, I had definitely said ‘YES!’. But I think it’s slowly changing ... also in Kristeligt Dagblad. More and more young people want to speak up and contribute to our opinion pages«<sup>2</sup>.

At Dagbladet Information, which has a relatively large share of young readers, opinion editor Gry Inger Reiter shares the optimism. Underrepresentation of young people as *such* is not an alarming issue here, she says.

»Since I started as opinion editor at Information (in 2018, red.), the number of op-eds written by university students has only gone up. I can’t show you any statistics, but that’s my clear impression. I literally hear from them every day now. To me, the big challenge is finding ways to reach the huge group of young people with no higher education who’d never read a newspaper or write an op-ed. They are massively underrepresented in the debate, and that’s a real problem<sup>3</sup>«, Reiter says.

<sup>1</sup> This is uplifting although not a clear proof of more young commentators in the newspaper. For instance, the survey doesn’t ask the young respondents if their comments were published in a newspaper. Neither do we know if they wrote the comments voluntarily (and enjoyed doing so) or if it was part of a school assignment which they’ll never do again.

<sup>2</sup> My translation. All interviews quoted in this report were conducted in Danish.

<sup>3</sup> I totally agree with Reiter. Education is an important criterium but due to lack of space I’ll stick to the age issue here.

One important takeaway from my interviews with journalists and opinion editors about the age issue is this: We need more data. Instead of solely relying on intuition and best guesses, I suggest we begin asking people about their birth year in the submission form template. This is not rocket science, but nonetheless important. Let's get hold of the problem before we try to solve it.

### Love is in the air

Two basic questions of 'why' shaped my project: 1. Why do some young people decide to write an op-ed in a newspaper? 2. Why do most young people not? Prepare yourself for a love storm as we dive into the first 'why'.

»In my view, writing op-eds in the newspaper is still one of the most important ways of participating in the public debate«, Mike declares over the phone. He is 20 years old, graduated from high school last summer and is now on a sabbatical year. So far, he has written 10-11 opinion pieces, mostly in Politiken, Information and local newspapers. Mike continues:

»This is the only place where my generation can reach older generations and tell them what it's like to be young, and how we see the world. Also, I must admit that I feel kind of proud when for example Politiken decides to publish my op-ed. It's like a stamp of quality ... a way of saying that my point of view is legit and important. I never get that feeling on social media«.

Climate activist Selma seems to agree. She is 16 years old and has written 8-10 opinion pieces in various Danish newspapers. But why?

»I'm a climate activist, and I have an important message. I also like to express myself through writing so it's an obvious choice for me to write op-eds«, Selma says.

*You could also write on Facebook or Instagram – why do you choose to express your opinions in an expensive newspaper that few people at your age read?*

»I think I'm reaching a much bigger audience when I'm writing in a newspaper like Politiken or Information than I would with a post on social media. Many politicians will read my comment if it's printed in Politiken, so potentially I'll have an impact on the political agenda and influence the people in power. That's crucial to me. Also, the reactions are much nicer in a newspaper's debate section or in its online comment track than on Facebook. On Facebook, the comments are often ... crazy ... in a very negative way«, Selma says.

Finally, let's hear from Jeppe, a 24-year-old student at Krogerup Folk High School:

»I honestly think the opinion section is the most important part of any newspaper. You can find news everywhere, and at DR and TV 2 you'll even get them for free. Opinion pages are unique, and it's the only place where you can go and have your horizons broadened

and find out what's up and down, right and wrong ... intellectually speaking«, he said when I visited him and his classmates at the folk high school in Humlebæk north of Copenhagen on a cold February day.

To sum it up, three factors seem to be recurring when young debaters answer the question 'Why do you write op-eds in a newspaper?':

1. Higher range and influence (compared to social media).
2. Better tone and nicer reactions (compared to social media).
3. Pride ("OMG! Newspaper staff thinks I'm worth listening too, and now I'm published in a real newspaper!").

Today, only 6 percent of 18–24-year-olds reads a printed newspaper on a weekly basis<sup>4</sup>. Yet, some of them still consider newspaper op-eds as the gold standard of public debate. Not all hope is lost.

### »The process is pretty difficult«

Let's face it. Most young people probably don't give a flying duck about op-eds. Why should they? They don't subscribe to a newspaper, and they can easily reach a huge audience with a tweet, a post on Instagram or Facebook or a small video on Tik Tok or YouTube when they have something shareworthy on their mind.

It's worth noticing, however, that 'indifference' or 'lack of interest' never appeared among the answers I got when interviewing young people about their reasons for *not* writing op-eds. Instead, most answers seemed to circle around either 'lack of know-how' or 'low self-esteem'. Below, a brief explanation of the two categories.

#### *Lack of know-how*

Apparently, poor practical information about how to write and submit an op-ed is what keeps some young people from doing it. Here is how 20-year-old Mike puts it:

»The process is pretty difficult. When I started writing op-eds, I spent hours researching on where and how to submit it. It's getting easier at Politiken's website but at Weekendavisen it's almost impossible to find out where to send it (...). One of my friends actually gave up finding out where to send his op-ed. He thought it was insanely difficult. Then I helped him, and it ended up in Politiken. I think you should do more to help inexperienced people«.

Oscar, a 21-year-old student at Aarhus University who has never written an op-ed, was equally confused about the process when I interviewed him:

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<sup>4</sup> Source: 'Danskernes brug af Nyhedsmedier', p. 32 (RUC, 2021). Across all age groups the share is 19 percent.

»It's not the most accessible format, I must say. I'm not 100 percent sure about the process ... what should I do if I one day wanted to send a comment to, say, Politiken? Should I just email it to you? I guess I would have to google it, ha-ha«.

Here, we can do better. Obviously, we should do more to guide inexperienced commentators through the steps of writing and submitting op-eds. We could, for instance, make small debate tutorials on our websites and various social media. Or maybe we should make an alternative submission form on Instagram where young users already spend 36 minutes per day<sup>5</sup>?

Young people who are interested in contributing to newspapers' opinion pages but hesitate to do it due to poor practical information, are the low-hanging fruits.

### *Low self-esteem*

1 out of 3 young adults in Denmark (35 percent) thinks that he or she is too ignorant about society to be involved in politics<sup>6</sup>. Apparently, this self-doubt also applies to public debates. Lack of confidence or low self-esteem were mentioned again and again in my interviews and conversations.

»I had no idea Politiken wanted to hear my opinion about anything. I thought you only wanted to listen to really clever people«, a young woman told me after a panel debate with approximately 60 folk high school students at Ømborgen near Gammel Rye in November 2021.

Oscar, 21, was on the same track when I interviewed him over the phone: »I think it has a lot to do with self-confidence. I really feel that I have to get all facts straight before I speak up«.

When I visited Krogerup Folk High School, I asked six students to take part in a small focus group interview. When I asked them about the self-doubt issue the following dialogue unfolded between Jeppe (24) and Anne Sofie (21), which beautifully summarizes the problem:

**Jeppe:** »I think my lack of knowledge and experience is what keeps me from writing comments. I'm 24 years old, and I don't know *shit* about the world. I think many at my age have this feeling; we are not ... how should I put it ... qualified to speak up«.

**Anne Sofie:** »That's so true. I often have something on my mind that I want to express in a comment and submit to a newspaper. But then, immediately, I get second thoughts ... 'ah, this is not edgy or interesting enough'. I get so self-critical, and I'm thinking: 'I'm not the most qualified person to write this opinion piece'. So, I'll leave it to someone else«.

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<sup>5</sup> Medieudviklingen 2021, DR

<sup>6</sup> Demokratianalysen 2021, DUF

**Jeppe:** »We want everything to be perfect, and we forget that an opinion piece doesn't have to be perfect. It could just be a small text about something that bothers us ...«.

**Anne Sofie:** »I wonder if it has something to do with the school system that formed us. Ever since we started in school every little step, we've been taken, has been monitored, measured, and graded, and we have constantly been pushed towards perfection. And now you tell us that it doesn't have to be perfect? How is that possible? Ha-ha«.

I'm not sure how media should tackle this. But Selma, the 16-year-old climate activist, might be on to something:

»I think many at my age are terrified by the whole idea of writing an op-ed. They think 'oh, I'm not clever enough to do that. This format is only for grown-ups'. You, the media, should really do more to inform young people that you are genuinely interested in them. That would be a start«.

Mike, 20, seems to agree: »You should do more to tell them that you want to hear from them. Young people don't know that. They might even think that nobody wants to listen to them. The only reason I started writing op-ed was that someone told me; 'I think you should do it – you'd be really good at it'«.

### »Keep it real«

It's a popular view (not least among fellows at Constructive Institute), that print media is dying and that the future belongs to social media. Hence, trying to raise the number of young debaters in a newspaper is simply a futile deed. Instead, the standard argument goes, legacy media should move their debate scene to Tik Tok, Instagram and YouTube and become initiators and moderators of online debates for *the digital natives*.

Great was my surprise when I tested this idea among the target group. No one liked it. Not one.

»Unless Politiken becomes very 'unlike Politiken' there will always be a group of 19-year-olds that you cannot reach. And that's ok. You shouldn't try to be too young and go on Tik Tok. That's not who you are«, 21-year-old Anne Sofie said.

A similar advice came from 20-years-old Henrik: »Don't try to be young with the young. Keep it real. Don't lose your integrity«.

It was also emphasized again and again that young people don't want special treatment in the public debate. Here's how Ingeborg, aged 21, put it: »Don't say: We want to hear from you because you are young. Instead say; we want to hear from everyone, including the young. We don't want special treatment«.

24-years-old Jeppe agreed with a great metaphor: »We don't want to be that *token black guy* (a black character deliberately featured in a show or movie for the sake of racial diversity) on your opinion pages«.

## »We don't want a filthy fight«

Last year, 61 percent of young people in Denmark said that the negative tone in online debates discouraged them from sharing their views. 71 percent completely or partly agreed that online debates were dominated by extreme point of views<sup>7</sup>.

Here's how 21-year-old Oscar explained it:

»A few years ago, I would sometimes write something in a debate in DR's Facebook feed, but again and again I was attacked by this angry mob of mostly middle-aged men who just wanted a verbal fight. It was so ridiculous and a complete waste of time. Today, maybe that's why I try to stay out of debates. I simply don't bother to go into a fight«.

Oscar, then, came up with a good advice:

»If you genuinely want to attract more young people, I think you should consider having a format where it's okay to have a normal conversation ... where you, sort of, lower the tone and aggressiveness of the participants. Many people at my age are disgusted by verbal fights that lead to nowhere. It's so irritating to read or listen to. To me, that's the biggest disadvantage of debates today – they are built on this idea that someone must verbally crush his or her opponent. But they never meet face to face and look into each other's eyes ... maybe they don't really disagree? Maybe it's all a misunderstanding? I think my generation is much more into nuances, solutions, and mutual understanding than just a filthy fight«.

At two occasions, I got a chance to test Oscar's claim. Is it true that young people are turned on by solutions and nuances?

At Krogerup Folk High School in February and at Politiken's School of Debate in May, I asked a group of around 15 young people to write a short 'constructive op-ed'. The first half of the op-ed, I told them, should begin as any other op-ed: mention the problem, the thing that bothers or worries you. But in the last part, they had to come up with a (possible) solution.

Oscar was right; they loved the concept. Two examples: A young woman criticized the principal who had chosen the new (ugly) paintings in the school's lobby. Her solution: Let's set up an art committee where students are represented. A guy had just heard that old-fashioned pubs (*brune værtshuse* in Danish) were on the verge of extinction in the big cities. His solution: Put old-fashioned pubs on UNESCO's List of Cultural Heritage.

Afterwards, Martin, a participant at Politiken's School of Debate in Aarhus, evaluated the assignment:

»Providing a possible solution to a problem adds a whole new dimension to debating. It gets more important in a way. It's interesting, absolutely. But it's also more difficult. It's much easier just to be critical ha-ha«.

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<sup>7</sup> Demokratianalysen 2021, DUF

A legendary tweet from a young American writer called @Merman\_Melville that got more than 50.000 retweets and 300.000 likes last year captures the need for solution: »Kind of a bummer to have been born at the very end of the Fuck Around century just to live the rest of my life in the Find Out century«.

Let's make the Find Out century a bit less *bummer*. When I get back to work, I will continue experimenting with constructive debate formats that – hopefully – appeal to a broader range of readers and commentators. That includes people with names like Mike, Selma and Anne Sofie.

My project is based on conversations with: 16 students from Katedralskolen and Risskov Gymnasium who participated in Demokratiskskolen at DOKK1 in October 2021; 60 students from the folk high schools Vallekilde, Rødning and Krogerup who joined the debate day at Ømborgen in November 2021; 15 students from the journalism and media class at Krogerup Folk High School (February 2022); 15 participants at Politiken's School of Debate in Aarhus (May 2022); fellow students at the courses I attended at Aarhus University in 2021/22.

I've made in-depth interviews with: Mike (20); Johanne (26); Oscar (21); Selma (16); Jeppe (24) (group interview), Mads (24) (group interview), Anne Sofie (21) (group interview), Ingeborg (21) (group interview), Henrik (20) (group interview), Rebekka (19) (group interview); Vanessa Pröschold, opinion editor, Kristeligt Dagblad; Gry Inger Reiter, opinion editor, Information; Jacob Christian Eriksen, Manager, Politiken's School of Debate.

Thanks for all your answers.