

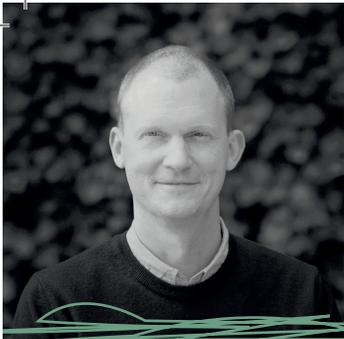
STEFFEN SLOT

CREATE INSPIRING CONVERSATIONS

FINDING SOLUTIONS IN A BUSY SCHEDULE



CONSTRUCTIVE
INSTITUTE



STEFFEN SLOT

Steffen Slot was a Fellow at the Constructive Institute, Aarhus, 2022/23, sponsored by Trygfonden. He works as a journalist at Frederiksborg Amts Avis/Sjællandske Medier doing daily news, interviews and investigative stories.

Create inspiring conversations

This book is written for anyone who loves journalism's close contact with people's daily lives, knowledge, and ideas. It is for those who believe that citizens in a democracy need a place to meet and discuss - not a battlefield or a place for PR puffery, but a place for conversations that inspire us to create a better society.

This book is especially for those of you who have noticed that journalism has taken a step back as the place where the power elite and citizens meet to get inspiration before making decisions.

We need to change that together, guided by citizens' questions and needs and our curiosity.

In journalistic themes, we should gather citizens, politicians, public servants, and experts to solve the problems in our everyday lives. This book aims to strengthen journalists' ability to facilitate such inspiring conversations.

We can't use the method described here every day, but when we identify problems that are important to many people, we can accomplish more by focusing on four key areas **the power elite, engagement, storytelling, and trust.**

A key point here is that when we - as journalists - investigate a problem, we have an extraordinary opportunity to gather a team of people who can work towards finding solutions.

In local journalism we work closely with the citizens, hearing about their ways of solving problems. But there can be a tendency to work in silos defined by geography.

We fail to communicate that citizens in one town or region may have solved a problem that another community is struggling with. In our busy schedules, we often neglect to bring colleagues from different editorial offices together, even though one may have excellent background knowledge and the other may have the sources to sharpen the story.

When we see these patterns, we should rally a group of journalists who can use their knowledge to delve further into a problem and invite a group of people to discuss solutions in several stories, a journalistic theme.

The group should consist of citizens, politicians, experts, and public servants who all promise to contribute their knowledge, ideas, and power to make decisions. The job of the journalists is to listen and guide the conversations towards solutions in what I call **an interest-based fellowship**.



This book aims to bridge the gap between high ambitions and reality by tapping into the knowledge and ideas of journalists working in the field. The method presented is an idea development tool that focuses on four key areas: the power elite, engagement, storytelling, and trust. This framework provides enough flexibility to accommodate various contexts.

Recently, the fellows at the Constructive Institute tested this method. I asked them to imagine working for a large regional news company, and that they as journalists had a specific interest in writing stories about men with postpartum depression.

The news company had previously covered the topic with a good case story, but the coverage had stalled after an expert provided wise but predictable comments.

Now the assignment was to reignite the journalistic theme by inspiring people to discuss solutions to postpartum depression while also adding value for new parents.

Within just 45 minutes, the fellows generated excellent ideas based on the four keys: **the power elite, engagement, storytelling, and trust.**

POWER 

KNOW-
LEDGE 

ENGAGEMENT



STORY-
TELLING



TRUST



Invite power and knowledge in

Remember to call the one being criticised. Talk to a politician and get an expert to bring in perspective. Quite often that's the predictable for a not so good story. And then on to the next story!

After working as a journalist for two decades, it can be disheartening to see how often reality and the solutions proposed seem to be repeated. A colleague once pointed out that a story from last week was almost identical to a story from five years ago.

The problem in elderly care remained unsolved, and the proposed solutions were virtually the same. The only difference was the name of the politician quoted.

I have had the same experiences with my own stories, and this repetition is incredibly frustrating. I can't help but wonder if we as journalists need to be more discerning in selecting the people we turn to for solutions. Perhaps we should take a closer look at the real power dynamics at play.

Recently in Denmark, a report described the interaction between politicians, civic servants and journalists, and it frequently made use of the word “mistrust”¹.

Amalie Trangbæk, an associate professor at Aarhus University, conducted her Ph.D research a few years ago interviewing and observing permanent secretaries.

In her findings, she describes how public servants often view journalists' questions as disruptive, sometimes ruining their workday. Let's just say, her findings do not suggest that the media is a source of inspiration for permanent secretaries or other decision-makersⁱⁱ.

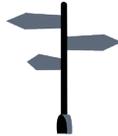
The public sphere is often seen as a disruptive and polarising place, except when there is a need to mobilise the people to gain attention. Quiet Politics seems to be the preferred approach for the power elite. As a result, the informational link between the people and the elite can be severed, thereby challenging the fundamental values of democracyⁱⁱⁱ.

To achieve our goal of fostering inspiring conversations and exploring solutions, it is crucial that we identify and invite influential people who have the power to effect change.

People who can bring curiosity, knowledge, and ideas to the conversation, whether it happens at a physical meeting or as dialogue in an article.

To identify the power elite, you can use these three methods^{iv}.

- **The Positional Method:** Who is in a leadership position with the power to take decisions, which have an impact on people's lives?
- **The Decisional Method:** Identify elites according to their active involvement in important policy decisions.
- **The Reputational Method:** The power to influence decisions can sometimes be difficult to discern. By simply asking people, you could get a different answer than using the two other methods. Who is considered to be of top influence?



Knowledge from experts and people's personal experiences are also types of power. So, don't forget to identify the people with the best academic knowledge.

And don't forget to involve the people facing the problems that we investigate with our solution-oriented conversations.

For each problem, we'll need to gather the people with the power, the knowledge, and the experience. There is a fair chance that they will join because they are curious about what we can achieve together.

Engage your audience

There are many reasons to engage the audience in journalistic themes, but the most important is diversity. If we only rely on experts or public servants with the same perspectives, we may become stuck and fail to find novel solutions to complex problems.

Municipalities often invite local residents to participate in social innovations or urban planning. Several large reports describe the benefits and challenges of citizen engagement⁴.

On the positive side, engagement can lead to:

- › A better understanding of a problem.
- › New, innovative solutions that go beyond conventional thinking.
- › Assistance from citizens in gathering information.

However, there are a few things we need to keep in mind, such as:

- › Who do we want to engage? Should we only engage the citizens we typically encounter or strive for greater diversity?
- › Do we have the necessary resources? Poorly executed forms of engagement can cause harm in the long run.
- › What is the precise purpose of engaging your audience?

It's often the quick, quirky ideas that generate involvement, identification, and smiles. For example, if we write about family life with children and postpartum depression, we might engage our audience by encouraging them to send pictures of their funny and tough experiences with children. Or, you can come up with other creative ideas when you talk about engaging the audience.

Taking it one step further, we can invite our audience to meetings where we act as hosts. In her book "The Art of Gathering," event maker Priya Parker explains how to bring people together in a meaningful way. Three pieces of advice stuck with me:

- The invitation is more important than you might think. Prepare your guests by letting them know what to expect, especially if you want them to answer specific questions.
- As a host, you can break the predictable social patterns where people tend to gravitate towards those they know. Guide your guests into new and inspiring conversations.
- It's okay to close the door for some people. You get to decide who to invite, and carefully selecting your guests can lead to sharper conversations.

Surprise your audience

Journalism that focuses on complex problems and nuances can sometimes be perceived as boring. Most people just want to enjoy life and make good decisions for themselves and their families. They don't like reality to be too blurry, difficult to navigate.

As journalists, we need to compensate for the lack of sensation in our constructive journalism by telling better stories. It should be an offer they can't refuse, despite all the confusing nuances.

To capture people's attention, we need to surprise them. Our stories should make people smile and ideally provoke a "Wow, I've never thought of it that way" reaction. There's no quick fix, but we can experiment to see what works best.

The obstacles we must overcome are well documented in several research papers based on the way we act on social media. We talk a lot about fake news. Why do we share it?

It's not just about algorithms or political agendas. When political scientists from Massachusetts analyzed 126,000 tweets with true and false stories, they found that false stories were retweeted quickly and widely by ordinary citizens. Further analysis showed that false news stories were connected to feelings like fear, disgust, and surprise - all of which have more impact than anticipation, joy, and trust - the reactions to true stories^{vi}.

Professor Michael Bang Petersen from Aarhus University looked into the evolutionary background for conflicts and lies, and he concludes that fake news and rumours are very efficient at coordinating attention and mobilising the in-group against the out-group in a situation of conflict^{vii}.

This might be the most important advice in this little book: we have to compensate for the lack of sensation, simplification, and conflict when we bring people together to find solutions. What's the use of inspiring conversations if too few people listen to them?

The illustrations in this book are one good example of how to do it. Early involvement of photographers is at least as important. For my own part, I was recently inspired by a research paper about the way NGOs could get more support. The method was to tell short stories with a character, a plot, and causality to remind people of their important work^{viii}.

Maybe fact boxes should be less focused on facts and more focused on people describing in their own voice why a journalistic theme is important?

Trust – how to seed and harvest

To succeed in social innovation and citizen engagement, it is important to build trust. In the fuzzy front end of a project, trust can be as important as participatory design itself. It pays off for project leaders to spend time building trust. You can get people to vouch for you^{ix}.

I would argue that people may not trust journalists as a profession, but they trust journalists that they know personally – and journalists working in local media know a lot of people. We have a major advantage here, we have been building trust. Let's use it!

When we develop ideas for a journalistic theme, it's very important to realise how network of good colleagues can give us access to knowledge or vulnerable sources.

Okay, now we have a lot of people participating in our journalistic theme – all ready for a conversation that inspires us to find solutions.

1. We have invited the power elite, knowledgeable and experienced individuals into our interest-based fellowship.
2. We have engaged the audience in our theme.
3. We have harvested trust to gain better knowledge.

These keys can help you along the way towards inspiring conversations.



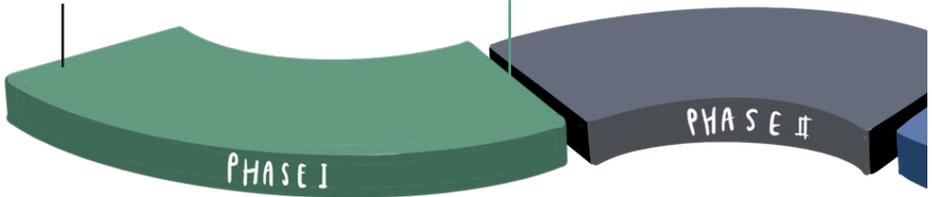
ASK YOURSELF:

Have we gathered a small group of journalists around a problem?



ASK YOURSELF:

Have we assembled a strong team of authorities, experts, citizens and journalists?



Early research

Identify power, knowledge and expertise regarding the specific issue. Make the most of the trust that individual journalists have built up within closed circles.

Starting the coverage

Use the team's knowledge and commitment to investigate the problem and gather potential solutions.



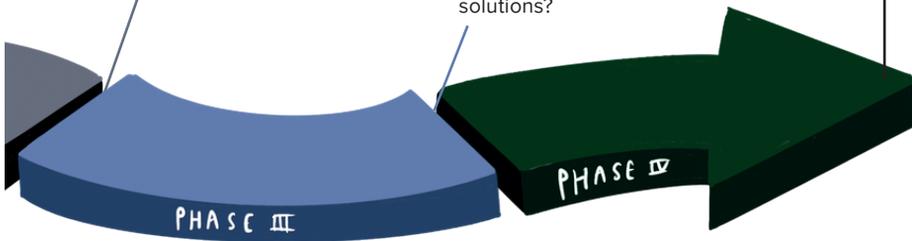
ASK YOURSELF:

Are the solutions realistic?



ASK YOURSELF:

Have the authorities committed to specific solutions?



Engagement of power

Discuss the potential solutions to the problem. Remember to prioritise effective storytelling: it can become complex in this phase.

Follow up and reboot

Take stock of the actions taken by the authorities. Restart the theme and investigate whether the solutions appear to be effective.

Are we able to create inspiring conversations? Or will it be a predictable fight with arguments hurled from the usual trenches? If the trenches are too deep, fortunately, something can still be done.

In the polarised USA, researchers noticed that Republicans and Democrats were tired of the exaggerations and prejudices they faced when meeting each other. The tensions can be reduced by personal relations and knowledge of the legitimate reasons for holding opposing views . If you encounter people with strongly opposing, perhaps hostile positions: ask them about their definition of a perfect day and enjoy the short-term calming effect^{xi}.

In the book "The Enigma of Reason", its authors discuss why humans as individuals are generally really bad at reasoning. They argue that there are no evolutionary benefits from anticipating counterarguments. Your interlocutors will provide them, and if they stay silent, you'll get your way...

But your way is not always the right way. Group discussion is typically beneficial when participants have different ideas and a common goal, the authors conclude.

So let's meet in... ... inspiring conversations.

Yes, you're flying on empty...

When you begin focusing on the power elite, engagement, storytelling, and trust, you will – at best - fly on half-empty. If you ask your editor for two weeks to prepare, you'll probably get a 'no.'

But if you ask for a few hours to discuss how to create inspiring conversations on a specific topic, you should get a 'yes' - with the add-on that it's okay to produce less for a few weeks in order to do better.

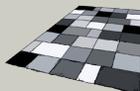
You'll be an entrepreneur, with your own enthusiasm as the rocket fuel. When in trouble, follow Saras Sarasvathy and her principles of effectuation, which I have slightly changed to fit into journalism.



Bird-in-Hand: Create the journalistic theme with the resources available here and now.



Lemonade principle: Mistakes and surprises are inevitable. Use them to look for new opportunities and new points of view.



Crazy Quilt: Don't be afraid of partnerships that can bring help, funding, and new directions. However, don't sell your independence.

Steffen Slot, Aarhus, June 2023

The Core Principles of Constructive Journalism

This guide is part of a series on constructive journalism produced by fellows at the Constructive Institute.

It either covers different topics or approaches to journalism that aim to do more than just report. All of them are based on the core principles of constructive journalism, which the Constructive Institute in Aarhus has helped define and shape.

Constructive journalism is bridge-building, critical, and balanced, and its focus is forward-looking and future-oriented. It is based on facts and mainly covers bigger societal problems.

Constructive journalism is not a promotion of heroes, governments, or civil society organisations. It is not simplistic, trivial, or happy news, and the journalist should never become an advocate for one solution over another.

The Constructive Institute essentially operates with three types of constructive journalism: Solutions-focused, covering nuances, and promoting democratic conversations.

The three pillars of constructive journalism

Journalism for Tomorrow

The Ambition

To contribute to democracy through critical, constructive journalism

Focus on Solutions

Not only expose the problems, but also look for possible solutions

Cover Nuances

Strive for the best obtainable version of the truth.
See the world with both eyes

Promote Democratic Conversation

Engage and facilitate debate, including people in the community

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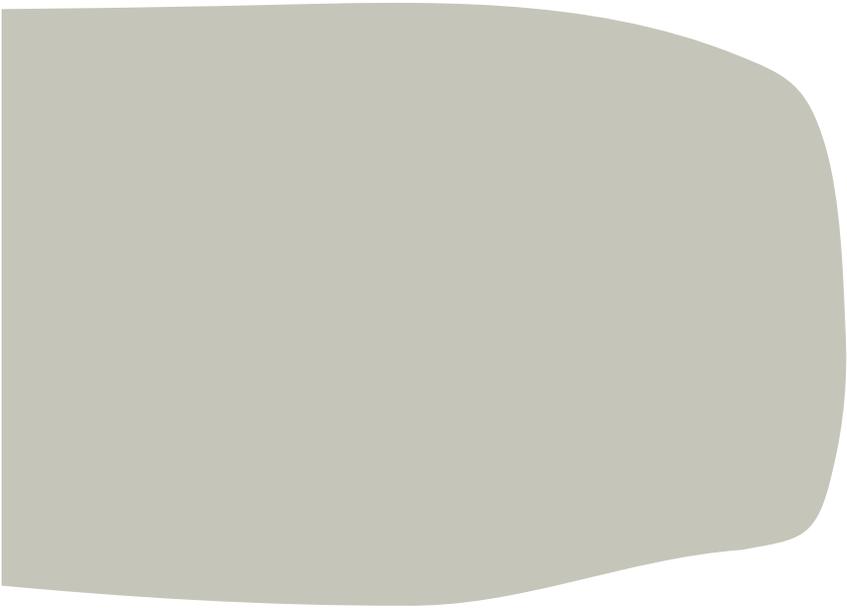
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