

For the maintenance of democracy: A new and more responsible debate culture is needed

My overall project was to search for and develop new formats and tools for public debate. And already from the very beginning of my ten-month fellowship at Constructive Institute, I was convinced about the importance of the field, not at least when it comes to public debates conducted journalists working with traditional media.

Often, as I wrote in my application for the institute, “they tend to search for conflicts instead of possible dialogues and solutions. The receipt for many tv- and radio debates is like ‘let’s get two different views to discuss a certain matter’. If they in addition to this also represents extreme views, there is a good chance for what is known as ‘dam good tv’ or ‘living radio’.”

Discussing this is instantly leading to a build-in conflict, because different views must be represented, explained, and challenged in public debates. “But”, as I stated, “if we more often could bring in doubt and solutions, it would be more alluring for citizens to participate and be part of a dialogue. Regardless of it takes place at a local, regional, national, or maybe global level.”

Being a fellow August 2021-June 2022 did surely not change the habits, traditions, and incentive structures in the media business. But input from discussions with fellow colleagues at the institute, inspiration, and new skills from chosen university courses – especially on how to build, maintain, and decrease conflicts – have created an important platform for further development. Below, I will go into more details about this.

On top the discussion on how to change ordinary debate culture, there’s a call for a change in journalism’s conventional wisdom. Quoting my application again: “Often it is seen as a great skill to keep people with different views in their staged positions. But what if newsrooms dare to ask: ‘what was the outcome?’, ‘what do we know now that we did not know before?’ and ‘how do we avoid falling into the same ditch tomorrow?’”

During the fellowship, a lot of important discussions had been taken with the fellow colleagues in the Constructive Institute lounge at the Aarhus University. Sometimes inspired by a talk from an external speaker, sometimes because of ongoing stories in the media, and sometimes provoked by a fellow presentation on a certain matter.

Following courses at the university, together with ordinary students in their early twenties, offered not only useful theoretical knowledge, but thanks to discussions in classrooms also great inspiration and ideas for my project.

The first semester, August-December 2021, was scheduled with a course on conflict storytelling and another on visual rhetoric remedies. I learned a lot about the importance of using narratives to achieve support in the public opinion for certain goals. David Herman, a Cambridge University expert on conflict narratives, stress the importance: “We organize our experience and memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative – stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing”.

Also, knowledge on conscious use of visual rhetoric tools was part of my takeaways. The rhetoric part was built on basic knowledge on rhetoric's, which I never had learned. But fortunately, a basic six-week evening course offered by the "Folkeuniversitetet" gave me good insights and understanding of basic rhetoric theory.

The second semester, February-June 2022, was highly concentrated with a lot of reading and preparation for ten weekly classroom hours. My autumn conflict storytelling course was followed by one on conflict transformation and at the department for political science I had a course on how democracies can defend themselves against people and movements trying to undermine or even abolish a democracy by using its own means.

As a kind of sidetrack to all this, the Constructive Institute invited me and another fellow to participate in a certain project named "Listen Louder". Conducted by three "explorers", the project was focused on finding examples on good debate practices and developing tools for all kinds of public debates. But not long after the beginning of the "Listen Louder"-project, I realized it was not a sidetrack but more or less part of my own main track. And it has been helpful for me working closely together for five months with skilled journalists from the British "The Guardian", the German "Süddeutsche Zeitung", the Norwegian public service broadcaster NRK, and the Danish newspaper "Politiken".

The "Listen Louder"-project was presented at two conferences in Bonn, Germany, in June 2022. A book with good practice examples and new tools for public debates was published aside with a website hosted by Constructive Institute. The work with best practice examples and tools will never be finished as it represent the beginning of a process with journalists, editors, and other media people contribution with their ideas and experiences: [Listen Louder - Bonn, Germany - Constructive Institute](#).

One of the "Explorer"-journalists is actually expected to continue the "Listen Louder"-project as part of a job at the newly opened Constructive Institute in Bonn, Germany.

To get inspiration for my project, I participated in study tours and meetings organized by the Constructive Institute. The institute was involved in bootcamps with politicians in autumn 2021 as preparation for the local elections November 16. Bootcamps was also organized for newsrooms, and I got not only inspiration but also valuable contacts at meetings with journalists and editors at the regional TV2Østjylland in Aarhus, at the newspaper Berlingske in Copenhagen, and at the regional TV2Fyn in Odense.

Conversations with politicians on the prevailing debate culture have added important views from the other side of the table. Surely, negative views on media and journalism coming from politicians are not surprising. On the other hand, in the media business we must acknowledge that they might have some point when complaining on too short time to answer complicated questions, unfounded interruptions, and highly sharpened angles.

Obviously, politicians are not innocent themselves while they often accept the rules of the game, including media expectations for clearly dividing lines. A typical characteristic goes like "I often deepen conflicts, because I know that's what you in the media expect".

Unfortunately, the bottom line will be more trench digging than necessary, far away from how most politics – at least in consensus seeking Denmark – are being discussed in municipality councils,

regional assemblies, and in the parliament. When doors are closed for public ears and eyes, everybody in the rooms seek for influence and common solutions on the matters being discussed.

Several times during my fellowship, I've held talks and discussed the public debate culture. A handful of talks were for other journalists and editors, three was held for fellow students at university courses, and one was for people working with debates. On top of this, I held talks at public meetings, organized by a local church, a community club, and a people high school. The talks and discussions gave me great input for my project as did participation in a debate on journalists and editors role and responsibility at a communication bureau festival in September 2021.

Some of my first findings and ideas was integrated in two public debates with local politicians in Copenhagen October and November 2021. As moderator, I encouraged the debaters – who all were leading candidates for the upcoming local election – to keep a decent tone, not to interrupt each other, and to acknowledge if an opponent came up with a brilliant idea. Main conclusions from a Constructive Institute/Epinion survey on voter's views on political debates was presented, and I'm sure the survey facts – please talk decently, do not interrupt, and accept opponent's ideas – had an important impact in the debates. Ending the debates with questions like “What was the most brilliant idea from one of your opponent's you've heard tonight?” surely gave not only surprising answers but also created some surprising alliances on stage.

Later, I presented and discussed not only my own but also the “Listen Louder” findings for a group of Aarhus based journalists, interns at the Danish Broadcasting Corporation Aarhus branch, the communication team at Aarhus University, and for students studying dialogue journalism at the Danish School for Media and Journalism as part of a dialogue project. And, not less important, I did a presentation at conference for journalism school teachers from all over Europe. Group discussions followed the presentation, and further inputs was included in a summing up panel debate on the role of journalism schools when it comes to for example polarization, news avoidance and mistrust. After moderating this important debate, I'm sure that journalism schools all over Europe will do follow up discussions and some of them will step by step change the focus and reformulate how they teach.

Finally, my project was presented and discussed with four groups of Georgian journalists visiting the Constructive Institute during the fellowship. A similar presentation was made for two visiting The Times Journalists and we had a discussion on the enormous difference between the UK and Denmark in both media, debate, and political culture.

In public, I wrote a full-page op-ed on the current debate culture in the Jyllands-Posten newspaper as a kind of warming up to the local elections November 2022, headlined “Drag up the debate from the mud trench”: [Hiv debatten op af grøften \(jyllands-posten.dk\)](https://www.jyllands-posten.dk/debat/nyheder/2022/11/08/hiv-debatten-op-af-grøften/). In the op-ed I concluded: “We all have a responsibility for a decent tone in the public debate. And publicism media are having a unique chance to show how local debates can promote dialogue and solutions.”

Regularly, I also wrote op-eds in the Kristeligt Dagblad newspaper on for example the lack of nuances in Ukraine war coverage, on polarization in France after the presidential election, on public service media's responsibility for not deepening conflicts with an angry tone in debates, on how curious conversations can have an enlightening effect, on dialogue seeking tv documentaries, on the January 2021 Congress attack in Washington, on predictable political debate formats, on Facebook promoting hate

speech, and on a dialogue based political Afghanistan war debate: [Søg på Kristeligt-dagblad.dk | Kristeligt Dagblad](https://www.kristeligt-dagblad.dk).

The outcome of my fellowship would for sure help changes in the way we do public debates in the media business. Some changes would be easy to implement, like kicking half open doors. Others would be more difficult, as they call for substantial changes in thinking, culture, and incentive structures.

But even though some changes might be long term, it's worth noticing the fact that "dialogue", "solutions", and "constructiveness" already are often used words in developing new concepts for public debates. Tools are available and with roots in the Danish folk high school tradition, the organization "Frirummet" conduct regularly debates with demands for doubt, reflections, inspiration, possible changes, and solutions. But still, it needs to be organized with simple tools and connected to a larger public audience with the media business entering the field. Media must take the lead, show how we can disagree without digging down in the nearest trench, how we can discuss important matters without yelling and shouting, and how we all could take on more responsibility for the society and its democratic institutions.

Most of my findings during the fellowship confirms the need for media taking action. All findings and ideas have since October 2021 been organized in a now +40-page document, serving for further research and work with the matter. The document will support a synopsis for a book on our debate culture. The book is expected to be published early 2023, structured in three main parts: 1) Discussion on the drivers behind the current, global polarization, 2) How words, images, and narratives escalate conflicts, 3) Suggestions on how the public conversation could be better with help from media business. Throughout the book a personal touch with my own experiences will be part of the discussion. Hopefully, the book will lead not only to a lot of public talks on the matter, but also debates on the way we debate and how we can change it.

As mentioned, journalists and editors in the media business should take more responsibility, being more active in initiating and moderating public debates. For this reason, I've developed a two-day course on how to do debate journalism in a more ambitious way. The course is part of Danish journalists continuing education system, and I expect it to be followed by more courses, coaching and discussions. Some would be designed for specific newsrooms, based on models I have been using for three decades doing individual interviewing skills training.

For my own part, running my own one-man band company in Copenhagen, changes in the way I do moderation job will occur. Already, as implied earlier in this paper, some tools have been tested, and I am looking forward to changing my own traditional moderation. Part of it will be in cooperation with other moderators also looking for new concepts and tools.

Despite what is in the pipeline, I have identified several challenges. On the concept level, an important one is to avoid boring debates. Discussions with the team behind the NRK format "Einig" setting experts and politicians together without a journalist as moderator underline the challenge. Progress in a debate is needed and traditionally its very often driven by one or more conflicts.

A conflicting element was developed in a TV2Fyn/Constructive Institute cooperation autumn 2021 with the concept "Solved or squeezed": Four politicians was invited to join a tv studio debate on a matter, they all found important to get solved. The debate lasted twenty minutes, and every five minute moving

walls in the studio was serving as a progressing conflict as they narrowed the studio room more and more: The conflict engine was to find out if the politicians would be able to make progress and finally agree without being squeezed in the end? Or would they be forced to give up an agreement and instead accept a punishment like conduction school traffic on a certain morning?

Another challenge which needs to be addressed is the fact, that especially professional and experienced debaters sometimes seem to be afraid of discussions intended for producing knowledge, not only disagreement. From time to time, I've met debaters being concerned, saying like "I'm not sure we will disagree very much on the matter...".

Seen from a journalistic point of view, it's very much about being clear about the purpose. As a debater myself over the years, I have realized how the outcome can change if the purpose is clarified and explained. Most significantly, I had this experience participating in the 2019 media organized "Europe Talks" in Brussels. 15 newspapers across Europe cooperated, and in the Belgium capital about 700 Europeans gathered for discussions on current matters. Around Europe some 21,000 were discussing face to face or online. I myself had a discussion with a German citizen arguing for another and – to me – disagreeing view on immigrants. The purpose was not that we should try to agree, but to understand and maybe find a common ground for further discussions.

The concept was developed and initiated by the German newspaper Die Zeit, and other media companies – in Denmark the Danish Broadcasting Corporation and TV2Fyn – have been using it in a smaller scale putting people with conflicting views together. Not asking them to agree, but to exchange views in a decent tone and in the end trying to at least understand the differences. But, off course, sometimes with a not intended side effect: Agreeing on small, common corner...

Working with setups aiming for open-minded discussion and dialogue are calling for significant changes in newsroom cultures and incentive structures. To change this is not an easy task, and to get new concepts and tools effectively integrated, journalists and editors must work intensively with debaters' traditional behavior and expectations.

Off course, not all debates should follow concepts as described above. Some debates need to clearly show for example dividing lines in politics, but even here small changes are possible. As, for example, by changing the starting point from the usual one focusing on disagreements to another one with a bit of common understanding and agreement.

A certain and growing problem is the lack of scientific, sustainable facts in many public debates. As the American-Polish writer and historian Anne Applebaum put it in her 2020-book "Twilight of Democracy: The Failure of Politics and the Parting of Friends": "People have always had different views. Now they have different facts".

From time to time, emotions overrule facts, and among leading politicians that's the way it should be: "In politics, emotions are more important than knowledge", says Peter Skaarup, speaker for the right-wing, populist Danish Peoples Party. Among Trump voters, surveys show a huge portion not believing most of his assertions during the presidency 2017-21. But at the same time, they tend to prefer his lies more than what they considered as Democrats falsehoods. With such a view on false and true, polarization

would be amplified; according to US surveys, the gap between Republicans and Democrats have never been bigger than today.

Consequently, a relevant question is like: "Is journalism part of the problem?". If yes, the next is: "How do we contribute to a solution?"

An answer on a micro scale level might be found in Silkeborg, a growing Danish municipality with 100,000 inhabitants. Over the recent years, the local newspaper Midtjyllands Avis had initiated and moderated debates on substantial and serious local issues. In an editorial, the newspaper defines its role with the following words: "The Silkeborg municipality can expand its goal having the best local democracy in the world to having the best democracy in the world. And we in the local relation house would be happy to help". Worth noticing is the phrase "the local relation house", showing a new role for the newspaper.

In this paper I've used the word "debate" several times. As an overall term, the word probably make sense. But coming originally from French "debattre", it might signalize a wish for fighting, conflicting and not aiming for any kind of agreement or solution.

For this reason, the "debate" word is not sufficient. It must be explained by using words describing what the concept and expectation in a certain debate could be. "Discussion" would very often be a more precisely description as well as "dialogue", "conversation", or "confrontation". The father of conflict solution research, Norwegian Johan Galtung, called for changing the wording in his 2004-book "Transcend and transform": "This is a conversation [...]. This is a dialogue, not a debate in which the point is to catch out the other side in a contradiction". And he added: "Try to talk constructively about the future, not destructively about the past [...]. Change gear from debate to dialogue".

More could have been mentioned, but above I've concentrated on the main parts. Changes and gear change in the current debate culture will not happen overnight. But they must happen.

Not for my sake. Not just for offering the media business new opportunities. But for the ongoing, necessary democracy maintenance.