

# BETTER LISTENING

A small logo for 'Let's Enhance' is positioned to the left of the word 'LISTENING'. It features a circular icon with a stylized 'e' and the text 'Let's Enhance' next to it.

## Shortcut to a more listening mindset

Findings from the fellowship at the Constructive  
Institute 2022-2023

By Nanna Holst

Med støtte fra  
**TrygFonden**

***"We talk a lot about the fact that the population's trust in the news media is falling.***

***We should talk more about how the media can show greater trust in the population.***

***The LYTH method helps to create results by including and listening methodically to those we are put in the world for. So they can continue to see the value in listening to us."***

***Nanna Holst***



# Content

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>Content</b>  | <b>2</b>  |
| <b>Resume</b>   | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>Preface</b>  | <b>5</b>  |
| The Better Listening Method                                 | 5         |
| The data foundation of Better Listening                     | 7         |
| <b>The Difference Between Hearing and Listening</b>         | <b>10</b> |
| The ongoing paradigm shift                                  | 11        |
| Cassette tapes, rolls of film, landlines .. and old media?  | 13        |
| <b>The value of listening</b>                               | <b>14</b> |
| The American experience                                     | 14        |
| Denmark is lagging behind                                   | 16        |
| <b>Case: Ask Us at TV 2 Kosmopol</b>                        | <b>19</b> |
| <b>Better Listening - Shortcut to a listening mindset</b>   | <b>21</b> |
| Shared language creates shared awareness                    | 23        |
| 5 typical reasons why listening is difficult                | 27        |
| Better Listening paves the way to a common language         | 28        |
| <b>The WHY: What we achieve by listening</b>                | <b>29</b> |
| TV 2 Kosmopol: The path to a shared WHY                     | 29        |
| Mediehusene Midtjylland: The way to their WHY               | 31        |
| 5 considerations before starting                            | 32        |
| <b>5 Common Traits of Successful Listeners</b>              | <b>33</b> |
| 1. Enthusiastic leaders and facilitators                    | 33        |
| 2. Systematics routines and prioritizations                 | 34        |
| 3. Make it easy to deliver and easy to participate          | 37        |
| 4. Start small and learn along the way                      | 38        |
| 5. Successful listeners document and share results          | 40        |
| <b>Focus on the audience's reality</b>                      | <b>44</b> |
| 1. Tuning down the noise to tune into the public            | 45        |
| 2. Guidelines help focus on the audience's perspectives     | 46        |
| 3. Consistency provides predictability and commitment       | 46        |
| <i>Example: Humility pays off</i>                           | 47        |
| <b>Our thinking determines our approach</b>                 | <b>49</b> |
| Trust is a mutual feeling                                   | 50        |
| <b>The straight path to creating trusting relationships</b> | <b>52</b> |
| Greater cohesion. Greater mandate. Greater significance     | 53        |

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| Align your intentions with your actions                           | 54        |
| <i>Example: Do you know the solution?</i>                         | 55        |
| <i>Example: Readers exposed the police in breaking the law</i>    | 56        |
| <b>We are constantly learning. Even complaints are valuable.</b>  | <b>58</b> |
| When we listen up, users help us with timing                      | 58        |
| Example: When TV 2 Kosmopol listened up - and didn't              | 59        |
| When we listen up, audiences help us learn                        | 60        |
| Closer and longer collaboration in the editorial rooms            | 63        |
| Example: Why is the travel card not an app?                       | 65        |
| Everyone likes to be seen, heard and understood                   | 67        |
| <b>Perspective and Conclusion</b>                                 |           |
| <b>Strengthening the Listening Approach in the media industry</b> | <b>68</b> |
| 'Resistance to Change' vs 'Change Aversion'                       | 70        |
| We need both data and dialogue                                    | 72        |
| <b>LYTH: A single day can make a difference</b>                   | <b>73</b> |
| <b>O.G. - Media's democratic duty to listen</b>                   | <b>75</b> |
| The public has the backs of legacy media                          | 77        |
| <b>Five final recommendations</b>                                 |           |
| <b>for a more listening culture in the media industry</b>         | <b>79</b> |
| <b>Bibliography</b>   | <b>81</b> |



## Resume

The media landscape has undergone significant changes in recent years with the emergence of new media platforms, shifting audience behavior, unpredictable algorithms, and a fragmented advertising market.

Most recently, artificial intelligence (AI) has rapidly become a shortcut to knowledge and attention for media users, as well as a tool for automating media processes. Today, many individuals already feel overwhelmed by a news stream that generates more noise than enrichment, and with AI, this phenomenon is likely to intensify.

Old media must adapt to this new reality if they want to maintain their relevance in society as meaningful, challenging, and investigative intermediaries between the public and those in power. This report argues, based on empirical and academic knowledge, that a crucial key to achieving more direct relevance for traditional media in this new era lies in actively and systematically listening to, understanding, and engaging with the public throughout the entire journalistic process.

It is relatively easy to devise a strategy as a media outlet to strengthen the relationship with our target audience and create more direct relevance for them. The challenge lies in integrating this approach into the daily routines of the newsroom in a methodical and persistent manner.

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### **The Better Listening Method - A shortcut to a more listening mindset**

During my fellowship at the Constructive Institute, I have developed a method that helps media organizations stay focused on what matters to their target audiences.

The method will take you through a systematic approach of listening and collaborating with the people that we, as media, serve.

The logic behind the method is simple: Interest is a two-way street:

*If we don't prioritize listening to the public, why should they prioritize listening to us?*

Nanna Holst

Fellow, Constructive Institute, Aarhus University 2022 / 2023  
Editor, Involvement & Dialogue, TV 2 Kosmopol



# BETTER LISTENING

## SHORTCUT TO A LISTENING MINDSET

### **Preface**

A conscious shift towards a more listening paradigm is taking place in media across the Western world. This movement is changing the way newsrooms work and think.

The paradigm shift is so new that the first-ever study proving the value of a more actively and systematically listening approach is currently under peer review in the United States as I write these words.

The shift is happening because media organizations thrive when they listen more methodically to their target audiences to understand their needs and collaborate with them as equal partners.

When the media invites the public into their thinking and journalism, it creates relationships, loyalty, and democratic engagement from those beyond the voices already present in public debate and media coverage.

Local and regional media that strategically listen experience a greater willingness from their audience to pay for journalistic content or donate to the media outlet.

Media outlets that succeed in listening and building relationships with their target audience acknowledge and leverage the fact that the majority of the population lives different lives than journalists and therefore is preoccupied with and curious about other things.

Successfully listening media organizations manage to establish a common language for what they aim to achieve through a more systematic collaboration with their audience and how they approach it. They have also created a methodology that ensures a continuous focus on the audience and their expectations of the media. New media never forget that.

### **The Better Listening Method**

The Better Listening method was developed during my fellowship in the academic year 2022-2023 at the Constructive Institute at Aarhus University, supported by a grant from TrygFonden.

The Better Listening method aims to make it easier for journalists, editors, and media leaders to engage in more meaningful and effective listening.

The methodology facilitates the necessary cultural change, perseverance, and patience.

Maintaining focus is more challenging than one might think, despite good intentions. Many traditional media claim to listen to and involve their target audience in their journalism. However, this often does not translate effectively on most news websites, where the majority of stories are still driven by journalists' and media outlets' own agendas. Journalists traditionally find it difficult to relinquish control and are typically most comfortable with their own ideas.

The Better Listening Method helps media organizations democratize the power of questioning and maintain focus on the target audience's reality and expectations of the media.

The method consists of four steps that together foster a more listening and collaborative mindset within the media organization:

**LISTEN FIRST**

**PRACTICAL TOOLS FOR A NEW CULTURE**

**EVERYDAY HUMILITY**

**KEEPING FOCUS ON THE AUDIENCE**

**TRUST IN THE POPULATION**

**OUR THINKING DETERMINES OUR APPROACH**

**LISTEN UP**

**WE ARE CONSTANTLY LEARNING**

In its 2030 Strategy Plan, TrygFonden emphasizes the importance of every Danish citizen being able to feel that they have a significant role in society and can actively participate in a well-functioning democratic conversation.

With this fellowship at the Constructive Institute, TrygFonden aims to enhance the opportunities for local and regional media to strengthen democratic discourse and trust in democracy, preferably through user engagement.

The Better Listening Method is a way to foster democratic conversation and trust by creating a sense of community around "meaning" – something that is meaningful for both parties – in contrast to the sometimes divisive "I mean-ing" that occurs on social media platforms.

## **The data foundation of Better Listening**

The method is built upon three main data tracks that I have worked on during my fellowship at the Constructive Institute:

1. Studies of practice
2. Academic research
3. Practical experience

### **1. Studies of practice**

The studies focus on local and regional media outlets, both domestically and internationally, that have experimented with and gained experience in listening to and involving their communities. They have shared insights into what works and what commonly goes wrong.

Why this: Traditional public service-oriented local and regional media face significant challenges in maintaining relevance and financial sustainability in a changing media landscape. At the same time they can play a crucial role in strengthening local and regional democracy and civic engagement.

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### **2. Academic research**

Through Aarhus University, the Folk University (Folkeuniversitetet), and the Royal Library (Det Kgl. Bibliotek), I have gained access to academic

disciplines, extensive research and literature, particularly in the fields of psychology, behavior, choice architecture, change management, and innovation.

Dedicated individuals within and outside the University and media industries, both domestically and internationally, have generously shared their knowledge with me.

### **3. Practical experience**

Finally, drawing from my own practical experience and engagement with audiences, I have observed and learned firsthand about the challenges and opportunities in implementing a more listening-oriented approach, collaborating with the population in the Copenhagen metropolitan area through my own regional public service media company, TV 2 Kosmopol.

This involved incorporating their perspectives more strongly into the core journalism of the media outlet. In particular, the initiative called "Spørg Os" (Ask Us) has been thoroughly analyzed to uncover results - and the lack of it - and systematize the experiences.

Additionally, I have had the opportunity to test the Better Listening Method through presentations and workshops throughout the fellowship. A collaboration near the end with Hearken and NRK in Norway has been valuable and has confirmed the potential of Better Listening,.

By combining these three tracks, the Better Listening Method is grounded in real-world practices, academic research, and practical experience. This data foundation validates that the method is robust, effective, and relevant for media organizations seeking to enhance their audience engagement and relevance.

You'll find a concentrate of the Better Listening Method called BETTER LISTENING SHORT at [constructiveinstitute.org/](https://constructiveinstitute.org/)

Nanna Holst

Aarhus, June 2023



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Fellow from Constructive Institute at Aarhus Universitet

Editor, Involvement & Dialogue, at TV 2 Kosmopol

Experienced journalist, video journalist, host and editor.

Project leader for TV 2 Regionerne. Key Note Speaker.

### **Need help with improving your listening skills?**

Contact me to learn more about the Better Listening Method.

Mail: [nannaholstbusiness@gmail.com](mailto:nannaholstbusiness@gmail.com)

Or contact Constructive Institute at [constructiveinstitute.org](http://constructiveinstitute.org)

# The Difference Between Hearing and Listening

*"Hearing is a physical ability, while listening is a skill. Listening skills allow one to make sense of and understand what another person is saying. In other words, listening is the first step in truly connecting with others."*

- Maribeth Kuzmeski, author, MBA, PhD, The Connectors'

Take a moment to think:

When was the last time someone truly listened to you?

How did it make you feel?

I posed this question the first time to a group of over twenty new and experienced journalists and media leaders from across Europe. They had gathered for a MasterClass at the Constructive Institute to explore how their journalism could become more relevant and impactful for a wider range of audiences.



At first, there was complete silence.

Then, a journalist from Austria gave an honest answer:

- *I can't remember the last time someone listened to me like that.*

A Swedish editor smiled as she recalled a completely different experience:

- *I felt loved, she said*

A Danish editor shared a positive conversation he had with the group during dinner the previous evening. He felt that everyone had made an effort to listen to each other and learn something new.

- *It made me feel less insignificant than I usually do, he said.*

These examples illustrate how it touches something within us when we feel seen, heard, and understood — or not. Through this project, I have found evidence that journalists and media outlets benefit from taking the time to listen in this way.

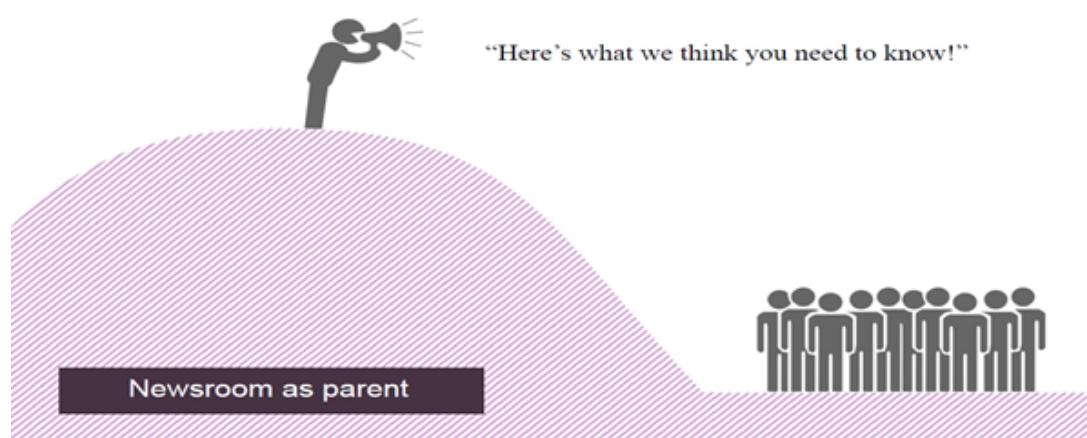
It creates trust and strengthens relationships when we listen to others to understand them and see them as competent partners. Media can do this by thinking of the public less as mere content consumers and more as competent individuals worth listening to and collaborating with.

## **The ongoing paradigm shift**

Hearken represents this movement. The organization offers a digital platform for systematic user engagement in media.

Hearken illustrates the paradigm shift as follows:

1. What we need less of: The authoritarian approach that focuses on: What questions do journalists think are important to ask





2. What we need more of: The more egalitarian approach that focuses on: What questions does the public ask themselves?

“What do you **not know** that we can find out for & with you?”



More and more media outlets across the Western world are beginning to understand the importance of listening more actively, systematically, and engagingly. They recognize the need to better understand their audiences and build closer relationships.

This movement is changing the way many media executives, editors, and journalists work and think today. While media outlets that systematically implement these practices have experienced benefits, it is only now that their effectiveness is being academically investigated.

The findings are presented in the scholarly American article 'Curbing the Decline of Local News by Building Relationships with the Audience.' As I write these words, the study is undergoing peer review.

The researchers asked 20 randomly selected local news outlets to launch a six-month initiative where journalists either reported on issues from and with their local communities or continued their traditional practices. The researchers then compared the results.

The study concludes that the listening and collaborative approach demonstrably leads to more subscriptions (economic impact) and more positive audience evaluations (relationship building) compared to the traditional approach.

Det er første gang, at den sammenhæng bliver dokumenteret, og forskerne fortæller mig følgende i forbindelse med et interview om deres arbejde:

*"These results offer the first causal evidence that engaged journalism can affect the economic viability of local news sites and local news sites' relationships with the communities they serve."*

*- Natalie Jomini Stroud, University of Austin, Texas & Emily Van Duyn, University of Illinois.*

## **Cassette tapes, rolls of film, landlines .. and old media?**

The paradigm shift stems from the recognition that the significance of traditional news media in society has weakened, especially at the local level. Users are increasingly seeking information and inspiration from other sources, and the percentage of people consciously making an effort to avoid news is growing each year.

The powerful figures - politicians, top executives, artists, influencers - have their own channels with a large following and don't rely on the media as intermediaries.

If this trend continues, traditional news media runs the risk of becoming as obsolete as cassette tape manufacturers, film roll producers, and landline telephone providers.

Many niche media outlets have long understood the value of building relationships and communities with their specific target audiences and members. The mindset of new media is rooted in understanding what is important to the people they have set out to serve and what it takes to meet their expectations. New media outlets do not lose focus on their users in the same way that many traditional media outlets do over time.

Listening to understand is not the opposite of being the watchdog of democracy. On the contrary, it strengthens the watchdog's democratic significance when news media ask questions that the public cannot find answers to themselves. The watchdog is stronger in its dealings with authorities, institutions, and corporations when it has a broad mandate from the public behind it, rather than an agenda concocted in an editorial meeting

## The value of listening

I meet Tracey Taylor at Cityside Media House in Berkeley, California. Cityside operates two popular local independent nonprofit news outlets, Berkeleyside and The Oaklandside, in the Bay Area. Several similar media outlets are emerging in the neighboring local communities, catering to their specific needs.

Cityside's local media outlets are built on the value of LISTEN FIRST:

- *It is a way of thinking and a way of acting. Listening is in our DNA, and we aim to bake it into everything we do. It starts with the work of reporters, one of whose core skills is listening, says Tracey Taylor, co-founder and editorial director of Cityside.*

## The American experience

When Cityside considers creating a media outlet in a new city, they initiate thorough and systematic listening efforts in collaboration with different individuals in the local community. The goal is to uncover the area's specific needs, dynamics, and become familiar with those who live and work there.

The media outlet establishes editorial guidelines that ensure reporters focus on creating value for and strengthening the local community. Four of the questions that reporters at The Oaklandside ask themselves every day are:

1. Does this story reflect an effort to listen to the community?
2. Does the story connect residents to resources?
3. Does the story challenge harmful myths and narratives within the target audience?
4. Does it increase transparency in journalism and in society?

The media outlet continuously listens to a panel of carefully selected local individuals with diverse backgrounds and experiences. Panel members are chosen based on community recommendations and an application process. They are compensated for their participation and hold the media outlet accountable to the values its journalists have publicly announced.

Cityside identifies with and is part of a growing trend in the new media landscape in the United States. Cutbacks, acquisitions, and closures of traditional media outlets have resulted in a decline in coverage of local affairs.

In response to this trend, there has been a growth in local nonprofit media outlets that are independent of commercial and political interests.



*Tracey Taylor. Cityside, Berkeley, Californien.*

Local nonprofit media typically have a mission to strengthen civil society, promote social justice, and facilitate democratic engagement. They rely on support from organizations, foundations, and individuals who share similar values and want to strengthen local media as a source of balanced information and community engagement.

When Cityside builds its media outlets around the principles of active and systematic listening to its local communities, it is not only because it aligns with the values of its founders and reporters, but also because it makes economic sense:

- *The sustainability of our organization depends on being in a deep relationship with our community. As a nonprofit newsroom, individual donations, both big and small, are a key source of our funding. If we want people to support our work, we need to demonstrate our value through the journalism we provide, says Tracey Taylor.*

The American membership organization LION Publishers assists the growing community of local independent news media outlets like Cityside in making their businesses more sustainable. The latest analysis of LION's 500+ members shows an increasing profitability among them.

The organization also notes that a growing and popular source of revenue for these outlets is hosting various types of public events. In other words, relationships create value.

## **Denmark is lagging behind**

In Denmark, local and regional news media also face the challenge of being relevant enough for their audience to be willing to pay for their content. They, too, need to establish relationships with the people in their areas and regain their significance in the local communities.

However, there doesn't seem to be a common understanding that an active and systematic approach of listening and co-creating can lead to greater economic sustainability and mutual interest.

During my fellowship, I have searched for research-based knowledge that could confirm or challenge my practical experiences that it pays off for a media outlet to listen more actively and systematically to its audience.

Danish media research has not addressed this issue.

Søren Schultz Jørgensen, an associate professor in media studies at the Danish School of Media and Journalism (DMJX).

He is also author of the book 'Den Journalistiske Forbindelse' (The Journalistic Connection), which explores the necessity for media to be closely connected to their audience, their realities, and needs.

In an interview, Søren Schultz Jørgensen explains the lack of value mapping the in the following way:

### **1. Listening and engaging is practice-oriented, not knowledge-based**

Involvement happens in practice within a field characterized by proactive practitioners who think today and act tomorrow. It is the efficient way of developing within the craft profession, simply by doing it.

## **2. The media compete and keep their knowledge to themselves**

The media industry is notoriously bad at sharing knowledge.

There is great competition on the digital platforms, so when the media collects knowledge about what users do and experience, they typically keep it to themselves.

## **3. A research impossibility to measure**

Methodologically and scientifically, it is impossible to measure the importance of creating relationships by listening and engaging, as news media are difficult to compare.

There are so many incomparable parameters involved, that you cannot pool the results and build knowledge on top of that. But the need is great.

## **Encouraging US research results**

Despite the challenges, researchers like Natalie J. Stroud and Emily Van Duyn have attempted to defy the research impossibility. Their groundbreaking study aimed to establish causal relationships between engaging approaches in newsrooms and the communities they serve.

The researchers hypothesized that providing the target audience with digital influence over journalistic investigations would create stronger relationships with local community members. A control group of comparable local news outlets continued their traditional journalistic practices with local sources, tips, and priorities.

After a relatively short six-month period, the researchers analyzed the results, which, although not revolutionary in magnitude, demonstrated a significant causal relationship.

The study confirmed the hypothesis that engaging journalism positively correlates with the financial sustainability of local news sites and their relationships with the communities they serve.

## **Direct relevance and value creation**

Something interesting happens when we combine the experiences from the new local, consistently audience-focused news media in the USA and

their results with the needs of Danish local and regional news media to be relevant enough for their target audiences to pay for content and become loyal users.

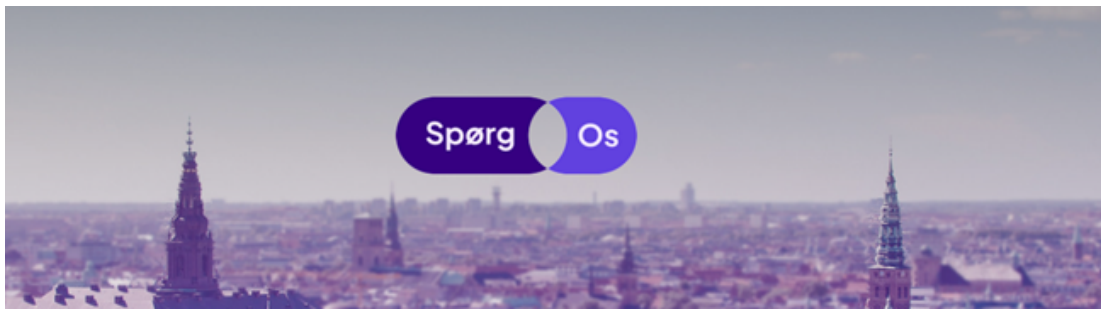
My research, which I am sharing here, shows that all media outlets that listen also create more direct relevance for their target audiences, establish contact with new types of users, and build closer connections with them.

**Media outlets that engage in active and systematic listening gain:**

- **Knowledge about ongoing topics and interests within their target audience**
- **Insight into what the audience finds most relevant**
- **An important mandate from users to demand answers and address their concerns**
- **Increased diversity in perspectives, stories, and sources, leading to a more inclusive media landscape**
- **Greater interest, engagement, and longer reading times from their audience.**

In other words, by listening better, news media can align their content and practices with the needs and interests of their audience, ultimately enhancing their value and impact in the rapidly changing media landscape.

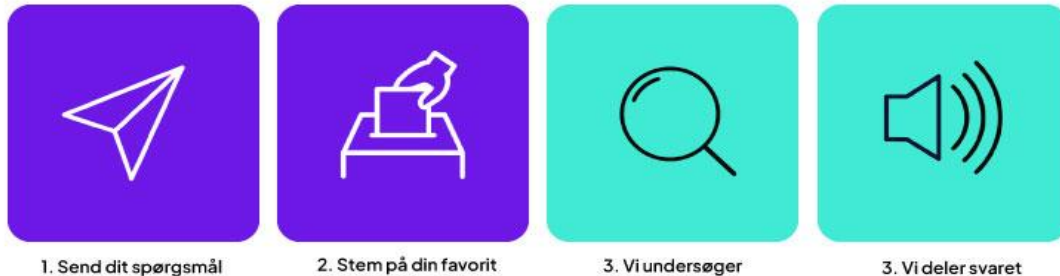
## Case: Ask Us at TV 2 Kosmopol



People of all ages want to see, read, and hear news and stories that are based on their own curiosity, insights, and desires to make informed decisions. They want to be involved in the process if news media outlets invite them. I have proven this in practice.

In just a few months, "Spørg Os" (Ask Us) at TV 2 Kosmopol became a popular opportunity for the population in the Copenhagen region to engage with the media house's daily journalism on the web, TV, and social media.

The concept was easy to understand for both the **public** and the **newsroom**.



After a little over a year, 6,500 people had contributed with unique questions. Each week, the editorial team selected three questions with journalistic potential. Readers voted on these questions in a total of 500,000 times to determine which ones should be further investigated. The voting ensured that the topics were of interest not only to the askers but also to a broader audience.

It was thought-provoking that the public often asked questions that we as journalists had wondered about at some point, without considering them as potential journalism topics or without having the relevant cases. This was the case with some of the most popular answers throughout time:



1. Søren wonders: why do craftsmen start so early?
2. Jannie is outraged: Less content for the same price is a sneaky maneuver



• SAMFUND

Søren undrer sig: Hvorfor møder håndværkere så tidligt?

1.



• FORBRUG

Jannie er forarget: Mindre indhold til samme pris er en lusket manøvre

2.

3. Is it necessary to rinse waste before sorting? Not really, the answer says
4. Customers are angry: Mailmen cheat with home delivery of packages



• MILJØ

Er det nødvendigt at skylle affald før sortering? Ikke rigtig, lyder svaret

3.



• SAMFUND

Kunder raser over postbuddet: De snyder med hjemmelivering af pakker

4.

The population's curiosity gave us original stories and angles. Their knowledge and participation propelled journalism forward. Their voices helped us understand what was relevant to them. Our relationship and collaboration created more community, greater understanding, longer reading times, and ideas for follow-ups.

Both the media and the population became wiser. And happier.

## Better Listening - Shortcut to a listening mindset

The fellowship at the Constructive Institute is a combination of folk high school, university education, and individual explorations of how journalism can enrich society and focus on the people we serve.

We meet daily in the Lounge at Aarhus University. We have knowledgeable guests from academics, media and other traits of life. We go on study trips at home and abroad to learn from the best. We give presentations about what we know and have found evidence for, to visitors from all over the world in Aarhus.

The constructive approach aims to make everyone wiser and find solutions to the most important challenges of our time in collaboration with civil society:



I brought my practical experiences into the fellowship with a curiosity about whether they were only mine or could be validated.

They could. With a lot more being added.

So, based on the fellowship, I have developed a method that explains how legacy media may become better at listening to our audiences.

The method is based on four values, as illustrated here:




Just like a car has movable parts that can be adjusted, the listening approach also has its adjustable components.

There are many ways to listen to and involve the audience. What matters most is the curiosity, mindset, and perseverance in doing so.

The Better Listening Method has been developed based on knowledge about what most effectively encourages the newsroom to listen more actively and systematically, as well as what typically hinders it.

## Shared language creates shared awareness

The Constructive Institute has developed an internationally recognized model that identifies the drivers behind the different journalistic purposes when the newsroom operates in a news-oriented, investigative, and constructive manner. The guidelines for these three approaches are described in the model below to understand what typically motivates us when we engage in journalism:



|           | Listening mindset              | News mindset | Investigative mindset | Constructive mindset          |
|-----------|--------------------------------|--------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------|
| Time      | Any time                       | Now          | Yesterday             | Tomorrow                      |
| Goals     | Understand                     | Speed        | Blame                 | Inspiration                   |
| Questions | How come? /<br>What is status? | What? When?  | Who? Why?             | What now? How?                |
| Style     | Puzzled                        | Dramatic     | Critical              | Curious                       |
| Role      | Helper &<br>Co-creator         | Police       | Judge                 | Facilitator                   |
| Focus     | Answers<br>& Nuances           | Drama        | Crooks<br>& Victims   | Solutions<br>& Best practices |

Source: Nanna Holst      Source: Constructive Institute

There hasn't been a common language for a conscious listening approach before. Therefore, I have expanded the model with corresponding guidelines for a more consciously listening and collaborative mindset in the newsroom (Column 1).

Listening is not just another task that journalists have to accomplish in an already busy day. Listening to understand what lies behind a statement, a question, a pattern, or an action is the cornerstone of journalism. Listening to and working together with our target audience is a prerequisite for understanding how we, as media, constantly stay relevant to them, regardless of our journalistic approach, topic, or format.

Just like companies in other industries can only survive if they listen to understand the needs and expectations of their customers, regardless of what the company produces and in what form.

### **Journalism education is lagging behind**

Nevertheless, methodically listening to and collaborating with the "customer" is not a mandatory aspect in Danish journalism education. Interview techniques are typically included in the curriculum, focusing on asking questions, interrupting, and occasionally staying silent to make the source uncomfortable enough to reveal something on their own. Some students mention having encountered the concept of "active listening," which we know from psychiatry and the conversation between therapist and client. However, the act of listening to understand, help, and build relationships with the public in journalism is difficult to spot in the study plans.

The Danish School of Media and Journalism (DMJX) offers an elective course in Dialogue-based Journalism, which can be applied for by a third of the students in each cohort. Associate professor Anette Holm is a driving force behind DMJX's work on dialogue-based journalism. She has been involved in developing accompanying teaching methods at the EU level and teaches the elective course herself in the fourth semester of the journalism program.



*Anette Holm, Associate Professor, DJMX*

Anette Holm acknowledges that education and training in listening receive very little emphasis in journalism programs. Even the description of the dialog-based elective course does not mention listening specifically. One reason is a lack of teaching materials in listening as a skill that can be learned and trained:

- There is very little about building listening skills in journalism textbooks. I probably spend half a day making students aware of how to listen, with the message that they need to open their ears and be genuinely interested in the people they are talking to, says Anette Holm.

### Job advertisements in the media industry

Listening and working together with the public on journalism is also not skills that the news industry requests in its job advertisements. In fact, the general focus on the population is remarkably small, even among public service media, which literally have it in their mandate to 'serve the public'.



In three representative job advertisements in Journalisten on May 7, 2023, the term 'customer' is mentioned either

1. not at all.
2. In a single sentence about the media organization itself: "A modern media company with towering ambitions to produce regional journalism of national class every day, engaging and informing the target audience."
3. In two bullets, it is mentioned that the applicant should have a 'nose for stories that people are talking about and that touch them' and a good 'sense of what interests people at the moment.'

The last example conveys a genuine interest in understanding the questions that the population asks themselves and is currently discussing.



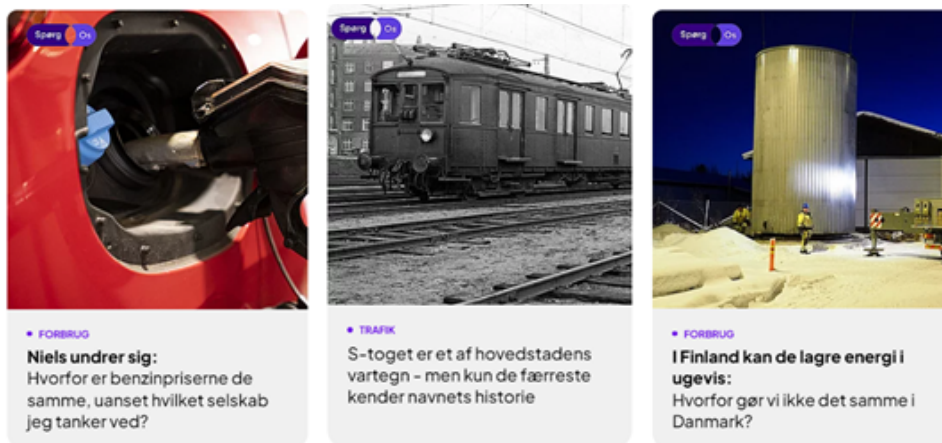
It is a skill that the media outlet seeks in new employees, but it can only hope for 'noses' and 'senses' because journalists, in general, are not trained in a methodical listening approach.

## The listening approach is timeless

The model for common language and guiding principles above (page 22) is about approaches rather than different types of journalism. On the contrary, the different approaches in the model complement each other: News can be inspiring, investigative projects can point to solutions, and the constructive approach helps find solutions to the problems and conflicts of the model. All journalism benefits from listening in order to understand, whether we're producing breaking news (approach), climate journalism (topic), or explainers (format).

The row 'Time' in the Language House (page 15) illustrates how news is concerned with the present moment, the investigative approach looks backward, and the constructive approach looks forward. The listening approach is timeless. The population seeks help in understanding what is happening now, what has happened in the past, and what challenges we face as a society.

Examples of curiosity spanning the present, past, and future from Ask Us at TV 2 Kosmopol:



Niels wonders: Why are gasoline prices the same no matter which gas station I fill up at? The S-train is an icon of the capital, area, but only a few know the history behind its name. In Finland, they can store energy for weeks: Why don't we do the same in Denmark?

Without a common language for listening and keeping focus on the target group's expectations of us, we easily fall back into old habits, where the journalists ask and the target group listens.

## 5 typical reasons why listening is difficult

Kate Murphy is an experienced American journalist who has long wondered why we are generally so poor at listening to others, both in the media industry and in our personal lives.

This curiosity led her to seek knowledge about listening and travel across the United States for several years to speak with exceptionally good listeners outside of the media industry.

She has published the book 'You're Not Listening: What You're Missing and Why It Matters'.

Kate Murphy highlights five factors that typically hinder us from listening:

1. **It takes effort to listen**

Our thoughts can race faster than others can speak, causing our minds to wander and become easily distracted.

2. **Multitasking is a myth**

Each layer of distraction impairs our ability to listen and understand.

3. **Listening is an acquired skill**

People in professions that require attentive listening, such as air traffic controllers, intelligence agents, focus group leaders, moderators, bartenders, salespeople, and hairdressers, have all invested 10,000 hours in listening. Like any other skill, listening improves with practice.

4. **If you don't practice listening, the ability fades away**

Many people want to be heard, but few are willing to listen. When we fall out of practice with listening, it can seem daunting to start again.

5. **The world is full of distractions**

Think of listening as a form of meditation. You acknowledge external disturbances but don't let them steal your attention. Purposefully redirect your focus back to the person you are listening to.



## Better Listening paves the way to a common language

Journalists, editors, and media leaders need a common language to foster a more listening mindset in the newsroom. Otherwise, we easily get distracted and fall back into old habits of thinking that "we in the media know best what the public needs."

The guiding principles in Language House (page 22) provide a common language for listening and help create a balance between:

- The questions that journalists ask themselves
- The questions that the public asks themselves

Both sets of questions are important. The latter requires us to listen better.



## The WHY: What we achieve by listening

Before embarking on actively and systematically listening and engaging with our target audience, it is important to determine what it aims to solve for both the media outlet and the audience. There are so many ways to listen.

For example, media outlets can engage users through their website, solicit input during live broadcasts, create communities through events and outreach formats, develop targeted newsletters, and bring together citizens and decision-makers to find solutions. The possibilities are endless, but they should align with what the media wants to achieve by listening better and the resources available to do so.

Some media outlets open up to public inquiries during special occasions. We saw this widely during the COVID-19 pandemic, where several traditional media outlets used their mandate as intermediaries between the public, science, and authorities to find answers. Other media outlets systematically involve the public in their daily journalism. Both approaches are valid.

The key is to define what specifically we, as a media outlet, aim to achieve by listening better. We know from research on creativity and innovation that problem analysis is crucial in the process of change, as it affects all subsequent processes. What we set out to solve defines the solution.

The following two pages present two examples of the work involved in creating a shared why.

### TV 2 Kosmopol: The path to a shared WHY

When my own media outlet sought to listen better, our reality was that we needed to be relevant to one-third of Denmark's population in the country's most diverse area.

In the metropolitan region, we have the most of everything: Traffic, people, power, powerlessness, diversity, gender, immigration, noise, wealth, poverty. The Capital, suburbs, market towns, countryside.

Our own research showed that what brings people together in the country's most expensive area is

1. Orientation towards 'The World's Best City' Copenhagen - as named by Monocle magazine for the fourth time since 2017

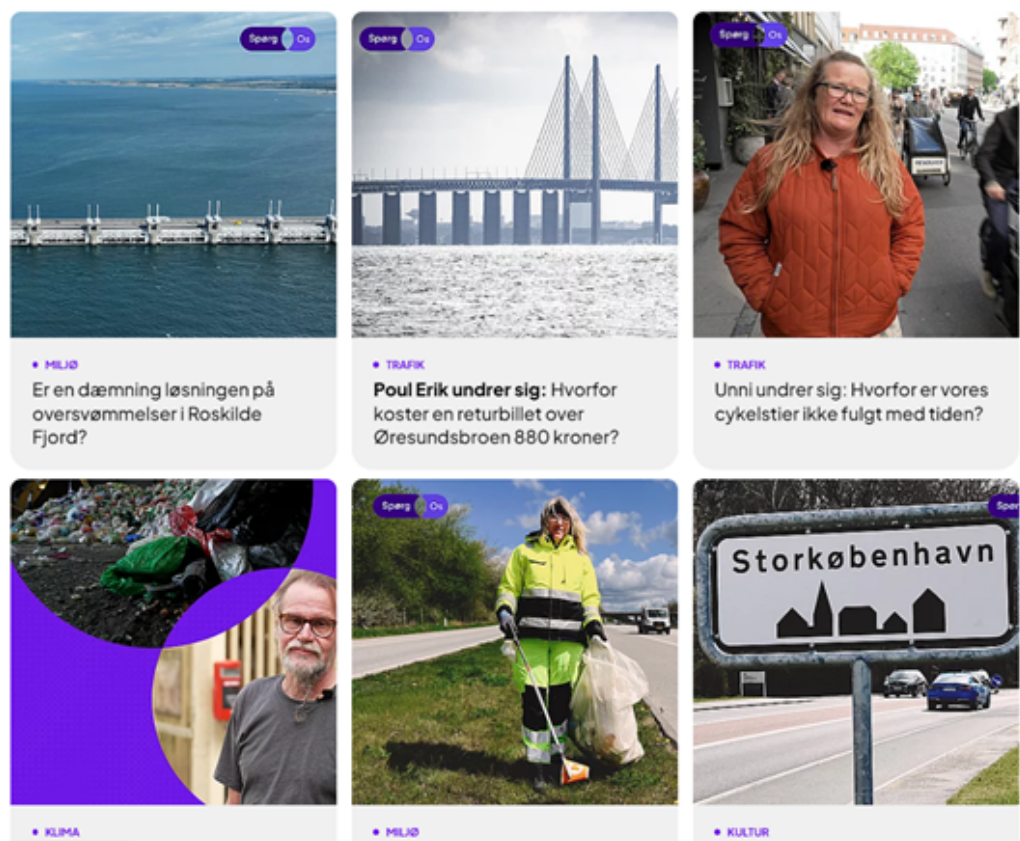
2. Outlook towards the rest of the world. Cosmopolitan means 'citizen of the world'. Our listening approach had to reflect that.

At the same time, the media wanted to reflect and tell the stories of everyday life in the metropolis, where people live and work.

The analysis led to

### **TV 2 Kosmopol's WHY for listening better:**

- Strengthen the sense of our unique regional community.
- Create more content that is directly relevant to the population.
- Include more voices, diversity, and perspectives in our content.
- Do it in a simple, systematic, and everyday way.
- Treat the population's questions as any other journalism.
- Foster a sense of community around 'meaning' versus the 'I mean'ings on social media.



## Mediehusene Midtjylland: The way to their WHY

Brian Holst is the News and Silkeborg Editor at Midtjyllands Avis. He is also driving the transition to a more constructive, listening, and engaging journalism at Mediehusene Midtjylland. The media group consists of Midtjyllands Avis, Skive Folkeblad, and Herning Folkeblad.



The reality of the media houses is representative of many traditional, local media outlets in a new era:

- We have many good sources, but they are mostly the same ones we have had for the past 30 years. The loyal core. Prior to our constructive project, we conducted a citizen survey, which shows that the majority of people know Midtjyllands Avis. However, very few in our area can name even one of our journalists. We need to change that so that citizens have a much more personal relationship with us.

Around 80 percent in the survey have never had contact with the newspaper. Not through a journalist, attending an event at the newspaper, or by, for example, writing a letter to the editor. It also reflects the fact that we need to work on building relationships.

Finally, like many others in the industry, we struggle to retain our subscribers, who are primarily the older part of the population - and they pass away over time. Therefore, we also try to listen more to the younger part of the population, aged 30-50, and get them connected to our newspaper. That is, as paying customers in a time when advertising sales are declining, says Brian Holst.

### Mediehusene Midtjylland's WHY for listening better:

- The newspapers aim to play a more active role in their local communities, becoming indispensable for their readers, in a shared mission to make living in Midtjylland better.

## **5 considerations before starting**

We can listen and engage in many ways. The important thing is to formulate what is missing in the relationship between the media and its target audience.

The following considerations will help develop a clear understanding of your special WHY for listening better:

### **1. What do you aim to achieve by listening better?**

Clearly define the goals and objectives that your media organization wants to accomplish through improved listening. This could include building stronger relationships with the audience, increasing audience engagement and loyalty, or delivering more relevant content.

### **2. How will you listen better?**

Determine the methods and channels through which you will actively listen to your audience. This could involve digital platforms, live interactions, conducting field research, or utilizing other innovative approaches. Choose the approaches that align best with your target audience and resources.

### **3. What measurable criteria will you use to gauge success?**

Establish specific metrics or indicators that will help you evaluate the effectiveness of your listening efforts. This could include audience feedback, increased participation, higher engagement metrics, or any other relevant measurements that reflect the desired outcomes.

### **4. What changes need to be made in your culture and daily operations to facilitate better listening?**

Identify the necessary cultural shifts and operational changes within your media organization to create an environment that values and prioritizes listening. This may involve fostering a more open and receptive mindset, implementing new processes for collecting and acting on audience input, and training staff members.

### **5. What resources can you leverage?**

Assess the resources available to support your listening initiatives. This includes both human resources and technological capabilities. Consider the skills, expertise, and tools needed to effectively listen to your audience and ensure that you have the necessary resources in place to implement your listening strategy.

Michael A. West, a British professor of organizational psychology, is known for saying, "Ideas are ten a penny." In other words, ideas are easy to come by but difficult to execute. He formulates what typically prevents organizations from delivering on what they set out to do:



- Usually, there is no shortage of creative ideas, but rather a lack of will, support, or the necessary resources, whether material or immaterial, to implement these ideas.

*Applied Psychology, June 14, 2002*

## **5 Common Traits of Successful Listeners**

### **1. Enthusiastic leaders and facilitators**

Media organizations that succeed in active and systematic listening have a leader who sees the media and the audience as equals. The leader consistently pays attention to and shows interest in the listening and engaging approach, supporting it with resources.



Lene Vestergaard, Horsens Folkeblad @Mads Dalegaard

Lene Vestergaard is editor-in-chief at Horsens Folkeblad. The editorial team has a history of being one of the most methodical within the JFM Group in



writing articles based on readers' curiosity. Such articles consistently perform better in terms of reading times and conversion to paid subscriptions than the average. Additionally, the reader-generated curiosity creates important relationships between the newspaper and the local community:

- It is in our journalistic DNA to work for cohesion and democracy in the local community. What aligns better with that than listening to local citizens? It makes a lot of sense to invite them into the journalistic process. With their curiosity and questions, they can influence what we write about - and at an early stage in the process. At the same time, they develop connections with us and feel taken seriously, says Lene Vestergaard.

### **A persistent facilitator**

In addition to leadership that shows the way, it is important to have a daily facilitator who is given the time, opportunity and mandate to lead the effort and drive progress in the newsrooms.

Systems and workflows need to be designed, set up, and continuously optimized. The audience needs to be made aware of the opportunity to engage. User input needs to be handled, evaluated, and curated.

There is the dialogue with users that may not be visible in the media content but is part of listening, understanding, investigating, answering, and informing. There is the overview of what the media has already responded to and what is trending in the inbox.

Results need to be recorded, lessons need to be drawn from experience,, and the organization needs to be held accountable. Content needs to be produced and published with the right timing.

The tasks of coordinating and maintaining engagement are many, which is why the facilitator should be driven by internal motivation and a strong value of serving the greater good. Otherwise, the newsroom quickly falls back into old habits where journalists think they "know best."

## **2. Systematics routines and prioritizations**

The majority of our thinking happens unconsciously. This is practical because our mental bandwidth is limited. Life would become

overwhelming if we had to consciously think about everything we do and every choice we make every single day.

Our unconscious thoughts occur in what the American professor and Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman calls the brain's System 1. The advantage of System 1 is that the brain does a tremendous amount of work for us without requiring much conscious effort. The weakness of System 1 is that the brain tends to choose the easiest solutions and make decisions based on limited information and past experiences. It relies on routines and what it's accustomed to.

When we want to do something new, we need new routines and prioritizations that support the purpose of cultural change. This requires engaging the brain's System 2. In System 2, the brain is rational, logical, and makes conscious choices. New routines and prioritizations help the newsroom train and establish new habits, eventually becoming the new and improved "normal" in System 1.

If the media organization does not create systematic routines and prioritizations, the old System 1 quickly takes over in a busy everyday life. The necessary systematic approach depends on the specific WHY of better listening.

Zetland, a niche media outlet, engages in daily dialogue with its members and often incorporates their experiences into its articles. The regional newspaper Fyens Stiftstidende prioritizes meeting readers through live events. The public service media TV 2 Fyn sometimes invites residents of the island of Funen to ask questions to experts on specific topics like COVID-19 or energy-saving advice.

Each approach requires its own routines to maintain ongoing dialogue, organize relevant events, and collaborate with experts. The important thing is to define how, when, and how often you can and want to listen and deliver, and what expectations you can create and meet.





## **Technology can support routines and prioritizations**

The organization Hearken is a pioneer in developing tools that support a listening and engaging approach to journalism. The organization defines its purpose as follows:

Hearken means "to listen". We founded our company on the belief and recognition that curiosity and listening are the foundation of better business." *wearehearken.com*

Since 2016, Hearken has been helping media outlets in the United States listen more actively, and in 2019, they expanded to Europe. Their analysis of customers shows that the brain's System 2 needs help to change the strong habits of System 1 in the newsroom to a more listening mindset:

- Many media organizations feel that they listen, but they don't ask themselves: How do we listen? How do we make listening a regular practice? There needs to be structure and a consistent practice; otherwise, it will be forgotten. Listening should be a way of thinking, not just a project. The media outlets that succeed in listening have a systematic approach to listening with the purpose of getting to know their users better and building a closer relationship. Not all journalism needs to come from listening, but it is an additional opportunity to engage and involve the audience in something they find relevant, says Christian Hougaard, Chief Commercial Officer at Hearken Europe.

Horsens Folkeblad was among the first in Denmark to install the listening and engagement technology from Hearken. The backend has made it easy for the newsroom to create digital questionnaires, conduct polls, and keep track of readers' questions and contact with them. The system has strengthened the newspaper's focus on the citizens' questions to themselves:

- As a media outlet, we have always received tips and questions from readers, but the tool has helped us establish a framework and maintain a sustained and more systematic focus on listening," says Editor-in-Chief Lene Vestergaard.

### 3. Make it easy to deliver and easy to participate

You can't expect either the editorial team or the target audience to be interested in engaging in a closer collaboration if it is cumbersome or difficult to understand where and how the collaboration should take place.

Research on Choice Architecture, popularly known as Nudging, shows how important it is to speak to the brain's System 1 - the part that is not systematic or consciously considering the many choices we make unconsciously - when we want others to change behaviour.

Hence, when you want the staff and the target audience to do something, it should be easy and intuitive to do so. Fx, when cafeteria staff set out smaller plates and place the healthy options before the sweet ones on the buffet, the guests eat smaller portions with more of the healthy food for lunch.

Media organizations that want to actively and systematically listen and engage must think in the same way: How do we make it easy and attractive for the target audience to be part of our journalistic community?

Some media outlets choose a listening and engaging concept that all editorial teams contribute to. Other media outlets leave it up to individual journalists or editorial teams to develop concepts that suit them.

Both methods have their advantages. Regardless, they need to work. This requires the media organization to activate the brain's System 2 to design something that works for the brain's System 1 in everyday life.

**Example:** Conducting a poll on what topic the media organization should prioritize first is an easy way to get help in understanding what is more important to the target audience.



## 4. Start small and learn along the way

Research on creativity and innovation uses the concepts of Exploration and Exploitation.

- Exploration - exploring new paths to create relevance in the future
- Exploitation - improving designs and methods to optimize results.

Successful listening media organizations do both when they decide to listen better and continuously adjust their efforts to optimize the dialogue.

Neither the "Ask Us" universe nor the formats in Mediehusene Midtjylland were perfect when they invited the target audiences in. They don't need to be perfect to work as a start. You can think through a lot and create designs and methodologies that you believe will work. But it's through practical work, interaction with and feedback from the target audience that you understand what works and what doesn't.

The learning approach is systematized and supported by Design Thinking. In this approach, you empathize with the needs of the target audience, devise prototypes, test them with the target audience, and continuously improve the prototype based on user feedback/reactions. A prototype could be a format in Midtjyllands Avis, a reader meeting in Fyns Stiftstidende, or a panel discussion hosted by The Oaklandside, all of which are continuously adjusted.

### The bird in hand principle

The renowned American professor of entrepreneurship, Saras D. Sarasvathy, calls it the **"bird in hand" principle**: Create solutions with the resources available here and now..

An example of a successful "bird in hand" solution is a small video from Avisen.dk's correspondent covering the Biden/Trump election campaign in 2020. Just before departing for the USA, he asked for relevant questions from the Danish readers.

- Emil reached out for help with a simple selfie video at the airport, inviting the readers to be part of the coverage. It went well. People are willing to help. The point is, it doesn't have to be fancy to ask for input. Reporters today can just record a simple video, and we can help



them with captioning, says Anders Hjelmer Paulsen, editor of newsletters and digital development, at JFM.

### **Set out with the motivated ones**

It's important to find good allies to work with throughout the creative process of creating a universe for listening, testing, and adapting. Not everyone in the newsroom will be equally motivated to produce journalism based on the perspectives of the target audience. Some will quickly embrace the idea and support it in their daily work, both by speaking positively about the approach and translating it into journalistic content. This group should quickly become part of the process as important ambassadors for the cultural change.

For others, it may feel overwhelming and fundamentally wrong to relinquish some of the power that journalists and editors traditionally have had over the editorial process. It can also be challenging to understand the target audience's different angles and realities.

Assistant Professor Bart Verwaeren teaches the academic course 'Creativity at Work' at Aarhus University BSS. He puts it this way:

- Some people are simply better at seeing others' perspectives than others. The young child only has their own perspective. We learn as we age. But not everyone learns equally well," he says.

### **The self-imposed requirements can evolve**

Just as we develop, design, and test the way we reach out, the level of involvement in the newsroom can also change over time. Fx, the starting point for "Ask Us" at TV 2 Kosmopol was that it should be enjoyable for both the public and the employees to participate. Not everyone had to take part.

However, a year and a half later, there were elections to Folketinget (the Danish Parliament). The employees themselves suggested that the station's election coverage should be 100% based on the metropolitan voters' questions and curiosities. This meant that all editorial teams committed to conducting debates, writing articles, creating videos, and producing TV for and together with the citizens on a defined, regular basis.



**VS**



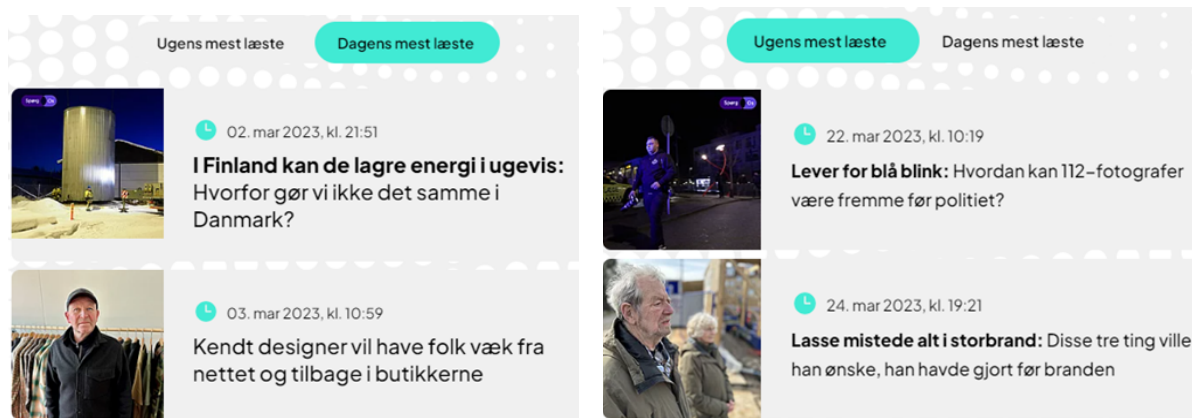
(Election. Ask Us)

## 5. Successful listeners document and share results

Editorial offices and media houses constantly measure how different content performs. Typically, as a journalist and editor, one pays the most attention to what happens to one's own content and within one's own editorial office.

When we aim to listen better in the newsroom, it is important for the cultural change that the newsroom is continuously reminded to focus on the listening and engagement results of all editorial teams.

On the news site tv2kosmopol.dk anyone can see which articles receive the most minutes of readers' attention. It is more the rule than the exception that articles capturing users' curiosity and co-creation end up being the most read of the day (left) and/or of the week (right).



*In Finland, they can store energy for weeks: Why don't we do the same in Denmark?  
Living for emergency rush: How can 911 photographers arrive before the police?*

That knowledge alone is not enough to create a cultural change. It is also necessary to build upon the results and communicate them continuously. This requires translation and publicity to ensure that everyone discovers the progress and understands what triggers it.

It often has a greater impact within the organization when leadership shares the progress and results. The facilitator can assist by making it easy for the leadership to incorporate the results into their internal communication. We know from research on nudging that humans are social beings and like to do things that others are also doing. If those around me, fx, vote in an election, I am more likely to do the same. It is motivating and prestigious to be part of a success that the leadership pays special attention to.

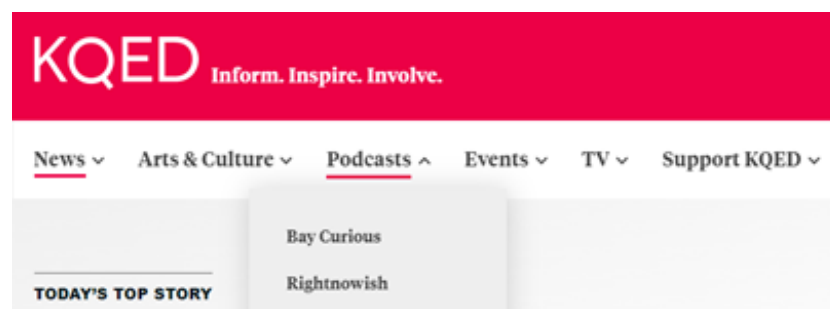
It is also important to acknowledge colleagues who take initiative and achieve results on their own. They are key players in the cultural change and contribute to continuously improving the dialogue with and relevance for the audiences it all revolves around.

### **Example: A shared concept for the entire media house**

AskUs at TV 2 Kosmopol was designed with the intention of making it clear to the population in the metropolitan area that:

"We are here, we listen, we co-create, we do it in our everyday work and as part of our regular journalism."

In my search for great listening role models in the media industry, I was surprised by how difficult it is to find examples of how media invite users to engage and the content that emerges from their collaboration.




It is not just a Danish phenomenon. The San Francisco-based media company KQED has created an award-winning, geographically curious and engaging concept - Bay Curious. However, new users have to figure out that they must go to a subpage in the drop-down menu under the main menu called 'Podcasts'.

On the subpage, users can easily ask curious questions about The Bay Area and vote for the most interesting question. They can also find the answers to the user generated questions. KQED calls Bay the Curious stories "Perfect for Bay Area locals and new arrivals" ([kqed.org](http://kqed.org)) but they don't make it very easy for new users to discover the treasure.

### **More clear entry points**

That experience helped secure a place for Spørg Os (Ask Us) in the main menu on TV 2 Kosmopol's website and in the burger menu for mobile devices:

Under each article, an automatically generated question box and a poll invite readers to participate in the media house's journalism.


**kosmopol**

Menu

Skriv dit spørgsmål her

0/500

**Kontaktinformation**  
 Vi kontakter dig, hvis dit spørgsmål bliver valgt

Navn


Mail

Telefon

Postnummer

☐ Hold mig opdateret med jeres nyhedsbrev  
☐ Jeg accepterer betingelserne og TV 2 Kosmopols [privatlivspolitik](#)

Sendt


**Spørg**

Os

Stem her: Hvilket spørgsmål skal vi undersøge?

Hvorfor kan læger, der for længst er gået på pension stadig udskrive receptermedicin? Tænker de nok ikke er helt opdateret på seneste forskning og udvikling.

Tilføj et ca. 1 måned siden, af Stig Bergen


Hvor havner farligt affald fra hovedstadsområdet henne? Graves det ned – og i så fald hvor?

Tilføj 3 måneder siden, af Minou Nielsen

Bliver der fortsat lavet mindsten for faldne danske soldater i nyere krige som f.eks. Afghanistan, Irak, Balkan?

Tilføj et ca. 2 måneder siden, af Kate Nielsen

Stem her!


**Spørg**

Os

Tak for dit svar!

Dit spørgsmål er på 2. plads med 39% af stemmerne.

Hvorfor kan læger, der for længst er gået på pension stadig udskrive receptermedicin? Tænker de nok ikke er helt opdateret på seneste forskning og udvikling.



50%

Hvor havner farligt affald fra hovedstadsområdet henne? Graves det ned – og i så fald hvor?

39%


Bliver der fortsat lavet mindsten for faldne danske soldater i nyere krige som f.eks. Afghanistan, Irak, Balkan?

11%

Tweet

Share


**kosmopol**

Menu

**Spørgsmål, vi undersøger for jer**

Vi skal holde byen ren, men i København har man efterhånden fjernet alle de skraldespande, som stod ved siden af bænkene i parker og på pladser. Er der mere skrald i bybilledet nu, og hvorfor er så mange skraldespande blevet fjernet?

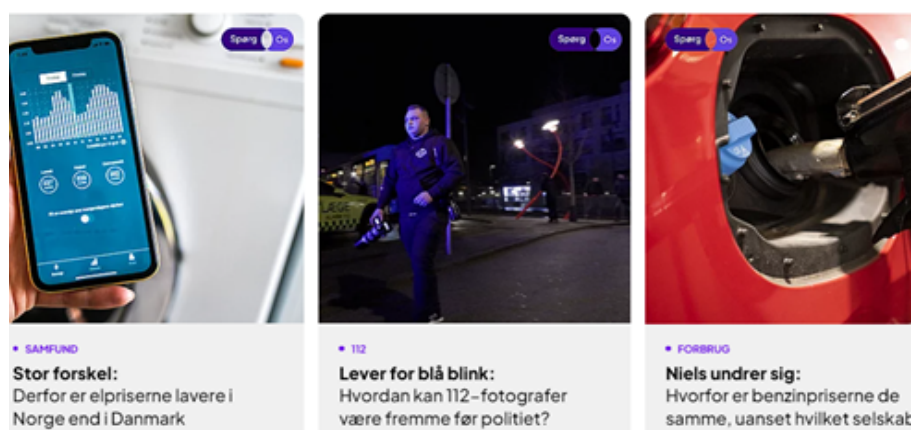
Indsendt for 21 dage siden af Aase Schomacker

Hvorfor bliver priserne på dagligvarer ved med at stige?

Indsendt for 27 dage siden af Birgit aaholm

Hvorfor er det russiskejede stålvejlsværk NLMK DanSteel A/S i Frederiksværk ikke underlagt de restriktioner, som mange andre russiske virksomheder i resten af verden?

Some workflows differ from traditional news production because the askers are invited to participate in the journalistic process before, during, and after the investigation of the topic they have asked about. There are also visual elements that highlight the collaboration with the audience.





Workflows and elements are easy to remember for journalists who uncover many answers but difficult for those who do not do it as often. Therefore, a manual describes and illustrates these workflows, serving as a checklist for journalists, similar to pilots. The manual is continuously updated and sent along with an Ask Us story to the editor or the journalist.

### **Example: Individual concepts within the media house**

Mediehusene Midtjylland has chosen to let individual journalists or teams at the three local newspapers develop their own formats. ,

The idea is for them to listen and engage in a way that makes the most sense for them and their target audience. The journalists have tested these formats by going out and trying them.

The best formats are compiled in a shared Format Book, making it easy for others to use the same concepts.



The task of listening better has been given by the management in Mediehusene Midtjylland in a top-down manner, but in a shared understanding with the employees of the necessity to create new relationships in the local area.

Project Manager and News Editor Brian Holst explains the advantage of taking a reverse bottom-up approach to creating specific, listening formats:

- It provides personal ownership and ways of working that make sense and bring satisfaction to each individual. All the formats contribute to enhancing our journalism and make it more tangible for journalists to work on a daily basis with constructive and engaging journalism. This approach helps create a relationship between readers and the newspaper, and it is precisely the relationship that we value highly, says Brian Holst.



## Focus on the audience's reality

When we listen to what matters to the target audience, loyalty and willingness to pay increase.

"The best way to find out what is important to other people is to let them ask their own questions."

The quote comes from '5 Good Advice: How to get more out of your questions'.

The guide is written by philosopher, Ph.D. Pia Lauritzen out of frustration with the way the fourth estate used its question time during the many COVID-19 press briefings at the Prime Minister's Office.



Pia Lauritzen researches questions, writes books about questions, and is on a mission with the company quest.io to, as she calls it, "democratize the power of questioning, which is the right to ask questions and demand answers from everyone else."

She argues that the population will benefit from journalists democratizing the power of questioning by asking themselves a fundamental question before every interview: "Is the most important thing right now what I think is important, or is it what the target audience thinks is most important?"

- You do not become a worse journalist by sharing your power of questioning with someone who can create greater curiosity, responsiveness, and cohesion than you can.

In fact, it is your duty as a watchdog of democracy to ask questions from the position that serves democracy best. Even if you perceive yourself as a critical journalist, you have to take seriously that other positions are often needed.

You can ask questions like an 'investigator' who is genuinely interested in understanding what precedes decisions. Or as a 'messenger' who investigates questions that matter to the population, says Pia Lauritzen.

Although our users are our raison d'être, it is difficult for many journalists to share their questioning power with those they are here for.

Research on creativity describes mental models as cognitive knowledge structures that determine how we think and act. We all have internal images of how things work and what to do in a given situation.

Fx, when a Dane visits a restaurant i Denmark, he/she expects that everything is included in the prices listed on the menu. You can tip if you want to show appreciation, but it is not required. When a Dane visits a restaurant in the USA, this mental model is challenged. Here, the prices on the menu do not include the tax that one has to pay or the tips one is expected to give to low-paid employees.

Similarly, journalists have mental models for how we work. We are educated through our studies, influenced by the culture in our workplaces, and develop habits that support these mental models.

As a new employee, you may initially question aspects of the culture in the workplace, but over time, you adapt your mental models to the context you are in and no longer question them. Bart Verwaeren, the lecturer on creativity at Aarhus University, calls this process 'updating' your mental models.

Here are three approaches that help foster greater everyday humility towards our audience and continuously update the mental models of the newsroom in that direction:

## **1. Tuning down the noise to tune into the public**

When we listen more to the target audience, we must listen less to something else so that it does not become the extra work that journalists do not need.

The most obvious place to cut back is on the agendas that professional communicators and those in power want the media to focus their efforts on. Today, professionals and the powerful have their own platforms where they communicate directly with their many followers.

The professionals manage well without the media and their critical questions. Therefore, the important actors in everyday life are your users, readers, listeners, and viewers, who have no particular questioning power without you.

## 2. Guidelines help focus on the audience's perspectives

When we need to change ingrained habits, we need to be reminded very specifically about the new thinking so that the brain's comfortable mental models in System 1 don't take over in a busy daily life. If the newsroom formulates guidelines or news criteria for listening and involving, they ensure that the target audience and their perspectives are included in editorial meetings, daily priorities, the thinking of individual journalists/reporters, in feedback, and post-critique.

Guidelines can be questions like the reporters at the American media house Cityside have to ask themselves every day, such as "Does this story reflect an effort to listen to civil society?" Or the KLIO model, which Mediehusene Midtjylland uses to remind themselves daily that their journalism is Critical, Solution-oriented, Inclusive, and Following-up. In Danish, the letters make sense.

## 3. Consistency provides predictability and commitment

Users can more easily follow along when they know when they can engage and when they can expect new activity/content/events. Regular deadlines for the newsrooms help journalists and editors prioritize user input so that it is not pushed aside and forgotten.

Fx, at TV 2 Kosmopol, users know that they can vote on new questions from the population in the capital region every Tuesday. The regional public service radio P4 Nordjylland promises to address a user question and explore it from different angles on their morning program every Friday. The London-based media outlet The Tortoise holds Think-In evenings in their Lounge several nights a week, where people can participate in various events with the media's journalists and invited guests.



## Example: Humility pays off

JMF - formerly Jysk Fynske Medier - operates with the Golden Ratio for how articles in the group's many newspapers perform. JFM can also see which articles lead to new subscription sign-ups..

Anders Hjelmer Paulsen, who is the editor of newsletters and digital development in JFM, has conducted an analysis for this study that shows how articles based on readers' curiosity and reality perform..

The numbers must be kept within the media house, but I am allowed to reference the conclusion: It is striking how much higher the articles perform compared to the Golden Ratio and how many symbols they have for conversion.

Articles with readers' questions typically speak into the user value: 'Helps me understand.' Such articles are much more effective at getting non-subscribers to sign up for a subscription than articles in a category like 'Inspire me,' which may seem similar. But they are not:

- Readers' curiosity provides background and investigations. It often involves down-to-earth questions about urban development and traffic that engage readers. The dialogue means that we establish a closer relationship to and understand our readers better. We can see this reflected in the lower churn rate of subscribers for these types of articles. Through readers' questions, we receive different and broader types of input than the self-interests that typically come through the editorial mailbox, usually with requests for event coverage, says Anders Hjelmer Paulsen.

Especially local 'mysteries' are popular because the answers to them - and the underlying stories - cannot be found through search engines or artificial intelligence.

Here are two examples of that:

*A reader is puzzled: Why a gravestone for Søs if she is still alive?*



Nanna Holst -Report from the fellowship

page 4/

Køb abonnement

**Vejle Amts Folkeblad**

Log ind Menu

Vejle Jelling Bækop Give Egtved Hedensted Billund Sport Danmark Live Spo

**Ole undrer sig over nyt forbudsskilt ved Dyrehaven: 'Her må jeg ikke løbe, men jeg må gerne køre i lastbil og på motorcykel'**



Bybækvæj møder Helligkildevej og skærer gennem Dyrehaven, hvor et nyt skilt ved fodgængernes og cyklisterens låge nu forbyder kondiløb. Foto: Google Street View

Ole Dregaard fra Nørremarken undrer sig over nye forbudsskilte ved indkørslen til Dyrehaven, hvor teksten proklamerer: "Kondiløb forbudt".

**Mest læste**

**ALARM 112**  
23-årig sad mageligt i taxa fra Aalborg til Vejle - men efter næste to timer og 200 kilometer opstod et problem

**VEJLE**  
Andreas og Noah går på den glædeste skole i Vejle Kommune: De kan andre lære af den +

**ERHVERV**  
Malerfirma er konkurs: Det stod om malerarbejdet på en række kendte steder i Vejle +

**ERHVERV**  
Fredag åbner ny butik på byens uofficielle oourmethørne: Her kan

*Ole wonders about the new prohibition sign at Dyrehaven: I'm not allowed to run here, but I can drive a truck and ride a motorcycle?*

Readers are, in other words, both interested in the content and willing to pay for it when the media house democratizes its questioning power to help the target audience understand.

It is an important value for a media outlet that needs to generate its own revenue.

Despite that, there are significant differences in the mental models of different editorial teams in the media group of what is perceived as good journalism and what is given priority:

- Readers' questions are not always naturally perceived as a help in generating good ideas. It can easily be seen as an additional task that needs to be solved. It requires a cultural change away from "We know best what should be in the newspaper." Some editors-in-chiefs feel that: "This is what we are trained for, and we don't need help", says Anders Hjelmer Paulsen.

## Our thinking determines our approach

TRUST IN THE POPULATION

*Audiences know a lot that we in the media don't know. They are willing to share their knowledge when we ask for it.*

We often discuss the public's trust in the media when another new report is published. Although trust in news and news media is high in the Nordic countries compared to the rest of the world, there is still room for improvement.

### Proportion that trust most news most of the time

All markets

#### Northern Europe



#### Western Europe



@Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023

The level of trust in the media is not representative of the general trust in society. Christian Bjørnskov, Professor of Economics at Aarhus University with a Ph.D. in Trust, puts it this way:

- Danes do not have declining trust in each other. They have declining trust in politicians and journalists. That is something worth holding onto, says Christian Bjørnskov.

-

In the repeated measurements of professional credibility, 'journalists' consistently rank at the bottom alongside 'politicians'. According to the professor, there is a logical reason for this:

- There is a spillover effect of distrust because journalists and politicians are perceived as part of the same system. Much of what the media writes about involves politicians and political issues. If you don't trust politicians, you also don't trust the journalists who work in the same echo chamber at Christiansborg, away from the general population, says Christian Bjørnskov.

At the top of the credibility scale are midwives and nurses, whom the population encounters in meaningful and relevant situations in their lives. These two professional groups are not 'away from the general population', but build trust through dialogue and collaboration.

Dialogue and collaboration are also highlighted as the path to greater trust by the so-called Dybvad committee, which recently investigated the interaction between the civil service, media, and politicians.

Recommendation number 4 states the following:

- Dialogue must resolve the trust crisis between the media and the civil service. There is decreasing trust between the media and the civil service. To ensure a healthy democracy, there is a need for dialogue and cooperation between the media and the civil service.

## **Trust is a mutual feeling**

The Dybvad committee describes trust as a mutual feeling that is important for ensuring a healthy democracy. Trust works both ways: Either one trusts each other or the opposite. With natural skepticism in power relations, of course.

Despite the inherent reciprocity of trust, I have not been able to find a single study on the media's trust in the population. Researchers I have spoken to argue that it is too difficult to define and measure what 'trust in the population' means, although it seems possible to measure in the opposite direction. The polling firm Epinion, which is regularly commissioned to conduct measurements of 'trust in the media,' has never been asked to conduct the reverse measurement.

Media and the civil service, as mentioned earlier, should not blindly trust each other. The mere fact that the number of communication employees in Denmark responsible for the government's needs has increased by 70 percent in the past 11 years between 2012 and 2023 calls for the media to take it very seriously to be critical on behalf of the population, be on its side and use its input and curiosity in the dialogue with the civil service. Whose



members, like journalists, typically live different lives than the majority of the population.

Media and the population should not blindly trust each other either. However, something interesting happens when media outlets challenge the traditional distribution of roles for trust and consider what it means to demonstrate trust in the population.

When I give presentations and workshops about better listening, I always ask participants if we can help researchers with suggestions for what 'media's trust in the population' could be. It is clear that journalists and media executives also struggle to understand what the reverse trust could be because, as mentioned, we never talk about it.

Media outlets that want to be relevant in the future must at least seriously consider how they view their target audience. Because our thinking determines our approach.

If we see the target audience as a group of passive recipients, the culture of 'we know best' will dominate in the newsroom. If we see the target audience as individuals with unique knowledge and skills, who are even willing to share it with us, the relationship becomes different and more equitable.

When media outlets invite the target audience as equal partners, mutual trust grows. It changes the culture within the media organization when the editorial team operates with an understanding that the collective knowledge and intelligence of the target audience far surpasses what exists within the newsroom.

### **Media outlets can, at the very least:**

- Consider our audiences as more than recipients -> Collaborators
- Treat the target audience as equal partners -> Competencies
- Ask the target audience for help and input -> Collective wisdom

Users know a lot that we don't. They are willing to share their knowledge when we ask for it.



## The straight path to creating trusting relationships

Research on behavior tells us that something special happens when we ask others to help us create 'meaning,' as opposed to asking for someone's opinion.

Dr. Robert Cialdini, an American legend in the field of influencing others, has written the best-selling book 'Influence.' The seventh and most recent principle in his model is 'Unity.' When you create a sense of belonging together, it becomes easier to get people to do what you want them to do.

In the case of media, it means getting the target audience to become loyal readers, listeners, and viewers.

**“When we belong, or feel we belong to a group,  
we’re likely to be more open to persuasion attempts.  
It starts with a simple question: “Can I get your advice?”**

Dr. Robert Cialdini, PhD, 'The Principle of Unity'

An example from Cialdini's research is a restaurant that wants to forge closer ties with new and existing customers. Participants in the study were asked about their expectations for the restaurant, their opinion on a new initiative, or to help the restaurant with its mission. Participants in the advisory group, who were asked for their advice, felt that they had contributed to the development of the restaurant and were significantly more inclined to visit it than the other two groups.

Although all three situations involve giving something to someone else, the perspectives are different. The one giving an opinion or expectation is focused inwardly on 'me' and 'them.' The one asked for advice experiences a shared focus with the questioner in a collective 'we.'

- The differential phrasing might seem minor, but it is critical to achieving the company's unitization goal. Nonetheless, these only slightly different forms of consumer feedback produce vitally different merging-versus-separating mind-sets.  
- Robert Cialdini, *The Principle of Unity*

In other words, it may seem like a small difference to ask for someone's opinion or ask them for meaningful input, but it makes the difference between creating a sense of community or not

## **Greater cohesion. Greater mandate. Greater significance**

A meaningful relationship with the target audience strengthens both parties. Publicist media, like few others, can find answers through data, research, and access to authorities, businesses, and those in power. It is an ability, skill, and access that the general population and personal news sources such as influencers and YouTubers typically do not have.

Hence, the significance of publicist media as a democratic link between the population and those in power grows when we ask the questions that the target audience asks themselves to those in power.

Cohesion with the target audience strengthens the mandate of the media, because

### **1. Media can give their audiences more authority.**

It is more difficult for authorities to dismiss inconvenient questions when they are rooted in the real realities of real people.

### **2. Media can get more authority by sharing the role of editor.**

It is more difficult for authorities to dismiss inconvenient questions that thousands of users have voted to be answered.

### **3. Media can create strong collaborations with audiences**

If answers are not precise or comprehensive and leave new questions unanswered, users quickly come forward with new knowledge and new questions. Once again, this provides a strong mandate to hold on to stories and demand new answers from authorities.

## **Align your intentions with your actions**

Do what you say. Otherwise, you do more harm than good.

When media outlets decide to listen more actively and systematically, they must be consistent. It takes time to build trust among users that their curiosity is taken seriously and treated on equal footing with the editorial team's own ideas.

If the editorial team forgets to listen and falls back into old habits of "we know best," users' engagement and trust disappear. Audiences feel deceived if we reach out for input and then ignore what they have to say. We know this from research in social innovation.

The European study "Engaging Citizens in Social Innovation," funded by the EU Commission, describes it quite well.

When governments seek to involve citizens in their activities, there is often a difference between what they express in the invitation and the reality experienced by the citizens. If a municipality, for example, uses terms like "empowerment" or "participation" when it is actually just conducting a consultation, it creates false expectations and ends up pushing the citizens further away:

- "Just as citizens' participation can strengthen democracy, negative experiences with participation can cause people to lose courage and interest in participating in the long run.

Staying away, becoming disillusioned, frustrated, cynical, and losing patience are common outcomes of poorly planned and executed attempts to engage citizens."

*Engaging Citizens in Social Innovation: A short guide to the research for policymakers and practitioners. (Davies, A and Simon, J 2013)*

In other words, we need to align our intentions with our actions and do what we say, or else we do more harm than good.

## Example: Do you know the solution?

TV 2 Kosmopol has described a problem in dept over two days: Companies in the capital area experience a serious shortage of workforce, but individuals with physical and mental challenges are still facing difficulties in finding employment opportunities. The evening news stories feature cases of individuals with good qualifications struggling to find employment.

The investigative newsroom has stopped at that point and has not exerted efforts to search for solutions. But the race is not over, even if the journalists have moved on.

Spørg Os (Ask Us) places a question box in the accompanying articles and calls for knowledge about workplaces in the capital area that have successfully employed individuals with physical and/or mental challenges. Within two days, readers come up with 20 qualified suggestions.



This results in four nuanced stories that describe the enriching aspects as well as the challenges of collaboration between workplaces and employees with special conditions. The companies also share their best advice as inspiration for other organizations that may contribute to creating space for diverse employees in the labor market while solving their own pending tasks.

With the help of the public, we quickly received a greater number of diverse and qualified solutions to a widespread, systematic problem than we would have found ourselves in the short time.

## Example: Readers exposed the police in breaking the law

The Copenhagen Police have recently started asking people to turn their bikes around in the morning traffic to check the frame numbers in order to find stolen bikes. A young man from the Nørrebro neighborhood feels that it is intrusive and asks TV 2 Kosmopol about the legal basis for this and whether one can refuse.

The police investigate the matter and come back with a response from their legal advisors stating that the legal basis is Section 77 of the Traffic Act, and no, one cannot refuse. I check Section 77 and include it in the article.

After the article is published, it doesn't take long for the collective intelligence of the population to be activated, and several messages start pouring into the "Ask Us" box. The main point in these messages is: 'The police are lying, you have been deceived, Section 77 does not cover bicycles.' True enough, there is no mention of bicycles in the section, only vehicles. I go back to the Copenhagen Police to get new answers regarding the legal basis and scope of their actions.



The answer comes with a big apology and a greeting to our "sharp readers" who have helped to uncover that the police are really not allowed to ask random citizens to turn their bikes. The Police admit to breaking the law 3,800 times and illegally charging 30 cyclists. Copenhageners are tired of bicycle thieves, but they are also concerned that the authorities must stay within the framework of controlling the population. Without trusting cohesion, the media might not have detected its blunder, and the citizens would probably never have made the police react.

### *Summary:*

If media outlets want trust from their audiences, they must show trust in return.

Trust in the audience provides the newsroom with new knowledge and creates unity when the audience is invited into journalism as a competent collaborator.

The significance of media as an intermediary between power and the population grows with a strong mandate from the users.

### **5 questions you can ask to get started:**

1. What answers are you looking for that we can help find?
2. Which of these stories should we investigate first?
3. What questions do you have within this topic that need answers?
4. What are your experiences or knowledge in this area?
5. Do you know the solution?

## LISTEN UP

### **We are constantly learning. Even complaints are valuable.**

Our audiences help us understand what makes sense to them, and what doesn't. When we listen to what users tell us, we gain assistance in learning, we expand the editorial process, and create a greater mutual understanding between the media and the audience.

### **When we listen up, users help us with timing**

The public often wonders about something before journalists do because they lead different lives.

Media outlets that listen pick up on trends and have a "hook" to tell the story, simply because someone asked. When media listen up, they have the opportunity to be the first to cover stories that are fundamentally interesting and will dominate the search results.

Some media outlets search for what is trending on Google to find out what questions people are asking themselves. That's fine. But when you invite the audience to contribute their own curiosity, you not only discover general trends but also gain insight into the background of the questions and why they are arising now. At the same time, the sources for the stories are readily available and can be part of the content that emerges from their curiosity.

I call this phenomenon the "seismograph."

Just as vulcanologists detect tremors before a volcano erupts, the facilitator with an overview of the listening effort in the media organization will notice when several questions start circling around the same topic. The seismograph can also be a single curiosity that speaks to a movement that journalists may sense but have not formulated themselves.

When the seismograph is in motion, it is crucial to listen up and take action. Timing is a significant factor in being relevant to the audience.



## Example: When TV 2 Kosmopol listened up - and didn't

Today, most Danes have an app that tracks the hourly price of electricity. Before the invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent energy crisis, most Danes only knew the price of electricity as a very small part of their overall electricity bill. Long before the editorial team or other media outlets noticed the change, a question arrived from pensioner Grethe, who had already started organizing her household's daily routines around the constantly changing electricity prices.

The question about why the prices had become so volatile received a large number of votes from readers, confirming its relevance. Uncovering what was going on and what individuals could do to deal with the situation became a hit. The media outlet was the first to cover the story and dominated the search results for the question for a long time. Thanks to its collaboration with the audience and its ability to listen up, the timing was just right.



At the same time, the capital area received many Ukrainian refugees, and a concern grew among their Danish neighbors: Would the war refugees not get a shock when our air defenses were tested routinely on the first Wednesday of May?

The editors recognized the need for an answer and wanted to time the story for the week when the sirens were scheduled to sound, as that would provide a "hook" for the story. However, it ended up being an article that few people read because, at that time, both emergency services and journalists in other media were covering the issue. The timing was off because editors didn't listen up when the seismograph started moving, indicating the growing concern among the audience.



## When we listen up, audiences help us learn

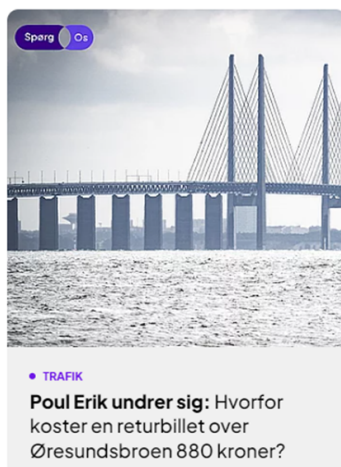
Messages from users help optimize content, workflow, concepts, and visibility. Better listening is not a campaign or a project; it's a mindset that needs to be trained, learned, and maintained. Audiences help us with that when we listen up. Journalists tend to believe that everyone follows the news flow and societal debates as closely as they do. But most people don't.

A BBC editor compares it to the way many people follow sports: They follow a few clubs and don't check on the development of all other clubs "just to stay informed."

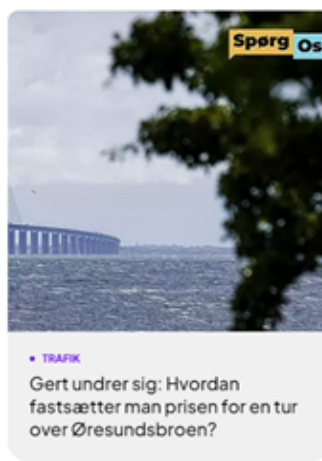
Therefore, it occasionally happens that the public asks about topics that the media has previously covered. The reaction from the newsroom will typically be, "We already did that." Yes, but the person asking was probably not around when the media last published something on the matter. There has likely been progress since then.

Here are two rather similar questions from Ask Us at TV 2 Kosmopol with the same underlying wondering 1 ½ years apart:: Why is the bridge between Copenhagen and Sweden so expensive to cross?

1. Poul Erik wonders: Why is round-trip ticket over the Øresund Bridge 880 kroner?
2. Gert wonders: How is the price for a ticket over the Øresund Bridge determined?



June 2023



October 2021

If the audience is lacking answers, like above, there may be good reason to listen up and check if it's time for an update or if the archive can be activated with a personal greeting containing relevant links for the person asking.

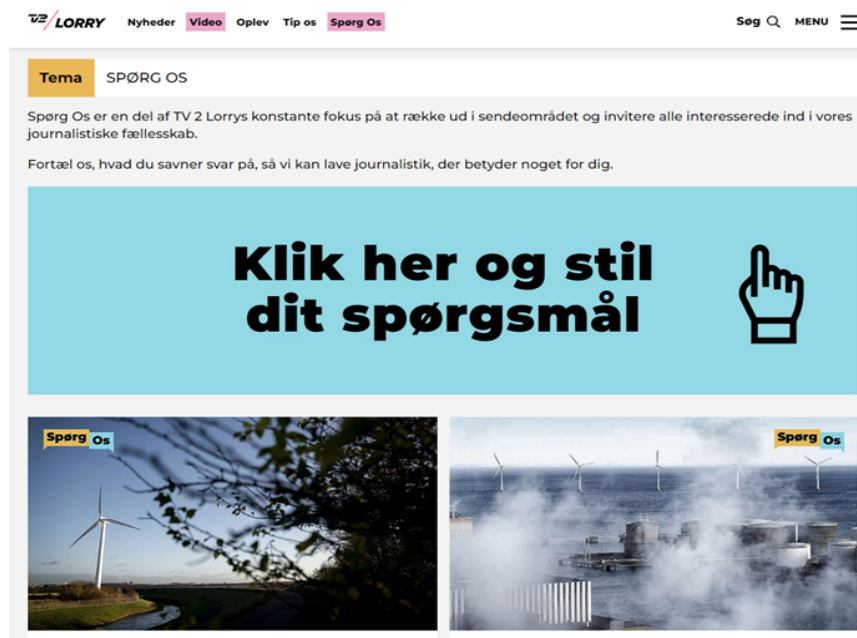
The same applies to questions about the media itself or the journalistic processes, which traditionally has been a black box for users: Maybe it's time for an update for the media outlet itself.

### Example: Where can I find the answers?

At TV 2 Kosmopol, the answers to the public's questions are published like any other journalistic content in the media house. They can be in the form of TV news, social media videos, articles, and web docs in the ongoing news stream. Additionally, all answers are also posted on the "Spørg Os" (Ask Us) subpage in chronological order.

Initially, we assumed that it would be easy for our audience to find the public's questions and our answers because the "Spørg Os" page is visible in the menu bar. However, it turned out that it was not as intuitive as we had thought. On the "Spørg Os" page, users had to go through a brief explanatory text, a question box, and a poll before they could access the answers.

It was evident that this setup was not user-friendly enough, so the solution was to add an extra page between the homepage and the "Spørg Os" page. On this new page, the answers were immediately visible, and it was easy to click on the blue banner if you wanted to ask a question.



## The dialogue with the target audience has value in itself

LISTEN UP

We build relations when we listen and respond to those who take the time to write to us. Even the angry and the complainers teach us something valuable about the questions the audiences ask themselves. When we listen to understand, the conversation usually ends up in a constructive place.

During the first few years of Ask Us we had about 1,800 conversations with users via email and phone that were not visible in the content we published.



It could be an email informing them that their question had been put up for voting, a conversation about their question winning and what would follow in terms of interviews, recordings, and publication.

The dialogue could involve sharing previously published content, acknowledging that the persons asking were not alone in their curiosity. It could be answers to questions from hearing-impaired people about the use of music and access to subtexts, or questions about why journalists and media are so dumb and useless.

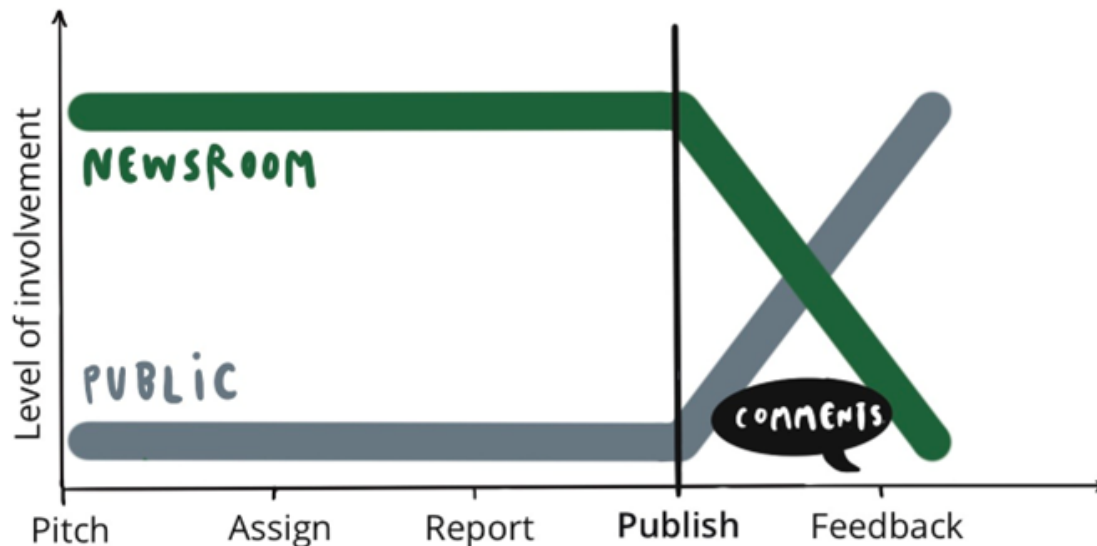
Even when a question was critical, the tone was rarely as aggressive as in social media comment threads.

The most striking result was that the desire to understand each other grew through the dialogue when the media started the conversation by listening to understand the underlying frustration and then acknowledged and provided nuances instead of just defending itself or asking for a proper tone like so often on social media.

## Closer and longer collaboration in the editorial rooms

Journalists typically develop ideas and stories together with other journalists in editorial meetings based on the media's own sense of what is important to create content about. They also consider professional press releases and other inquiries that come to the newsroom.. Audiences often play a secondary role as recipients.

This traditional approach can be visualized as follows:



Source: Hearken

There is, of course, interaction along the way with actors outside the newsroom: sources, experts, professional communicators, those in power, those who want the media to cover something, and those who want the media's help in changing their situation.

However, those who should have an interest in seeing, hearing, or reading the content are rarely involved in the process from idea to publication and feedback.

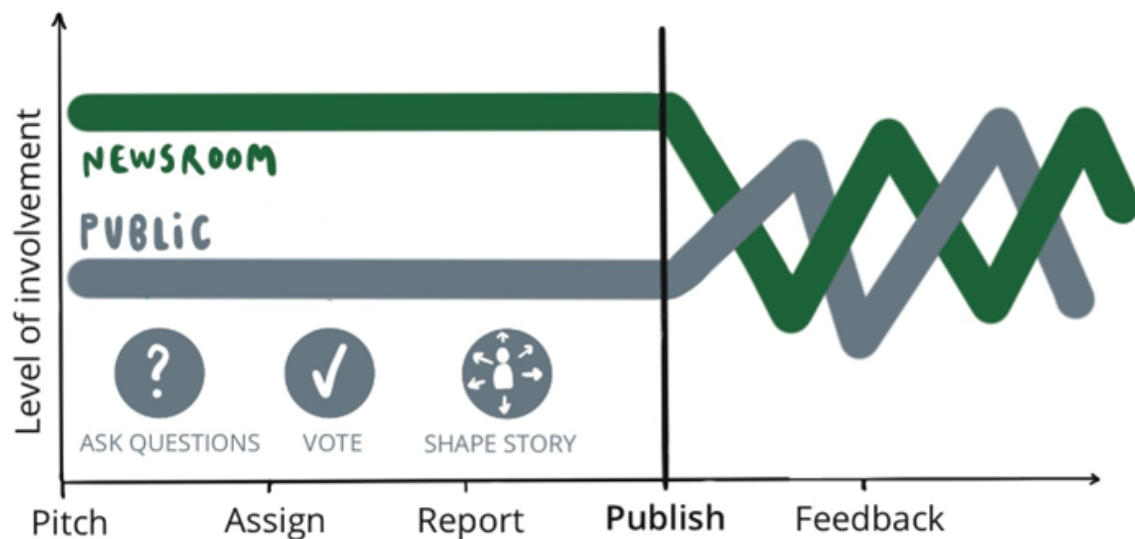
The public usually only has the opportunity to engage once the media has published the content. Now, users may want to interact, but the journalist has typically moved on to another story and is no longer as interested in the old story.

## The expanded, listening, and collaborative approach

The international organization Hearken has developed technology that makes it easier to systematize the dialogue between the public and the

media throughout the journalistic process, making it more transparent and co-creating..

They have visualized it like this, where the newsroom engages the audience in asking their own questions, encourage them to vote on which stories they find relevant for the media to cover, and invites them to provide input for ongoing stories:



Contrary to the traditional approach, the expanded, listening, and collaborative approach continues the dialogue with the audience after the story is published.

When the newsroom listens, it receives qualified help to be more directly relevant to the users. The questions help the media understand what the audience is talking about. The polls help the media understand what the audience finds most relevant.

### **Help to follow up on the stories**

When media outlets listen, users also help in sustaining the stories until the issues and challenges within them are resolved. This is of great value in a busy everyday life where journalists and newsrooms easily forget to follow up on and persist with their own agendas.

Media outlets that listen can leverage the collective knowledge outside the newsroom, where the audience moves around in different contexts and experiences different things than the journalists of the media do.

## Example: Why is the travel card not an app?

### Step 1

A young man named Jason writes to Ask Us at TV 2 Kosmopol with a question:

"Why do I have to carry a plastic travel card with me in the nightlife when all other payments are made on my phone? It's also not environmentally friendly to have a plastic card that needs to be renewed every five years," he says.

Users vote on the question.

The newsroom investigates the matter and provides an answer that explains the reason behind the plastic card.

Rejsekortet (the travel card company) announces as a piece of news that they are actually working on an app. Although Jason's specific issue isn't resolved, he acknowledges the complexity and the company's intentions.



### Step 2

Claus follows up with another question: "Why can't we and our tourists use our visa cards to check in and out while we wait for the app? I can do that as a tourist in London and Malmö."

The newsroom examines how the system works in those two cities and reach out to Rejsekortet for further clarification.

The company explains the necessity of barriers for the visa card model to function properly and adds that they are in the process of testing a new app as has been requested by our readers in the past.





### Step 3

Now Morten wonders why Rejsekortet is testing a new app when there are already well-functioning solutions available. He knows this from his travels in Germany and Switzerland.

The newsroom investigates how this app works and gathers Morten's practical user experiences with it.

Rejsekortet explains the many different Danish political requirements for a nationwide system but also mentions that it is precisely Morten's app that the organization is going to test in a few months in Northern Jutland to see how well it can meet the politicians' demands.



This story about the impractical plastic card can continue until a well-functioning travel app is eventually developed—without the need for the media's journalists to closely monitor the development.

As long as they listen to what the target audience knows, tells them, and wonders about.

One can see the act of listening up as an ongoing editorial process that never truly ends.



Source: Hearken

## LISTEN UP

### **Everyone likes to be seen, heard and understood**

Whether you're a private individual or a professional, it matters to be seen, heard, and understood.

When media outlets invite the public into their editorial rooms, those involved often respond with gratitude and a certain surprise at being taken seriously.

Below, there are three representative examples of personal feedback from users of "Ask Us" whom the editorial team has helped to find answers through a journalistic investigation of their questions:

Three typical reactions to user feedback when we listen:

#### **1. My questions can be front-page news!**

*"Thank you so much for your detailed response. I'm actually on the front page, I must say."*

#### **2. You take my wondering seriously!**

*"Thank you for the serious response, a thorough exploration of the issue."*

#### **3. I understand more now!**

*"It's a good article. I've become more knowledgeable and I feel that my question is well represented in your article. Have a great day."*

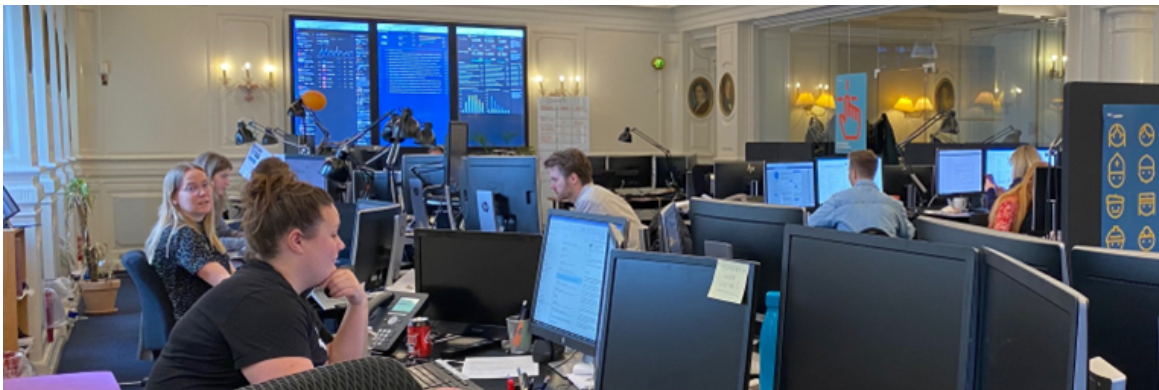


## **Perspective and Conclusion**

### **Strengthening the Listening Approach in the media industry**

With all the documented benefits that media outlets gain when they listen to and collaborate with their target audience, one would think that it would be obvious and easy to create the necessary cultural change in the newsroom to do so.

It's not. Habits and mental models of what constitutes "proper journalism" and "how newsrooms operate" are strong and deeply ingrained.



Leadership should expect reservations when asking for cultural change in the newsroom

At the same time, research in psychology shows that our personality traits and work context influence how open we are to changes and cultural shifts in the workplace.

Some individuals in the editorial team may readily embrace the listening approach as meaningful and relevant, while others may be more hesitant. It is important for those leading the cultural change to understand what naturally works for and against the desired transformation.

### **Oreg's Classic Resistance to Change Scale**

Shaul Oreg, a professor in Organizational Behavior at the School of Business Administration at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, has developed the widely recognized "Resistance to Change Scale" (RTC).

This scale measures a person's natural or inherent tendency or preference to resist or counter changes that they have not chosen or requested.

What may appear as willingness or reluctance to change, Oreg explains as unconscious emotional reactions. The RTC scale particularly addresses the need for routines, whether one operates with a short or long-term perspective, and the degree of cognitive rigidity.

Individuals with a strong need for routines, a short-term perspective, and low mental flexibility are more likely to hold onto fixed beliefs and be less open to new information or opportunities. They may struggle to adapt to new situations and prefer to cling to what is familiar and known.

Conversely, individuals with low cognitive rigidity tend to be more open to different perspectives and ideas. They are more flexible in their thinking and find it easier to adapt to new situations.

### **Linking Oreg's resistance scale to the Big Five personality traits**

Two Norwegian researchers, Ingvild Berg Saksvik and Hilde Hetland, have linked Oreg's RTC scale with the five widely recognized broad personality traits: Neuroticism, Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, and Agreeableness.

Employees high on the personality trait neuroticism will experience negative emotions such as anxiety, fear, and irritation to a greater degree than others and will worry most about changing perspectives.

Employees high on the personality trait conscientious can go either way and support or undermine a cultural change.

Employees high on the personality traits extraversion, openness, and agreeableness will have the least internal resistance to external change.



Personality traits are stable and do not change noticeably throughout life. Therefore, an effective approach to cultural change is to align with the open, extroverted, and agreeable individuals from the beginning and then work with the conscientious and neurotic individuals over time.

### **Remember the context**

However, what is decisive for how a person reacts to external changes is the context. The key questions employee asks themselves are:

- Does this change make sense to me?
- Will my work life improve or worsen?
- Does the change align with my core values?
- What does it mean for my status within and outside the organization?
- Can I figure it out?
- In short: What's in it for me?

In a cultural change, it is important to bring all these thoughts out into the open. Those leading the cultural change must listen and pay attention to understand what lies behind the feelings and reactions that may be perceived as resistance to change, but perhaps are more about protecting what has so far given us job satisfaction, both professionally and socially.

### **'Resistance to Change' vs 'Change Aversion'**

Hanne Jessen Krarup is a Danish lawyer, management and organizational psychologist, and teaches change management, among other subjects, at Folkeuniversitetet (The folk university) and DMJX (Media & Journalism)

She believes that we should completely drop the concept of 'resistance to change' and instead focus on how the organization creates change without creating what she calls 'change aversion':

- Traditionally, we talk about resistance to change, but it is a highly value-laden term. The expression more than implies that the leadership is always right. There is an implicit assumption of the employees' 'wrong' resistance to the leadership's 'right' demands for change.

Instead, I propose the concept of 'change aversion' or 'expected reservations' if we are not to pigeonhole each other before the dialogue about the change has even begun, says Hanne Jessen Krarup.

The weakness of enthusiasts is typically to overlook non-enthusiasts. Not everyone naturally shares our truths, perceptions of reality, and perspectives. When change leaders want others to embrace what they perceive as important cultural changes, it is important to ask employees:'

- What is your reality?
- What are your perspectives?
- What challenges are you facing?

And then listen to what they tell us.

### **Three pieces of advice for change leadership without change aversion**

- Define the employees' role and everyday life in the new culture together. This provides a good understanding of what others do not understand the same way as you do (top-down)
- Allow employees to qualify the solutions presented by management. This creates ownership (top-down - bottom-up)
- Let employees develop their own solutions within the framework and goals of the cultural change (bottom-up)

*Source: Hanne Jessen Krarup, The Folk University of Aarhus*

## **We need both data and dialogue**

"Never before have the media 'listened' more than today. This happens through an abundance of data, both commercial and editorial."

That's what a long-time traditional investigative journalist wrote to me when I stated that old media need to listen better to the people they serve if they want to stay relevant in a new era. He didn't agree with me.

I agree with him that data is an important part of the media's everyday life. Dashboards in newsrooms continuously show the number of online users, what they click on, and how long they read. The editorial team can test which headlines are most engaging. Analysis can show which articles lead to greater loyalty and new subscriptions. Data is important for understanding preferences.

The problem with data is that much of it is backward-looking. Many journalists don't know how to read the future through data or what users want news media to focus on tomorrow.

Typically, users are given the opportunity to engage with the content that media outlets have chosen to publish. They have the opportunity to react to editorial agendas and what journalists find important. Data doesn't make the population part of the content.

Conscious listening, attentive hearing and co-creation bring greater originality. Media outlets gain new perspectives and voices when they listen to understand what is on their audiences' minds.. Dialogue provides a sense of being seen, heard, and understood, which data cannot.

We need data and dialogue as two sides of the same mission.

## LYTH: A single day can make a difference

'NRK - the Norwegian equivalent of BBC - is undergoing a profound cultural change towards a more listening and constructive approach to their journalism.



There is no fundamental resistance to the development among the employees, in fact quite the opposite. Nevertheless, it requires effort to change habits and perspectives in the daily routines of the newsrooms.

Chris Carlsen is District Editor for NRK Oslo and Viken and one of the driving forces behind the more listening and collaborative approach. He formulates the paradigm shift and the difficulty of the cultural change as follows:

- We desire a cycle of constructive dialogue and editorial decisions that includes ideas and input from the audience. It is different from the traditional way of working, where we receive and seek tips but hold closed editorial meetings and have exclusive rights to journalism.

Audience dialogue has been announced as strategically important at NRK, but it is a bigger challenge to convince journalists and editors internally than it is to get the audience on board with the idea.

Journalists and editors can easily see the meaning and value of citizen-generated journalism. The challenge lies in changing the journalistic process and the way journalists work, says Chris Carlsen.

### The workshop in Oslo

I tested the LYTH method at a two-day workshop with journalists and leaders from NRK's Region Sør-Øst in the small town of Drammen, north of Oslo.

The journalists came from six newsrooms in the large regional coverage area. The national public service media house is - as described above - already working on making their journalism more constructive, nuanced, curious, and solution-oriented.

Now, the aim is to incorporate audience dialogue more systematically into their daily journalism on radio, TV, and the web.

Everyone around the table has significant contact with listeners, readers, and local sources, but there is no system or common language for what it means to listen and actively and systematically engage. There is a slight reservation in the room: Is this even more that we have to do in an already busy everyday life?

Already when we reconvene the next morning, it becomes clear that the participants have fully grasped what a listening approach means, what value it brings, and how they will approach the task of involving their different target audiences in their journalism. Not as something extra, but instead of something else.

### **Examples of the participants' observations that morning:**

- Before leaving for the workshop, a manager listened to me. It made me feel seen, heard, understood, valued, and respected. We all need that.
- I am inspired that it is not about platforms but about a way of thinking. Just grab the bird while it's flying. It's fine to start small. You can always progress.
- I am fascinated that the audience is willing to participate to such an extent, and that it can turn into good journalism. It's smart that you don't have to chase cases.
- It is an exciting difference between asking people about their opinion, which is one-way communication, and creating something meaningful together. We need to move away from 'them and us.' We are only an 'us.'
- I particularly take with me that you can be conscious of audience dialogue in everyday life without overcomplicating it. Now I am confident.





After lunch, the group, both together and individually, has created concepts that they can go home and implement immediately. They have a plan for how they will engage in dialogue and make it easy for the public to get involved. It is evident that the journalists want to focus more on what matters in people's everyday lives in the region, and they want to have more conversations with those experiencing challenges and finding ways to solve them.

They will try to find time by reducing the routine use of experts who comment on other people's everyday lives and problems without adding any particular value.

Perhaps most importantly, they have gained the courage to share the power of asking the question and trust that useful input will come from the audience.

The cultural change towards a more active and systematic listening and engaging mindset is in full swing - less than a day since the group met.

"Now it's about maintaining momentum in everyday life," as Benedikte Fjelly, Head of Audience Dialogue in NRK Region Sør-Øst, puts it.

## **O.G. - Media's democratic duty to listen**

Traditional, journalistic media - which young individuals refreshingly call O.G.s or 'Original Gangsters' - have a duty as guardians of democracy to be on the side of the public.

O.Gs have an important task of bringing the population together around topics that make societal sense in a time marked by individualization, echo chambers, and polarization. They have a responsibility to delegate their traditional power of asking questions to those affected by the power.

Many talk about co-creation, but few media outlets manage to create an open dialogue from the outside in. Most still think from the inside out.

Here, listening and co-creating come in as the missing link in the editorial process. It is not something extra, not an add-on, but a value-based necessity that is currently absent as a strategic tool prioritized in the everyday lives of most traditional news media.

The way that O.G. media outlets use their influence has an impact on societal thinking. Therefore, news media should carefully consider whether they are part of the problem when an increasing portion of the population

consciously avoids news and in the face of the world's overwhelming problems curl up in a mental fetal position or pour black paint over capitalist strongholds in protest against... everything.

**"People are not happy with what they are getting: News are overwhelming, depressing, repetitive, I can't do anything about it."**

Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Oxford 2023

This trend becomes evident each year when the Reuters Institute publishes its Digital News Report. More and more individuals, particularly young adults, make an effort to avoid news in their daily lives. They feel overwhelmed and perceive news as hard to understand, especially context wise, and depressing..

In Denmark, almost one-fifth of respondents state that they deliberately avoid news, and the situation is even worse outside the Nordic region.

It is not the "news avoiders" who are at fault; it is the media and their approach to news that overwhelms, excludes, and depresses. But why push people away?

Legacy media can choose to be part of the solution by providing the audience with a democratic and meaningful opportunity to ask questions, make choices, contribute, and gain a more enlightened understanding of society.

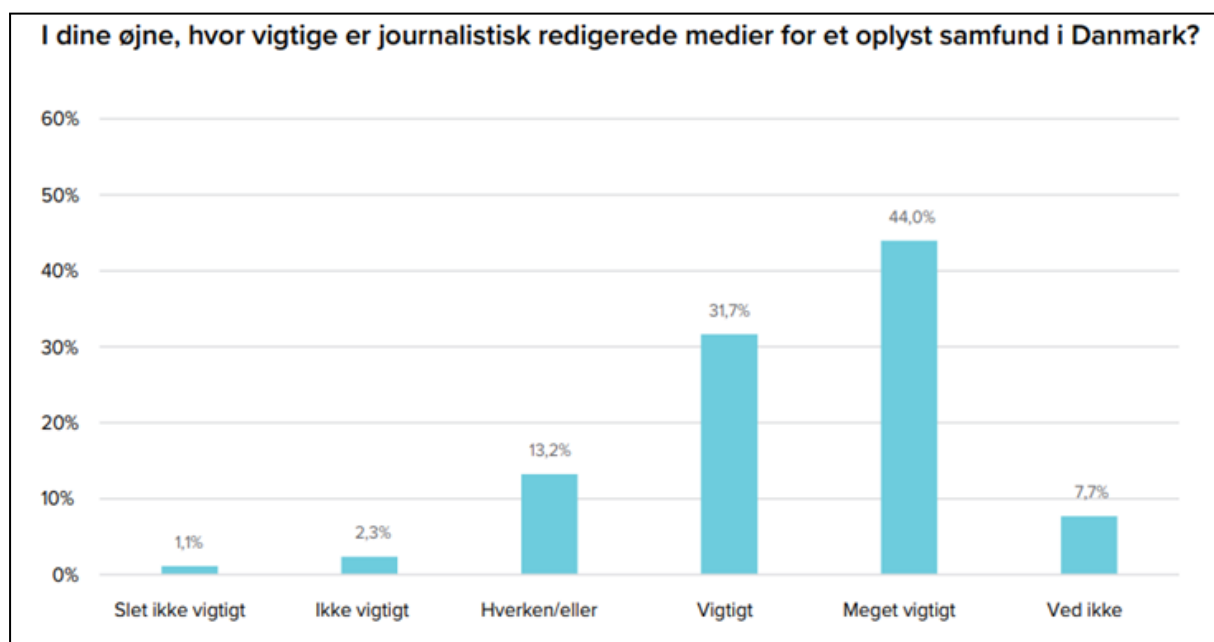
## The public has the backs of legacy media

Researchers from Roskilde University have examined the Danish perception of the relationship between traditional, journalistic media and democracy in the Danish Media's Publicistiske Barometer (Publicist Barometer).

A clear majority in the survey believes that a well-functioning democratic society depends on journalistically edited media because such media inform and contribute to a strong cohesion.

Citizens in Denmark perceive journalistically edited media to be more important than social media for an enlightened society. Danes also experience that journalistic media contribute to a healthy democracy with a strong cohesion and that, in comparison to social media, they provide news and high-quality content that supports an enlightened Denmark.

*In your opinion, how important are journalistically edited media for an enlightened society? Let: Not important at all. Right: Very important. + Don't know*



@Publicistic Barometer 2019

Where niche media can tap into a narrow value or interest community, traditional news media must create a broad and meaningful community around them.

Geographically based local and regional news media face the particular challenge that their target audience only have one thing in common: they live in the same area.

An area that someone has defined as a neighborhood, a city, a municipality, or even more loosely, a region. This makes it even more important for local and regional O.G. media to actively and systematically listen to what the population in their specific area finds relevant and how the media can help strengthen civil society and democracy in the area, while regaining the significance in society that they need to thrive on.

The Better Listening method can be used by anyone in the media industry worldwide because the listening, engaging and power-sharing approach to journalism is a mindset.

The active, systematic, listening, and co-creating approach expands the way media think in all types of journalism. It forces the media to focus on the utility and trustworthiness for those that the media themselves want - and need - to have a significance for..

Ultimately:

If we, as media, do not find it interesting to listen to the people we serve,  
why should they listen to us?

# BETTER LISTENING

SHORTCUT TO A LISTENING MINDSET

**LISTEN FIRST**  
PRACTICAL TOOLS FOR A NEW CULTURE

**EVERYDAY HUMILITY**  
KEEPING FOCUS ON THE AUDIENCE

**TRUST IN THE POPULATION**  
OUR THINKING DETERMINES OUR APPROACH

**LISTEN UP**  
WE ARE CONSTANTLY LEARNING

# **Five final recommendations for a more listening culture in the media industry**

## **1. In education**

Shared questioning power and training in a methodical, listening, and engaging mindset should be made a mandatory part of journalism education programs. The aim is to provide an understanding of how journalists and media create relationships with their target audiences through more direct relevance.

## **2. In post educational programmes for professional media staff**

Shared questioning power and training in a methodical, listening, and engaging mindset should be offered in professional development programs.

## **3. In newsrooms**

Shared questioning power and training in a methodical, listening, and engaging mindset should be consciously integrated into the onboarding, training, education and every day routines in newsrooms.

## **4. In hiring practices**

A democratic listening mindset should be recognized and sought after as a core competency in job advertisements and interviews for new employees.

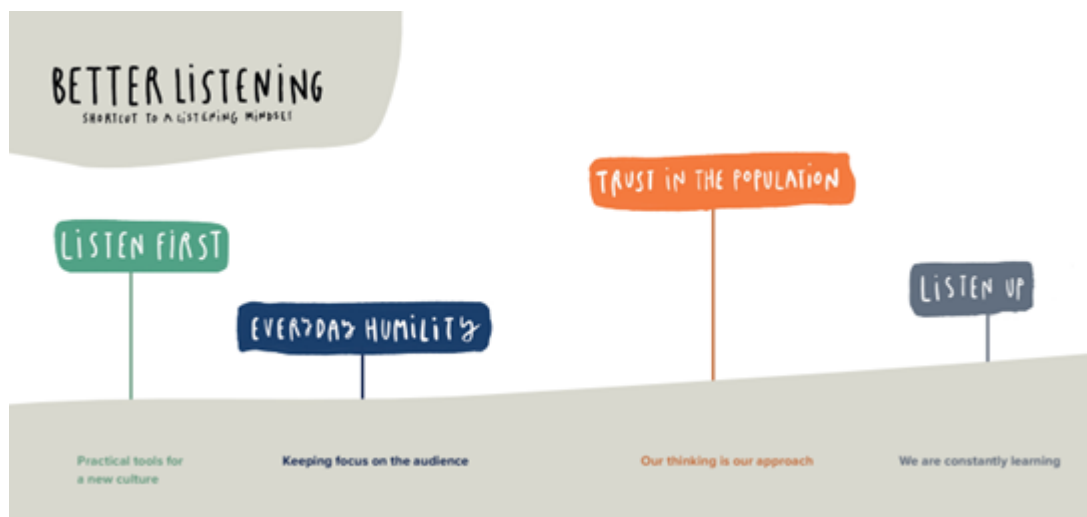
## **5. In research**

Shared questioning power, listening and involvement should be explored in Danish media research to understand and document its significance, value, and methodology within a Danish context. As well as in every other democratic country.

**The BETTER LISTENING Method** has been developed to make it easier for journalists, editors, and media leaders to start listening in a more meaningful and effective way. The methodology facilitates the necessary cultural change, persistence, and patience.

The BETTER LISTENING method has been developed based on my own and others' generously shared practical experiences of active and systematic listening and engaging,, the research and knowledge I have gained through the Fellowship at Aarhus University and Folkeuniversitetet, and the feedback I have received through practical tests of the thinking and methodology.

A big and warm thank you to the many of you who have contributed with knowledge, focus, collaboration, illustrations, feedback, and significance



## **Need assistance in improving your listening skills?**

Contact me to learn more about the BETTER LISTENING Method

Email: [nannaholstbusiness@gmail.com](mailto:nannaholstbusiness@gmail.com)

Or reach out to the Constructive Institute at [constructiveinstitute.org](https://constructiveinstitute.org)

You can find a condensed version of the method called BETTER LISTENING SHORT on [constructiveinstitute.org](https://constructiveinstitute.org).

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TrygFonden



**“Let’s go listen to the  
public, so that the public  
wants to listen to us!”**

**- Nanna Holst**