



Listen Louder

How journalists can
counter polarization



CONSTRUCTIVE
INSTITUTE
Journalism for tomorrow

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Table of contents

Summary	3
Preamble	4
1. Introduction	6
2. Polarization of society: A challenge for democracy	9
2.1. Causes of polarization	9
2.2. Polarization and journalism	10
2.3. Opinion Poll of attitudes in Germany, Denmark, and the UK	13
3. Promoting constructive conversation I: Best practices from around the world	15
4. Promoting constructive conversation II: Tools	43
5. Lessons and recommendations: The turbine of constructive conversation	50
6. What now?	57
Authors	59

Summary

There is so much in journalism to take pride in, from investigations that expose wrongdoing to vivid, eyewitness accounts of suffering in conflicts such as Ukraine. And tribute should be paid as well to all those under-resourced and underpaid local reporters keeping their communities informed. But there is also journalism that is misleading, dishonest and destructive, and that contributes to polarization in politics and society. While politicians have to shoulder a large share of the blame for polarization, journalists too bear responsibility. For too long have journalists failed to listen to the public, and even when they do, they so often fail to listen hard enough, to listen louder.

This booklet proposes various ways in which journalists can reduce polarization. It is intended to be a handbook of practical recommendations. Chapter 2 takes a brief look at the causes of polarization, the consequences for society and democracy, and the challenge this poses for journalists. It quickly moves on to the core of the booklet, Chapter 3, which contains examples of good practice we have found from around the world – ones that are surprising, innovative and imaginative, and that can be emulated. More ideas are offered in Chapter 4, an eclectic mix of tools for journalists, from ones aimed at increasing public engagement to ones that help in moderating televised political debates. Chapter 5 brings everything together in a novel concept, a ‘turbine of constructive conversation.’ The hope is that this booklet will promote discussion about how journalism can reduce polarization and reinforce democracy.

Preamble



By **Ulrik Haagerup**

Founder and CEO
of the Constructive Institute

Are we media people part of the problem of the trust meltdown in our democracies? And how can we be part of the solution? These questions led to the launch of the independent Constructive Institute in 2017. Other questions have followed. Words matter: so why are we – journalists, editors, publishers and news hosts – trained to think that when we bring two people together to talk about problems in society and how they can be solved, we should always call it a *debate*? The word itself comes from the French *Debatre*, which means fighting. And we routinely name our debate programs ‘Duel’, ‘Crossfire’ or other terms that use the vocabulary of war and boxing. We talk about the red corner and the blue corner, winners and losers, and we too often see it as the job of the host in the TV studio to wield a microphone like a dagger and to encourage conflict. Against a backdrop of a media fixated on clicks, likes, shares and, above all, money, such combat is seen as a way of winning viewers and readers, especially for political coverage.

And yet surveys show that the public is fed up with politicians yelling at each other in the media. A survey among 6,000 Danes found this toxic tone in political coverage was a major cause of so many turning their backs on politics and news media. Danes said they hate it when politicians in debates do not answer questions, attacking opponents, criticize and interrupt. What they really longed for, they said, was for politicians to dare to admit to being in doubt, for politicians who had solutions and for politicians prepared to listen. What are the consequences of our way of framing public conversation as warfare? Are we partly to blame for this toxic circle of media and politics? Are there alternatives? Can we play the role of mediators in public conversations? Create dialogue?

Engage the public in discussions on potential solutions? And where are the examples of best practices from around the world, where the media are daring to rethink journalism, to give space not just to the loudest and rudest and the ones with the biggest mouths, but also to the ones with new ideas, curious minds and big ears instead of.

Through a donation from the Salling Foundations we launched the Constructive News Lab, where we do research, conduct surveys and, in partnerships with news media and other organizations, try to come up with new constructive formats and inspire the industry to rethink. With our constructive fellows from Danish and international media, we have tried to learn from other professionals who make a living out of entering a conflict-filled room to start a dialogue. How do they do it, these marriage counselors, mediators and hostage negotiators? What questions do they ask, what drinks and snacks do they serve, what are the seating arrangements?

A no-strings-attached grant to the Constructive Institute from Meta News Partnerships made it possible to ask senior journalists from around the world to help us explore ways of moderating public conversation. What are the challenges we all face, and what are the potential solutions that we all could learn from? This booklet is a condensed version of the results of the work of Pulitzer Prize winner Ewen MacAskill from The Guardian, editor Anne Katrine Førlø from NRK Debate and former deputy editor-in-chief of Süddeutsche Zeitung (Online) Peter Lindner. The team has been supplemented by online moderation expert Nadia Nikolajeva, journalism master's student Kaori Kohyama from Japan and our Danish fellows Kenneth Lund, debate editor of the national daily Politiken and Kurt Strand, former debate host at the Danish Broadcasting Corporation, DR. Their discussions, insights and examples from around the media landscape offer reasons for hope. They found ways that are good for the business of journalism but also worth adopting just because it is the right thing to do. Journalists have a crucial role to play in difficult decisions about how our societies move forward.

Read on and share more constructive ideas on www.constructive-institute.org and with a newsroom near you. Change is possible.

1. Introduction



When the social division turns ugly—a mob storming the US Congress. January 6, 2021 / Photo: Scanpix

We are living in an increasingly polarized world, drowning in a swamp of distortions, lies and untruths. And the swamp is getting bigger every day. Across the world – though not all of it – there is growing intolerance, a refusal to listen and talk to one another and, in the worst cases, a tendency to no longer view people on the other side as human beings. The impact on politics, society and journalism is proving both corrosive and dangerous.

This polarization has been accompanied by an alarming loss of trust in the media, especially in the United States, with politicians accusing journalists of being purveyors of ‘fake news,’ making them targets for attack both digitally and physically.

Europe, though not as dangerously polarized as the US, is not immune. Public broadcasters in the United Kingdom, Scandinavia, Germany and other parts of Europe still enjoy the high levels of trust absent among most US broadcasters. This trust in public broadcasting in Europe even rose during the Covid-19 pandemic as the public turned to traditional media for news and information. In spite of this, there is little

complacency, a recognition that trust cannot be taken for granted and that without a free, independent, quality media, democracy is at risk.

The Washington Post, the New York Times and other major news organizations today recognize they made serious misjudgments in their coverage of Donald Trump: that they did not listen hard enough to disenchanted voters, especially in the Midwest, and were not robust enough in challenging lies and misinformation. They are taking steps to try to address this in future elections. The Washington Post announced that for the November 2022 mid-term Congressional elections – and elections beyond – it will create a ‘democracy team,’ with more reporters placed in the most hotly-contested states to cover voter registration issues and to address challenges to the legitimacy of the election outcome, as Trump did.

But is this enough? Margaret Sullivan, a Post columnist on media matters, urges news organizations to do much, much more, putting at the center of their coverage stories about the threat to democracy. (On the other great polarizing issue of our time, climate change, Wolfgang Blau, former president, international and chief operating officer of Condé Nast, made a similar plea in a speech in Oxford in February 2022, arguing that journalism needs to also put climate change at the center; not merely token environmental stories but infusing every part of coverage, from news to sport.) In a column in May 2022, writing about the threat to democracy, Sullivan said: “My sense is that the news media has to try harder – and differently – to get this message across to voters who are the only ones who can truly protect democracy.” She added: “How can news organizations do that? Is it just more of the tried-and-true: good, solid, aggressive reporting? Or is another approach necessary, and if so, what might it be?”

That is what we looked at. The team assembled by the Constructive Institute approached the task with humility, given the complexity of the issues. It was never going to be realistic to find, within a mere few months, The Big Idea, The Magic Dust or The Glittering Pony – the elusive solution to journalism’s problems. Instead, we settled on aiming for something more modest: a series of practical recommendations gathered from existing literature and from speaking to experts and fellow journalists. We hunted for good

examples from around the world that news organizations could implement or at least think about.

This report was written under the umbrella of the Constructive Institute. The very words ‘constructive journalism’ or ‘solutions journalism’ can – and do – provoke eye-rolling among some mainstream journalists across the world, especially in the US and in the UK. The sign on the door at the entrance to the Institute, located on the campus of the University of Aarhus in Denmark, offers a clearer indication of what it is about: ‘Constructive Institute: Journalism for Tomorrow.’ The ideas for ‘Journalism for Tomorrow’ being developed at the Institute are already being adopted in parts of the media in Scandinavia and Germany, and even in the US and UK.

A core belief of the Institute is that while journalism should expose problems as it has traditionally done, it should also offer solutions. Jay Rosen, professor of journalism at New York University, speaking in April 2022 at the opening of the Bonn Institute for Journalism and Constructive Dialogue, summed up this approach when he said journalists can no longer just be ‘smoke-detectors.’ Echoing this, Berna Namata, a journalism teacher and former bureau chief in Rwanda for The East African, in an email exchange with the Constructive Institute, said: “I’m not surprised there is a lot of resistance to this concept in the West because it does challenge the original journalism training which largely focuses on issues, i.e., pointing out what is going wrong in society. We were trained that it is somebody else’s job to fix the issues.”

We hope publishers and fellow journalists will scan the recommendations and examples of good practice in this booklet, pick and choose, and find one or more ideas they might want to adopt. An expanded version of the booklet – with more details and more examples of good ideas, tools and best practices – can be found on the Constructive Institute website. The project is intended to be open-ended and to remain alive beyond this booklet. So we invite you to add further ideas, recommendations, observations and comments. It can be found at: www.constructiveinstitute.org

2. Polarization of society:

A challenge for democracy

Differences about Covid vaccinations, climate change, refugees and a host of other issues are just part of democratic debate, the essence of a free society. It only becomes a problem when one side no longer feels the other side is worth engaging with, when there is no agreement on basic facts, when lies – even when disproved – grow and spread. It is only a problem when a president of the United States, Donald Trump, claims more people attended his inauguration in January 2017 than Barack Obama's, in spite of aerial photography disproving this, or four years later claiming the 2020 election was stolen from him.

Academics, in a research paper titled Lethal Mass Partisanship, underscored how ugly this has become in the US when, based on a 2017 opinion poll, they wrote: "Fifteen percent of Republicans and 20 percent of Democrats agreed that the country would be better off if large numbers of opposing partisans in the public today 'just died', a shockingly brutal sentiment." By March 2022, a Pew Research Center analysis found the average Democrat and Republican further apart ideologically than at any time in the last 50 years.

2.1. Causes of polarization

There are countless reasons for polarization and why it has become worse. Volumes have been written about it, especially over the last decade in the US in response to Trump, with *Why We're Polarized* (2020) by US journalist Ezra Klein among the standouts. But the causes of polarization in the US are often not the same as those in Europe and the rest of the world. In many countries the main cause of polarization is resentment over a widening gap in wealth, one exacerbated in the 2020s by high inflation and rising energy costs.

Polarization has its origins in identity: nationality, religion, gender, sporting allegiance, class, taste in music, political partisanship or

some combination of all of these, or even something completely different. Having an identity only becomes an issue when you start to berate or belittle someone with a different identity or – worse – resort to violence, such as attacking the very symbol of democracy, the US Congress. Such intolerance has been exacerbated in the last two decades by the advent of the internet and social media. More people today access news via Facebook and Google than from any news organization. The internet offers the potential for everyone to have a voice – a true democracy – and new and better ways for journalists to tell stories and engage with their readers and audiences. But it also opened the way for online debates to become shriller, uglier and more extreme. Big tech companies like Google and Facebook have made efforts in recent years to better monitor and moderate debate but are still not doing nearly enough. While there is a tendency to blame polarization on Big Tech and social media, political polarization predates the advent of social media. In the US, it can be traced back to at least the 1990s, when Republicans in Congress ended traditional co-operation in favor of a strategy of all-out opposition.

Early on we decided there was little value in adding to the already extensive literature on the causes of polarization and opted instead to narrow the focus on the implications for journalism and how we might address them.

2.2. Polarization and journalism

The journalism model that sustained us for more than a century is in need of a major rethink. Traditional news organizations are struggling over how to retain audiences. The best quality journalism in the world is not much use if hardly anyone reads, sees or hears it. There is a generation under 30 in danger of being lost altogether. Major news organizations were until recently buoyed by a rise in the number of subscribers but have stumbled upon a harsh reality: the problem is not only attracting subscribers but also – if you get them onboard – retaining them. Problems confronting journalism that contribute to polarization are:

The conflict model. The conflict or adversarial model has worked for journalists for more than a century, and still works. The political systems in the US and UK are adversarial and the coverage reflects this. Conflict stories are also easy to sell to news editors. The public is used to this kind of storytelling. It has proved profitable for news organizations such as Fox, which thrives on confrontation. It is not going to disappear. But the model needs an overhaul.

Poisonous, combative language. The conflict model relies on language that is combative. Political disagreements are reported as 'punch-ups,' 'battles' or 'war.' This is partly because the political systems in some democracies were constructed to be adversarial, such as in the US and UK. But not all stories have to be written in this manner, not every political issue treated as a row, not every story has to be ramped up. There is a dishonesty in reporters hunting out politicians at extremes in order to manufacture a row.

Debate format. Existing debate formats for televised debates are mostly based on the adversarial model. Such an approach is frequently necessary when confronted by evasive politicians, those sticking rigidly to pre-prepared talking points or simply telling lies. Debates are engineered to provoke confrontation, one extreme against the other in hope of a shouting match and, if lucky, a studio walk-out. Surveys suggest such an approach is a turn-off and they would prefer debates conducted in a more civil tone, ones that would provide information and maybe even solutions. But viewers also complain such programs can be boring. Television executives are hunting for formats that produce debates that are civil and informative but are tense, nervy and in which there is friction.

News fatigue. This fatigue arises partly out of relentlessly negative news agendas, with more and more people just glancing at headlines or listening to the top of the bulletin before tuning out. This is especially true of the young, who get their news from social media – where news is competing against chat lines or games or sports or other hobbies, something more fun, more diverting than news. The BBC's Audience Research Survey in 2016 showed 51 percent of teenagers wanted news to contain solutions, and this rose to over 70 per cent in India and Africa. According to the Norwegian Bureau of Statistics Media Barometer published in 2022, the number of young people avoiding

news in general between 2020 and 2021 increased and 18 percent aged between 18 and 24 do not read any news at all.

Engagement with the public. The loss of so many local news outlets, mainly from the loss of advertising revenue to the Big Tech platforms, has contributed to polarization. With no or little quality local news available, focus is concentrated on national news, which often tends to be factional.

Online comments. Journalists initially embraced the opportunity offered by the internet to meet their readers online. The UK's Guardian was among the first, launching the ambitious 'Comment Is Free' in 2006, giving online space to many more commentators and readers. It also allowed a wide range of readers to respond 'below-the-line' on a whole raft of articles and encouraged staff journalists to engage in exchanges. That cooled substantially when confronted, as other news organizations have found, with comments that were abusive, sexist, misogynist, sectarian and intolerant. To try to make the below-the-line comments civil, moderators are needed to monitor, steer, delete or hide the worst, yet such moderators are often expensive.

Bias. Journalists are seen as partisan, sneaking in their own opinion; their work lacking in transparency. Journalists are seen as elitists, drawn from the same background, some university educated, financially comfortable, often based in the capital, out of touch with life elsewhere, working in newsrooms lacking gender or ethnic balance. The result is a group consensus on what stories matter; too narrow a range. All this contributes to a loss of trust.

False balance. Journalists try to give an impression of balance by finding people from the opposite ends of the debate and this too contributes to polarization. Too often it is a false balance: an environmental scientist pitted against a climate denier or a scientist/medical professional pitted against a vaccine skeptic. Or someone claiming reality to be red and another claiming it to be blue. But what if it is neither red nor blue, but yellow?

Not listening. Journalists do not listen enough, too often going into interviews with a preconceived idea of what they want, treating people as if they are walking quote boxes.

2.3. Opinion Poll of attitudes in Germany,

Denmark, and the UK

A survey by the Constructive Institute in collaboration with the Danish analytics company Epinion found that only around half of the Danish and German respondents say they trust the media to paint a fair and accurate picture of the world. And in the UK, trust drops even further to just a third.

British people are less trusting of the media to paint an accurate picture of the world compared to Danes and Germans, and they also believe the news often is exaggerated.



I trust the media to paint a fair and accurate picture of the world

The news in media often exaggerates the real stories



Germany
n=1,039

52%

55%



UK
n=1,032

32%

76%



Denmark
n=1,030

56%

34%

Which of the TV-shows below would you be most inclined to watch?

A

Non-constructive

We invite well-known politicians, opinionmakers and other experts to **debate** important decisions for society. The programme format is designed to be **confrontational**. The host will interrupt if the politicians fail to answer questions. It is intended to be **entertaining** and heated.

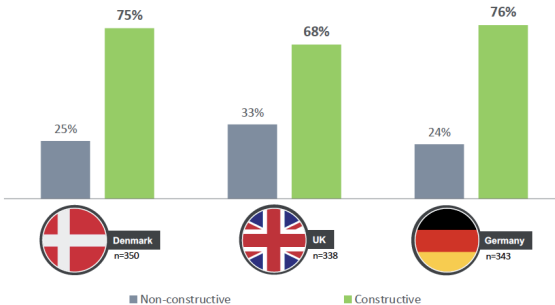
We meet to debate important societal issues once a week when we invite significant politicians, opinionmakers, and other experts to the studio. The host will **interrupt** if the participants fail to answer the questions. The program is intended to be entertaining and it can get **heated** between the participants.

B

Constructive

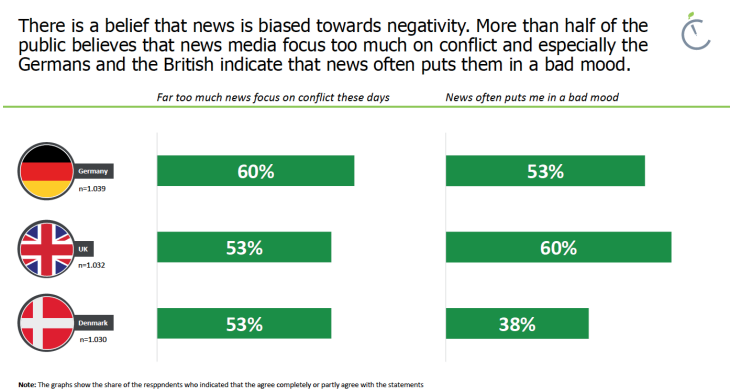
We invite well-known politicians, opinionmakers and other experts to **discuss** important decisions for society. The programme format is designed to encourage **dialogue**. The host is trying to **clarify opinions** so the viewers can understand the disagreements and different **ideologies**. The aim is to provide viewers with knowledge and understanding.

We meet to debate important societal issues once a week when we invite significant politicians, opinionmakers, and other experts to the studio. The host will try to **clarify** the different opinions so the viewers can understand the disagreements and different ideological viewpoints. It is intended to provide the viewers with new **knowledge** and **understanding**.



The survey was conducted in May 2022 from a representative sample of 1,000 people in Germany, the UK and Denmark, sounding them out about their attitudes towards news and journalism. It also explored how the media moderates political debates and people's experience of debate culture. This data about people's attitudes makes an important contribution towards the discussion about journalism and debate formats.

A clear majority in the survey prioritized debates based on constructive journalism principles. This was demonstrated when the respondents were asked to indicate what kind of stories they prefer to read and to react to different debate formats.



The goal of the survey is to provide journalists and editors with information about people's perception of news and inspire new approaches and new formats.

Read more about the detail of the survey on the Constructive Institute's website: www.constructiveinstitute.org

3. Promoting constructive conversation I: Best practices from around the world

How can journalists push back against polarization? How can they promote more civil dialogue and constructive conversation in ways that strengthen social cohesion and democracy? One of the best ways is to look for new ideas among fellow journalists, to look for best practices.

We will here take you on a journey around the world to discover new approaches. We start in Europe, with a broad focus on combating polarization through breaking down cultural and language barriers. We look at a laudable initiative in the middle of one of the most entrenched conflicts in the world, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. As the journey progresses, we take you to Japan and the United States and back to Europe, in order to explore different fields of constructive conversation. We found hopeful, optimistic and innovative projects in the UK, Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Germany. We found projects that think out of the box, that increase dialogue, that increase diversity, that give a voice to the unheard, that offer a more complex and nuanced view of the world.

A European Perspective

(Pan-European, digital news hub, based in Switzerland)



Diversity in Europe—Screenshot from shared programs / Photo: EBU

What is it about?

A European Perspective is an ambitious, pioneering project launched in July 2021. A prime objective is to reduce polarization through breaking down language barriers, increasing understanding across European borders and to counter propaganda, conspiracy theories, misinformation and campaigns aimed at creating fissures within and between European countries. The project is the brainchild of the European Broadcasting Union, which represents public service broadcasters and is best known for its production of the Eurovision Song Contest. A European Perspective is a consortium of broadcasters from 12 countries to share online stories.

About 2,000 stories are sent daily to A European Perspective's news hub, from which individual broadcasters select ones they think will be of interest to their readers and which have been copyright cleared. The stories are displayed on broadcaster's websites in a special box. This offers readers a diverse choice of stories from other countries: some national, some local.

Why did they do it?

The idea was first floated around 2016 and initially met with skepticism. But a rise in polarization and right-wing populism in Europe created some alarm. With Europe having 24 official languages, such a project would have been difficult – probably impossible – until recently. AI-assisted technology – EuroVox – has overcome language barriers, offering near-simultaneous translation of reports arriving at the news hub into multiple languages.

The aim of the project is to stimulate curiosity about life in other European countries, to celebrate diversity and to see if there are lessons to be learned from how other countries respond to issues such as the Covid pandemic, immigration, the war in Ukraine, rising living costs and others.

How did it go?

Between its launch and May 2022, the story boxes attracted 45 million views. Level of engagement varies from country to country, being most popular in France, Finland and Ireland – which all prominently display the boxes on their websites – and less popular in countries where the boxes are less prominent, such as Portugal.

Justyna Kurczabinska, a former Polish television journalist and now project director for A European Perspective, said in an interview with the Constructive Institute: “The objective is for Europeans to better understand one another. But you also have to give them solutions. And you want to show them that other countries are not only suffering but how other countries are dealing with problems.” A European Perspective is embarking on Phase Two, mainly finding a way to engage the youth through targeting one or two social media sites.

More about the project: www.ebu.ch

Contact: kurczabinska@eurovision.net

Haaretz21

(Haaretz, print and online, Israel)

What is it about?

The Israeli–Palestinian conflict has proved to be one of the most intractable in the world, defying all attempts thus far to bring about a permanent peace deal. The main liberal newspaper in Israel, Haaretz, launched a project in 2021 to train and recruit Israeli-Palestinians, sometimes called Israeli-Arabs (Palestinians living within Israeli borders and who are citizens of Israel).

Why did they do it?

As a liberal newspaper, editors have long been uneasy about having so few Israeli-Palestinians in the newsroom, even though Israeli-Palestinians make up 21 percent of the Israeli population, hence Haaretz21. Noa Landau, its diplomatic correspondent, was one of the staff bothered about this. “We are a bunch of liberals who want to write about Palestinians without having Palestinians,” she said in an interview with the Constructive Institute. She asked her editor if she could change jobs and when her editor asked her what job she wanted, she suggested recruiting Israeli-Palestinians. An advertisement was placed in Haaretz, asking for applications from Israeli-Palestinians who wanted to become journalists and who would be trained by Haaretz.

How did it go?

Haaretz is not making any extravagant claims about the initiative’s impact on resolving the conflict. But the move has increased diversity within the newsroom, stimulated discussion on difficult issues within the newsroom, added news perspectives and a more nuanced understanding of recent clashes between Israeli Jews and Israeli Palestinians.

Of the 20 initially recruited, five have been given staff jobs and another four freelance jobs. Landau said it was too early to assess the impact but there was one immediate positive outcome. Amid one

of the worst outbreaks of violence, the Israeli-Palestinian journalists brought a better understanding to the paper about what lay behind the clashes, providing insights from within their own communities, broadening Haaretz's coverage. "I am not going to say it has been easy. There are a lot of complexities," Landau said. But she regards the initiative as worthwhile. "We viewed Israeli-Palestinians from the outside. We have brought the voices inside."

More about the project: www.haaretz.com

Contact: Noa.landau@haaretz.co.il

Minna de Hikikomori Radio

NHK (Radio, TV, online, Japan)



The NHK anchor conducts interviews about Hikikomori people / Photo: NHK

What is it about?

Minna de Hikikomori Radio is a program created to engage an estimated one million people in Japan who are recluses, many of them young. This covers a wide range of conditions, including those who remain isolated in their bedrooms and those who refuse to leave their homes or engage with people. The program has given a voice to those who had previously gone largely unheard.

The host is Nozomu Kurihara, an NHK anchor whose brother experienced Hikikomori himself. Each episode deals with a topic suggested on their

website by listeners. The listeners can join on SoMe using the hashtag #HikikomoriRadio, so the host can moderate the discussion live. In December 2020, the program collaborated with NHK's TV program 'Close-up Gendai,' to film the anchor's excursions in a camping car, complete with a mobile tearoom, to engage in conversation with listeners.

Why did they do it?

NHK director Ayumi Okada, who had interviewed Hikikomori people in 2019, realized there was a desire to connect with the outside world but in what they regarded as a safe space. She said: "For many Hikikomori people, spending time in living rooms where there is a TV, is challenging. We thought that radio, listening in private and connecting with other listeners during the live broadcast, could create an alternative safe community."

How did it go?

Within half a year after the release of the first episode, they received more than 7,500 tweets with the hashtag both from the Hikikomori and their family members who secretly listen in on the program. Although it began as an intermittent program in May 2020, the public response has been positive and from April 2022 it has become a fixed monthly program. What Hikikomori listeners appreciate is that it is interactive, allowing listeners to participate through messaging and tweeting to the program.

More about the program: www.nhk.or.jp/corporateinfo

Texas Tribune Festival

(The Texas Tribune, event, online, US)

What is it about?

Over the last two decades the US has seen a rapid disappearance of newspapers at state and local level, turning large swathes of the country into a local news desert. The Texas Tribune news organization has reversed this trend, at least in the Lone Star State,

by providing in-depth political news coverage and organizing mass events to promote civic discourse. The Texas Tribune, founded in 2009, organizes a host of public events, with the main one being a three-day political gathering every September, TribFest, where citizens have the opportunity to question politicians and officials with the aim of finding solutions. The festival, which normally includes about 60 different events and 190 speakers, takes place in the state capital, Austin. The Tribune, whose news coverage is almost exclusively devoted to politics and policy, has turned the assumption that the public is not interested in the detail of politics and policy on its head.

Why did they do it?

The Texas Tribune was founded by financier John Thornton, who despaired of what he saw as sparse political coverage of Texas. Thornton, quoted in its annual report in 2019, said: “We believe that civic discourse is in danger of becoming less informed and more reflexively partisan. We believe that’s bad for democracy and bad for Texas.”

How did it go?

The Tribune has proved successful. In 2020, it recorded 9.9 million monthly page views and the number of journalistic staff has risen to 80. Before the pandemic, TribFest attracted more than 7,000 in-person and 120,000 combined in-person and viewing on live streams. On the agenda for September 2022 is education, health care, infrastructure, the power grid, criminal justice, voting, foster care, abortion, gender identity and the world beyond Texas. Without local news and opportunities for civic engagement such as provided by the Tribune, the public would spend much more time watching national news, which in the US is deeply polarized. Discourse at the local level, while vigorous, tends to be less polarized.

More about the project: <https://festival.texastribune.org>

Melting Mountains

(Evergrey, online, newsletter, US)

What is it about?

Evergrey is a small US news organization based in Seattle, Washington, which sends out a daily newsletter about things happening locally. This service helps foster a sense of community. It achieved prominence beyond the city when it embarked on an initiative aimed at directly confronting the bitter partisan divide in the US in the wake of Donald Trump's 2016 election victory. Two months after he became president, Evergrey took a busload of readers, mainly Hillary Clinton supporters from urban Seattle, on a five-hour, 250-mile drive to meet mainly Trump supporters in rural Oregon. The expedition was called 'Melting Mountains.'

Why did they do it?

Mónica Guzmán, co-founder of Evergrey, launched the newsletter two weeks before the November 2016 election. The aim was to get as close to readers as possible, to be inclusive and to avoid making assumptions about people holding different views. Guzman had personal experience of this: she supported Hillary Clinton while her parents, Mexican immigrants, voted for Trump. On the day after the election, the newsletter asked people 'Are you okay?' The assumption was that there would be universal despair among readers. But emails came in reminding the editors they had failed to be inclusive by assuming all their readers would not be Trump supporters. The idea for Melting Mountains grew from that. Evergrey contacted the Sherman County E-News in Oregon to suggest getting readers together.

How did it go?

There was initial anticipation and nervousness as 21 people from Seattle sat down with 16 from Sherman County. The opening question for the event was 'What would happen here today that would leave you feeling like this was a good investment of your time?' The highlight of the day was one-to-one exchanges. What the event achieved was that it allowed each side to see the other

as human beings who had, for the most part, perfectly rational reasons for voting in the way they did. The event acted as a counter to the dehumanizing of people holding different political opinions and particularly made the city dwellers more aware of problems faced in rural communities. Guzman, in a book she wrote published in 2022, 'I Never Thought Of It That Way,' said: "Many good things would follow Melting Mountains. A few participants from across the counties would stay in touch, continuing their conversations over email." Guzman has gone on to become the director of digital and storytelling at Braver Angels, founded in 2016 after the election and which has become one of the largest grassroots groups in the US working on depolarization.

More about the project: <https://theevergrey.com>

Contact: <https://moniguzman.com>

The Guardian

(Print and online, UK, US and Australia)



The Guardian and Observer office in London / Photo: Matt Fidler

What is it about?

The Guardian has specific columns and sections that are clearly 'constructive' or 'solutions based,' such as a regular Saturday feature titled Dining Across The Divide and, until 2021, The Upside. The significance of The Guardian is that this approach is not confined to a few easily identifiable articles, but is becoming integral to the whole

news organization, spread across its coverage. Editors encourage reporters and columnists to build solutions into their work.

Why did they do it?

The Guardian has been at the forefront of investigative journalism and has since its inception more than 200 years ago campaigned for progressive ideas. Among initiatives this century, it organized secret talks outside London between Israelis, Palestinians and politicians from Northern Ireland in 2002, during the Second Intifada, and in 2015 launched a 'Keep It In The Ground' campaign against further expansion of fossil fuels. In 2017, the editor Kath Viner formalized this approach in a keynote speech: "We cannot merely criticize the status quo; we must also explore the new ideas that might displace it. We must build hope." One of the clearest examples of this was The Guardian's Upside section set up by Mark Rice-Oxley, head of special projects and the leading advocate in the organization for constructive journalism. Upside sought "answers, solutions, movements and initiatives to address the biggest problems besetting the world."

How did it go?

The numbers for Upside were small compared with the big and dramatic breaking news stories but surveys showed those reading upside spent longer on those stories and were more likely to share them. Upside was dropped in 2021 when its editor, Mark Rice-Oxley, changed position to executive editor. In an interview with the Constructive Institute, he said Upside had been a bit of a ghetto whereas now the idea of constructive journalism is "clearly a sort of newsroom-wide idea. More and more journalists are involved in it." But the adoption of the constructive approach is uneven – more prevalent in features and comment than the frenetic world of breaking news.

The Guardian established a strong business and journalism model, based largely on readers' subscriptions and donations. In November 2021, it reported it had more than one million digital subscribers. Deputy editor Owen Gibson, in an interview with the Constructive Institute, said: "In terms of constructive journalism in general and a series of ways in which we are cognizant of the need both to encourage

plurality of views and offer hope and solutions through our reporting, it is something that is uppermost in the minds of senior editors, and desk editors and reporters. It is a journey we have been on that has become more urgent as we become more directly reader-funded. We recognize we have further to go, more to do.” The Upside was relaunched by The Guardian in June 2022 as a weekly online newsletter.

More about the project: www.theguardian.com/uk

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Crossing Divides

(BBC, radio, TV, online, UK)

What is it about?

It deals directly with polarization by encouraging people with different viewpoints in the UK and across the globe to engage with one another through telling stories of people crossing divides. It is a multimedia project involving television, radio and online. Stories have included bringing a jailed violent Islamist face-to-face with the family of a victim. In the UK, stories have included people with opposing viewpoints of Brexit, climate change and immigration, as well as smaller – though no less emotional – issues such as pairing a traditional cab driver with an Uber driver in Coventry.

Why did they do it?

The project originated with Emily Kasriel, head of special projects at the BBC World Service. Her motivation for addressing polarization stems partly from her interest in solutions journalism and also from her personal background, as a daughter of a refugee and an immigrant. She kick-started a solutions-focused journalism initiative across BBC News that in 2018 led to a pilot for Crossing Divides in 2018.

How did it go?

Since that pilot, Crossing Divides has had 50 million video views and 50 million online views. Senior journalists from across the BBC, such

as Lyse Doucet, chief international correspondent and Mark Easton, BBC Home correspondent, have taken part.

Asked if Crossing Divides had succeeded in reducing polarization, Kasriel, in an interview with the Constructive Institute, acknowledged that it was difficult to measure. "I don't think we can come with any proof that Crossing Divides reduces polarization, much as I would like that... It is very hard always to demonstrate a causal link between media consumption and behavioral change." That did not mean it did not exist, she said, pointing to anecdotal evidence such as the positive impact of an episode about a meeting between two former child soldiers, one a Muslim and the other a Christian, on the island of Ambon, Indonesia.

There have also been initiatives such as hosting a one-day BBC debate in March 2020, which offered 200 people tools to engage in conversation with someone holding opposite views. In spring 2022, Crossing Divides co-hosted, together with the British Council, which promotes British culture overseas, a three-week program to train 1,000 people from 119 countries in 'deep listening,' aimed at encouraging listening, talking and discussing polarizing issues. "The biggest changes come from ways that you can't measure," Kasriel said.

More about the project: www.bbc.co.uk

Free space debate

(The Constructive Institute and Århus Stiftstidende, event, print, Denmark)



Free space inspired debate in Aarhus, Denmark / Photo: Kurt Strand

What is it about?

A free space debate consists of three major rounds. The first round sees those with significant disagreements lined up. The second is a time for reflection, possibly acknowledging an opponent's views. The third is concentrated on possible solutions. Some tools from the concept, developed by the 'Frirummet' (Free Space), were used at a "constructive election meeting" at a local school in Aarhus, Denmark, in autumn 2021. The structure was as follows:

- 1 Two political candidates, a 'red' and a 'blue,' sit in chairs in front of six other candidates, questioned by a moderator and exchanging views.
- 2 The candidates change seats and have to answer the question: "Is there anything your opponent has said which you understand quite well?"
- 3 'Help' from the other candidates behind who add their thoughts, suggestions and maybe a question or two.
- 4 Questions and comments from the audience.
- 5 A question for all candidates. "What is your takeaway from this debate?"
- 6 Sum up with the two candidates in the front chairs.
- 7 Traditional political debate with all eight candidates.

Why did they do it?

The election meeting was organized by the local Århus Stiftstidende newspaper and the Constructive Institute at the University of Aarhus as an alternative to the traditional debate format, after a survey reported growing fatigue with politicians failing to answer even simple questions, talking across one another and focusing on opponent's weakness rather than promoting their own ideas.

How did it go?

After the meeting, some of the candidates said it was great to discuss issues in a new manner while some of the audience said they felt better informed. They nonetheless welcomed the fact that the meeting ended with a more traditional debate format which allowed everyone to express their political views. Jan Schouby, Århus Stiftstidende editor-in-chief who moderated part of the debate, wrote afterwards that everyone who took to the microphone had the same message: that in the next election citizens wanted to be involved much more and earlier in the process.

More about the project: www.frirummet.org

Contact: uh@constructiveinstitute.org

Solved or Squeezed

(TV2 Fyn, TV, Denmark)



Politicians being squeezed while trying to solve a problem / Photo: TV2 Fyn

What is it about?

This is a political, entertaining and constructive game show on TV where real politicians try to agree on real solutions. While doing this they come under pressure from a ticking clock and moving walls. It is an election game, and four local politicians from different parties are put together in a box to solve an important issue in their municipality.

They have 20 minutes to solve a problem, and every five minutes the walls contract. Outside, a host and an expert in negotiation are on hand to help. If the politicians fail to reach agreement in time they face a penalty, such as having to do community work.

Why did they do it?

They wanted to do something different for the municipal election in the region of Funen in 2021. The organizers had been involved in constructive journalism since 2018 and had realized that while worthy, it could also be boring, lacking the drama and entertainment of conflict. The inspiration came from a day watching reality and game shows.

How did it go?

They were really surprised that in 8 out of 10 municipalities the politicians agreed on real solutions that were then being implemented to the benefit of the citizens of Funen. Viewing figures were high, and a revised version of the program is planned for the next national election. Lasse Hørbye Nielsen, editor-in-chief, said this in a comment to the Constructive Institute: "We learned a lot in the process. For example, that Danish politicians are not afraid of trying something new. They actually loved it. We had 40 politicians in total and the feedback from 39 was great. Some even said they had their best experience in politics and media that day."

More about the project: www.tv2fyn.dk

Contact: Lasse Hørbye Nielsen, Lahn@tv2fyn.dk

'Dinner Party Debate'

(TV2 Østjylland, social media, Denmark)

What is it about?

Debate on the Facebook page of regional Danish media house TV2 Østjylland is hosted from Monday through Friday by a member of a special team. The aim is to create a relaxed environment. Karsten Smed, editing director of TV2 Østjylland, said to the Constructive

Institute: “A good host at a dinner party makes sure that all guests are comfortable and makes sure to go around the tables and chat with people. Our SoMe-hosts do exactly that, just digitally.”

Why did they do it?

Smed said that while there is a tendency for many to focus exclusively on the downside of Facebook – fake news, bubbles and hate speech – there are also positives, such as giving every user a voice, being listened to and becoming better informed about news. The team monitors the comments section on their Facebook page and asks guests to expand on their views and to document their claims if need be. The team also tries to enrich the conversation with pertinent facts.

How did it go?

Smed points to various benefits, among them the fact that by being present in the comment section, they create a relationship with their users and thus greater brand loyalty. Another is that the comments are often a goldmine in providing fresh information for existing stories and ideas for new ones.

More about the project: the comment section:

www.facebook.com/TV2OJ

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Zetland Live

(Zetland and Boligselskabernes Landsforening, event, Denmark)



Full house at The Royal Theater in Copenhagen for Zetland Live event / Photo: Zetland

What is it about?

The Zetland Live concept was developed and executed by the Danish start-up online media organization Zetland. It combines journalism and debate with acting, music and other artistic modes of expression. They have performed at the annual people's democracy festival on the Danish island of Bornholm, focusing on daily life in vulnerable housing areas. Other performances have been on stage at the Royal Theater in Copenhagen, and broadcast in cooperation with DR, the Danish Broadcasting Corporation.

Why did they do it?

The idea was to combine journalism with other formats. Several Zetland Live events have been undertaken in cooperation with Boligselskabernes Landsforening, the organization for social housing communities in Denmark, who wanted to focus on daily life not normally covered by traditional media, especially the issue of social housing and poorly integrated ethnic groups.

How did it go?

Most Zetland Live performances have sold out and have received a lot of attention from other media. One of the performances at

the Royal Theater in Copenhagen celebrated the 100th anniversary of the social housing organizations. Michael Thorberg, press officer for the social housing associations, said he is sure the audience, many of them living in social housing flats and being in the Royal Theater for the first time in their lives, will “remember more facts and points in a very different way than if they had read them in a book or newspaper.”

More about the project: www.bl.dk

Contact: Michael Thorberg, mith@bl.dk

Einig?

(“Do you agree?,” NRK, TV, Norway)



Discussing controversial issues without a host at Einig? / Photo: NRK

What is it about?

This is a ground-breaking program, born out of public expressions of dismay at traditional political debate formats. There are normally 2 to 4 participants in each program discussing controversial issues such as immigration, gender equality and abortion. There is no

visible host, but the host is in the background and can interrupt if necessary. The debate is edited, not live. Each discussion starts with a statement and those who agree raise their hand to explain why. The participants and politicians ask each other questions to try to establish and understand the source of disagreement rather than blame one another. Participants agree beforehand they will not indulge in pre-rehearsed soundbites, and will instead try to find points of connection and if possible – though not necessarily – reach agreement. The studio is set in a low-key way so as to create a more informal setting and the approach is comparable to meetings for couple's therapy: listen, ask questions and be curious.

Why did they do it?

NRK wanted to try a more constructive means of debating that would replicate the conciliatory, amiable tone politicians engage in when cameras are not around: their language more natural, their opinions more interesting. Gro Engen, editor of NRK Einig?, said to the Constructive Institute: “For politicians entering traditional TV debates it is like winning a match. When they decide it is about ‘winning,’ then their objective is not to inform viewers about political issues or find resolutions to problems.”

How did it go?

The program received a lot of love from viewers. Figures on TV were a bit lower than the other big, traditional debate programs, but reached a younger audience in the online version. It proved popular with teachers who used it in school, and was nominated for “Gullruten” in Norway as one of the three best innovative programs of 2019, the year it was launched. This year NRK is making a new season of the program. One change is that this time there will be a host who will try out some new mediation skills.

More about the project: www.nrk.no

Contact: Gro.engen@nrk.no

NRK Replies

(NRK, online, TV, radio, Norway)



Engaging the public—An invitation to ask questions live at NRK Replies / Photo: NRK

What is it about?

NRK Replies is a dialogue-concept for online use, especially during big breaking news stories when there is a massive audience demand for information. Experts answer questions from the public live throughout the day. The tool they use is Coral from Vox Media. It is now also used on NRK TV and radio news. The answers are used to enrich news stories. Most news organizations have similar formats but what makes NRK different is that it is formalized and that they have their own team of experts.

Why did they do it?

In March 2020, the day Norway was closed down because of Covid, NRK recognized that Norwegians had lots of questions about the pandemic. For several days a week, experts and reporters from NRK were live on the internet answering questions from the public. They received thousands of questions during the first weeks. NRK has repeated the exercise on other issues, such as over the invasion of Ukraine. About 60 of Norway's best experts on war-related issues answer questions about the rules of war, arms, military tactics, politics and diplomacy, the UN, human rights and nuclear issues.

How did it go?

In the first two weeks after the invasion of Ukraine, 1 million people – a large share of Norway's 5.3 million population – visited the site. Young people were especially interested in asking questions. Half of those visiting the site in the first week were under 30. It also proved popular among those aged between 30 and 49 and with a group the media often have difficulty in reaching, those without higher education.

Gunnhild Viken, head of public dialogue in NRK's news department, said to the Constructive Institute: "We will keep on doing this, because NRK Replies is a journalistic goldmine. We get more information from the experts, we get better stories, and stories that are more relevant for the audience, especially the young ones. We have to develop a culture for doing this among our journalists, sometimes the ideas from the public are even better than our own."

More about the project: www.nrk.no

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The Challenge: an Agenda special

(SVT, television, Sweden)

What is it about?

The current affairs program Agenda broadcasts a two-hour 'hearing' on issues such as climate change, gang violence and schooling. Politicians from all eight parties join a studio discussion with scientists and other experts. The scientists set out solutions and then the politicians are invited to talk about these. Camilla Kvartof, host of the program, said there is no debate and instead politicians are asked to look forward, to avoid criticizing one another and to engage with the experts. The aim is to highlight different solutions to society's problems from each party.

Why did they do it?

SVT was responding to public disenchantment with politicians failing to offer solutions. The program was aimed at providing more facts and increasing understanding.

How did it go?

The program had good television ratings, though a bit lower than other, shorter debate formats. But online, the hearings achieved higher numbers. SVT will keep on making these programs in addition to their other debates. Eva Landahl, one of SVT's best known journalists, said: "We have had a lot of positive responses and love from our audience. Politicians have also liked the concept as something new and interesting."

More about the project: www.svt.se

Contact: eva.landahl@svt.se

Werkstatt Demokratie

(Workshop Democracy, Süddeutsche Zeitung, print, online, event, Germany)



Readers discuss and look for solutions at "Werkstatt Demokratie" / Photo: Jessy Asmus/SZ

What is it about?

It is a solution-oriented discourse project from Germany's biggest quality daily newspaper. The aim is to find forward-looking answers to political and social questions that concern people in Germany in four steps.

- 1 Listening: Readers decide on the topic that will be the focus of each round of the project via online voting.

- 2 Informing: Journalists research a dossier on the chosen topic with facts and context.
- 3 Discussing and finding solutions: Readers develop proposals in moderated workshops, online and at events.
- 4 Making an impact: Participants present their ideas for solutions to politicians.

The Werkstatt Demokratie is a follow-up project to the SZ's "Democracy Lab." In the run-up to the 2017 general election, journalists traveled all over Germany, among other places, to talk to people in person at marketplaces. The focus was on the question: What needs to change in Germany? The newspaper compiled dossiers and organized discussions on the most frequently mentioned topics.

Why did they do it?

Disinformation, hate speech and other tendencies toward division in society were central themes before the 2017 general election. The SZ wanted to do something to counter these. The project was intended to promote a fact-based, constructive culture of political discourse, to reduce the distance between citizens, between citizens and politicians, and between citizens and journalists. Media representatives were already facing massive hostility at the time ("Lügenpresse"). But SZ was also interested in experimenting with new formats and forms of reader engagement, strengthening reader loyalty and trust, and tapping into new target groups.

How did it go?

According to the organizers, the willingness to participate proved greater than expected. Interested members of the public had to register for participation in the workshops and fill in a questionnaire with information about age, gender and political standpoint, among other things. "We always had far more registrations than places," said Sabrina Ebitsch, one of the project managers, in a conversation with the Constructive Institute. The central issues of our time attracted

the greatest interest, such as the climate crisis or questions such as ‘How does good governance work?’ The creators were impressed by the readers’ ideas for solutions. Many participants remained in contact after the event.

More about the project: sz.de/werkstattdemokratie

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My Country Talks

(Zeit Online, event, online, Germany)

What is it about?

“My Country Talks” is ‘Tinder for politics.’ It aims to connect people with opposing views for a one-to-one-conversation based on a special matching algorithm. The approach has now been tried out in numerous countries. First, people are recruited to take part in the project through a short yes/no survey focusing on divisive issues. The program matches pairs of readers who had not met before for a face-to-face-discussion in real life or online, in the hope of conducting a civil discourse.

Why did they do it?

The starting point was the question: If people in many parts of society have forgotten how to speak to each other, how is it possible to get them back into conversation? So they invented “Deutschland spricht” (Germany talks) in 2016. The goal was to break up filter bubbles and combat polarization in this way. “My Country Talks” was an international follow up project that was launched together with a group of news outlets all over the world and is today a non-profit NGO.

How did it go?

Participants from more than 30 countries have taken part in project events, over 200,000 people have registered for an event and more than 70,000 pairs of political opposites have been matched. Researchers at the University of Bonn conducted a study on the impact of the pilot

project (“Deutschland spricht”) in 2018. They measured the effect of the conversations on participant’s views and tendencies toward polarization and found that even just a two-hour conversation between people with completely different political views can reduce polarization and prejudice, viewing them in a less negative light.

According to the creators, on average 80% of participants have said they were happy with their conversation and 90% said they look forward to participating in another event like that. Moreover, it strengthens trust and the bond with the media brand. The creators want to develop the project further in 2023 and connect people all over the globe at the “World Talks.”

More about the project: www.mycountrytalks.org

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13 Fragen

(13 questions, ZDFkultur, online, social media, and TV, Germany)



Salwa Houmsi is one of the hosts of “13 Fragen”, where her guests meet on a playing field to look for compromises / Photo: David Biene/ZDF

What is it about?

The centerpiece of this innovative debate format aimed at attracting younger audiences is a pitch divided into squares in the hall of a former Berlin brewery, created by the German public broadcaster ZDF. Six participants with diverse views discuss 13 questions and move toward the center whenever there is agreement. The challenge for the host is to bring them together. Every viewer is invited to join the discussion and to comment on YouTube. There are also links with further information on the respective topic.

Why did they do it?

Vanessa Olivier from ZDF format development said the creators wanted, given increased polarization, to “build bridges in society.” Recruiting is very important: they take several weeks to find really suitable debaters. The main target group is young people between the ages of 25 and 34.

How did it go?

Several of the episodes available on YouTube have been viewed by about a million people, and one episode by more than two million. “There is a very good long-tail effect,” said editor Stefan Munker in a call with the Constructive Institute. The broadcaster is particularly successful with their target group: 40 percent of the viewers are between 25 and 34 years old, and another 40 percent are even younger – between 18 and 24.

A fourth season started at the beginning of 2022. Munker, summing up the main lesson, said: “A good talk is not about talking, but about listening.” This ability to listen is particularly important, not only in the discussion but also in the research beforehand – in order to identify topics that matter to the public rather than to the journalists and to ask questions that reflect the reality of people’s daily lives.

More about the format: www.zdf.de/kultur/13-fragen

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Flipping the Script

(Deutsche Welle, online, social media and TV, Germany)



“Flipping the Script” gives everyday people a stage for a nuanced and civilized exchange of views and arguments / Photo: Deutsche Welle

What is it about?

“Flipping the Script” is a debate format produced for the German general elections in 2021. The creators from the public international broadcaster reversed the traditional roles (politicians talk, voters listen) and put ordinary people from diverse backgrounds at the center of discussions about social mobility, climate change and migration, while politicians are the audience. They are expected to listen but can be invited to ask questions.

Why did they do it?

Aya Ibrahim, creator and executive producer, said in a call with the Constructive Institute: “We wanted to do something out of the box that was accessible for both local and international audiences.” Another goal was to bring new perspectives into the public discourse.

How did it go?

"The format was more successful than average," Ibrahim said. Her team – which is also deliberately very diverse – took a lot of time to find suitable discussion partners. Among other things, they launched a call to participate on social media, which was helpful. She was also surprised by the good discussions on YouTube and other platforms. Ibrahim attributes this to the fact that "people didn't feel like they were fooled": the opponents represented clearly differing positions and argued from their respective life experience.

More about the project: www.dw.com

Contact: aya.ibrahim@dw.com

4. Promoting constructive conversation II: Tools

To help anyone hosting debates in different formats and on different platforms, we have collected several tools. You can pick and choose from these to help create more nuanced, varied and hopefully more exciting debates and discussions. Some tools might help move discussion toward common ground, agreement or even a solution. The tool list is far from complete; it presents just a sample of some of the simplest and most useful, most of which have already been tested in debates.

We also looked at a wide range of other tools aimed at reducing polarization, ranging from new ways of dealing with online abusive comments to increasing the diversity of opinion.

Starting point in debates

Instead of starting a debate by restating a contentious issue, start with a question. “What do you expect to get out of this debate?” It immediately throws the debate into the future, rather than starting with something which will merely rehash a conflict. This tool was inspired by talking to professional mediators who use this approach to encourage dialogue and find common ground. By casting forward, you might even end the debate with something positive or at least better informed, rather than an undignified fight that leaves the audience dispirited.

Presenting two different introductions

In a discussion where the debaters have a totally different view of the issue and of what kind of words should be used, start the program by showing this to the audience. Make two totally different introductions, live or taped, and present both at the beginning of the program. The impact of this is that it hopefully highlights the fact that the issue is complex. Secondly, once debaters have seen that

their points have been presented they might be more susceptible to a discussion aimed at trying to understand opposing viewpoints. The program NRK Debatten in Norway has tried it and reports good results.

A short explainer before the debate

This one is related to the previous tool. Start the debate by letting one or more participants present a short explainer on how they see the problem, maybe simply through a PowerPoint presentation lasting no longer than a few minutes. The participants might be offering alternative views. Or it could be a scientist and a journalist who start by presenting facts they can agree on before entering into a more complicated discussion.

An opponent's best proposal

It is a simple but effective question in a political debate. "What's the best proposal from one of your political opponents tonight?" The question was used as a tool at the end of two local election debate meetings in Copenhagen, Denmark, in October and November 2021. Strange and unexpected alliances were discovered.

Body language

Smart use of body language by a host can help foster dialogue between debaters. Techniques shared by a conflict management expert and experienced debate moderators we talked to include:

- 1 Look down, forcing the debaters to look at each other.
- 2 Look at the one listening rather than the one speaking.
- 3 Take a step back and remain silent when the debaters enter into dialogue with one another.

Experienced debate moderators also said that they found it useful to tell debaters in advance that when a host raised a hand or a pen that was a signal they must stop talking. It is more effective than simply

trying verbally to stop a long tirade by one or heated exchanges between two debaters.

Debate awards

Awarding debaters is a useful tool for encouraging a good and respectful tone. At the annual Hørup debate award – named after one of the Danish newspapers, Politiken's, founder, Viggo Hørup – tribute is paid to “the curious debater with a clear focus and respect for his or her opponent.” Another award is provided by a regional TV-station, and two regional newspapers on the island of Funen, Denmark. At the end of each of ten election meetings in 2021, one of the debating candidates was awarded a Fair Play Cap. The cap was given to the most constructive debater, and they came up with the idea “because we know many voters are fed up with quarreling and a negative tone in political debates,” said TV2 Fyn chief sub-editor Malene Hammershøj Kjerstad.

Audience training

Politiken's School of Debate and Critique (Politiken's debattør- og kritikerkole) is a three-month course for 100 people aged between 18 and 30 organized by the Danish newspaper Politiken. Participants meet once a week with newspaper staff who teach them how to write op-eds. Experts, policymakers and commentators share their best advice on how to be heard. “Our clear goal is to engage more young people in the public debate, not least on the opinion pages of Politiken,” Jacob Christian Eriksen, Politiken's course manager, said. “Young people are extremely interested in debating, but somewhat insecure about how to do it. We want to give them the tools and the courage. Every year, new debate talents are born, and soon after the course we see them in the newspaper columns or on debate shows on live TV”.

In Germany, the interactive program “Streitbot” (Argument bot, www.sz.de/streitbot) by Süddeutsche Zeitung is a nicely designed technical tool to improve the standard of debate and discussion. A fictitious dispute on a certain topic is played out on screen and a user can choose between different answer options. Depending on

the selection, tips aimed at improving an argument are displayed on screen from a communications trainer. The tool, as well as being educational, can also be fun.

Dialogue bench/sofa/balcony/walk



The dialogue bench in front of the Nobel Peace Center in Oslo, Norway, creating space for a conversation. / Photo: Nobel Peace Center.

In front of the Nobel Peace Center in Oslo, Norway, you can find a peace bench, bow-shaped to bring debaters physically closer to each other. The bench is mainly symbolic but the concept has been employed to get opposing politicians to enter into dialogue and to try to reach a common understanding at the annual “Folkemøde” (people’s meeting) at Bornholm, Denmark. At a meeting in 2014, the Danish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Martin Lidegaard, and the spokesman for foreign affairs from Dansk Folkeparti (Danish people’s party), sat side-by-side on a sofa discussing the supply of energy in the EU. Alternatives to a bench or sofa can be unusual settings such as a balcony or – inspired by an expert in labor conflict mediation – two politicians at odds walking and talking as they move around a house.

Tools for online moderation

Faced with a wave of abuse from readers in ‘below-the-line’ comments responding to articles, many newspapers either reduced the number of articles open for comment or stopped comments altogether. There were other reasons too, including the cost of employing moderators.

But there are AI tools being developed – though some not yet sufficiently tested – that claim to be able to identify and block abusive comments and to pick up potential libel. A more immediate step would be to end the anonymity of those taking part in such below-the-line comments and to register if they wish to participate. Another proposal to get around concerns about cost would be to put existing staff on a rota in which they would each take turns as moderators. Readers like to see journalists join in discussion, while journalists can gain insight into public thinking and maybe even story ideas.

Acknowledging emotions in online moderation

Media organizations whose news content is hosted by Facebook and other platforms have faced problems of abuse in their comments section. A new study, led by Gina Masullo at the University of Texas at Austin’s Center for Media Engagement, offers an interesting approach when dealing with emotional outbursts in the comments sections. The method acknowledges a person’s emotions. Instead of correcting commenters’ behavior with a response like: “Dear commenters, don’t get so bent out of shape,” the study suggests another style of answer: “Dear commenters, I recognize that you’re angry, but let’s try to keep an open mind.”

This approach was tested in an experiment with both a German and an American audience on comments about the #metoo movement and climate change. They found a more positive attitude toward the media outlet’s Facebook page. In an interview with the Constructive Institute, Martin Riedl, one of the authors, said: “I think media organizations should really make use of this knowledge if they want to see a more positive debate climate on their page.”

Contact: gina.masullo@austin.utexas.edu

Other tools to help counter polarization

A new bot is redressing the gender balance by giving more space to women. Women across the world are put off by the lack of representation in articles and broadcasts, with pieces too often top-heavy with quotes from and interviews with older men. A brutal but effective way to address this is the Financial Times system. If a FT reporter files a story without quoting enough women, the software automatically sends out a warning to rebalance their stories by finding women to quote. The FT adopted the system after a survey showed only 21 percent of people quoted in the FT were women. The 'She said He said' bot analyses first names and pronouns to help identify gender. The software could also be applied to youth or people from different ethnic backgrounds.

Shaking Hands



This is the brainchild of Mikkel Gudsøe, connected to the Constructive Institute in Aarhus and a specialist in negotiation and mediation. Given so much interaction is through Facebook and other social media, he thinks that the option to just 'Like' is not constructive. He says: "When we communicate emotions in person 93% (55% body language and 38% intonation) of our communications comes from everything other than words – and the words only account for 7%. On social media platforms – we communicate primarily through words. It's not surprising that conflicts and misunderstandings can escalate."

He suggested, as an alternative to just clicking on 'Like,' a range of other expressions such as a handshake or hands reaching out or other symbols that would carry a message that we agree to disagree and part as friends.

Fact-checking

Fact-checking is an essential way to build trust. In debates, it helps moderators throw in figures and other indisputable facts. CBS did live fact-checking during a Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump debate in 2016. Agence France-Presse and Reuters are among the best at this, providing lists of stories and pictures that they have investigated and that turned out to be untrue. Both AFP and Reuters sometimes write these up as stories, which is often more effective than simply lists. There is now international cooperation between media organizations investigating what is true and what is not and sharing the results, and fact-checking specific to one issue such as the invasion of Ukraine.

5. Lessons and recommendations:

The turbine of constructive conversation

The best practice examples above use different concepts, methods and tools. What they have in common is that several factors must always work together and certain conditions must be met for the whole to work. What exactly do you need for a constructive conversation? How will it succeed in your journalistic context? We not only analyzed various approaches but learned lessons. These we have brought together in a new model, a “turbine of constructive conversation,” one that will hopefully provide orientation, inspiration and serve as a checklist when developing new formats.

There is immense energy in words, comments and conversations. This energy can fuel conflict. But it can also be used to resolve conflicts and generate ideas for a better future for society and democracy. The “turbine of constructive conversation” is intended to help generate sustainable energy for society and democracy. Journalists are, at best, constructors of such turbines. But they are also called upon to keep them running, to maintain them, or to repair them when a part ceases to function.



Turbine of Constructive Conversation (image: Kaori Kohyama)

In the center of the turbine are powerful blades that, like conversation in society, should always be in motion. Each of our ten blades represents an element essential for constructive conversation:

Listening, not just waiting to talk. If you listen actively, you really want to understand what someone says and means. This requires concentration and empathy. At the same time, it signals openness, respect and interest in the other person and their arguments. This significantly improves the climate of conversation and promotes comprehension. Every good discussion thus presupposes listening and the basic assumption “that the other person might be right” (as Hans-Georg Gadamer, philosopher, put it).

Asking, not only telling. Those who always speak too much learn nothing. However, asking (mostly open-ended) questions means becoming smarter. It is essential to better understand contexts – and what is going on inside the head of another person. This helps to avoid misunderstandings and misinterpretations. Another thing is to remain critical: do not be satisfied with simple answers.

Based on facts, not on false claims. Constructive conversation depends on facts. This applies not only to personal dialogue, but also to the discourse in society: “Without facts, you can’t have truth. Without truth, you can’t have trust. Without trust, we have no shared reality, no democracy” (Maria Ressa, journalist and Nobel Peace Prize laureate).

Nuanced, not good and evil. The world is not only black or white. There are countless shades of gray. That also applies to the spectrum of opinion. Discussions can be judged successful when participants recognize shades of gray and describe and present their arguments in a nuanced way.

Rich in different perspectives, not one-sided. Showing diversity and illuminating topics from different angles opens up new perspectives. And new perspectives lead to new insights. That is also an important step on the way to the “best obtainable version of the truth,” as the Washington Post reporter of Watergate fame, Carl Bernstein, put it.

Solution-oriented, not only problem-focused. For constructive conversations it is important not to stop at discussing the problem, but to look for possible solutions and to ask: What now? Which approaches and ideas could help? In this context it is worthwhile not only to look backward, but attentively to the left and right, up and down – and especially forward.

Respectful, not rude. The tone of a conversation can change everything – for the better or for the worse. To present views and arguments in a civilized manner and to treat each other with respect means, beyond the appropriate tone of voice, to let the other person speak, not to interrupt and not to make a personal attack, but to separate people from their opinions.

Concrete, not abstract. If you want to be understood, you have to communicate clearly. This means avoiding vague formulations and trying to be as precise as possible. Among other things, examples help clarify statements, make them tangible and more understandable for the other person.

Engaging, not boring. A good discussion is an attention magnet and thrives on the willingness of the participants to engage intensively in the conversation, especially if it takes place in public. It should also encourage potential listeners or viewers to think and join in the discussion.

Uniting, not dividing. It is important to name and explain different points of view. However, it is also indispensable to look for and at commonalities and intersections when conflicts arise. This helps to bridge differences, find solutions and ultimately enable progress.

This continuously rotating center of our turbine, which is intended to map the conversation level, is held together by a double frame. The inner frame consists of six factors important for a functioning journalistic conversation format:

Goal: The success of a journalistic dialogue format depends to a large extent on clearly defining target groups and goals. Who should be reached with the offer and how? What should the discussion

achieve first and foremost? Which success criteria are relevant – from reach to social impact? And what do we expect participants to say and contribute?

Rules: When people with different opinions meet, in the best-case scenario everyone involved learns and sees things from new perspectives or, in the worst-case scenario, everything gets out of hand. However, whether a discussion escalates or proceeds productively is not a question of fate but depends on the respective rules. They ensure that a safe democratic discourse space can emerge, as well as a varied, exciting discussion.

Moderation: A good discussion needs direction and someone to make sure the rules are followed – without favoring anyone. A good moderator not only acts as a referee but guides, organizes and sorts out strands of discussion and brings them together. The moderator asks the right questions and keeps an eye on the substantive points of contention, and also pays attention to the behavior and relationships between the participants in the discussion. He or she is empathetic, fair and solution-oriented.

Setting: Construction site or ballroom, armchair or standing, dark or bright? Rooms, including digital ones, and the positioning of the participants in them have a significant impact on their behavior and the climate of the conversation. The setting should therefore be designed very carefully to support the content-related goal of a discussion format.

Recruiting: Bringing the right issues for discussion in the media is just as challenging as finding the right people. It would be a gain for public discourse if fewer well-known voices were heard and gave way to a diverse range of voices. There are so many people who have something to say, who are a pleasure to listen to, and whose views open up new insights. Finding such people can be time-consuming – but meticulous recruiting pays off.

Training: How can we better involve young people in public discourse? How can the voice of ordinary citizens be heard even more – and at the same time improve the culture of discussion?

Some media companies are providing exemplary answers to these questions by taking it upon themselves to coach interested persons from their audience: in their own debate school, in individual training sessions before taking part in a TV show or with an argument robot that can be used to practice disputes on screen. This can be a valuable contribution to empowering people to engage in discussions more constructively and more often.

But it's not just the factors mentioned at the conversational and format levels that need to work together so that journalists can even better fulfill their role as trusted moderators of the public conversation. According to our analyses, the cultural framework in the newsroom is also of great importance for the development and implementation of new, forward-looking approaches. These form the outer framework of the turbine. The most important factors here are:

Audience centering: Journalism that wants to be fit for the future places people at the center: their needs, their concerns, their opinions, but also their wishes and ideas. Audience centering means above all listening – and remaining in conversation with the audience – and not only developing the offering *for* the people, but *with* the people. This strengthens brand loyalty and the development of content and products and secures the economic future. Audience centering is essential to ensure that journalism remains relevant tomorrow.

Omnipartiality being on everyone's side: Journalists traditionally try to remain impartial. As moderators of public conversation, they can help resolve conflicts – like mediators of conflicts between individuals or groups. What can journalists learn from them? Omnipartiality, for example. The term seeks to express that a mediator is on the side of all parties and tries to understand everyone's concerns and expectations. If necessary, she helps them articulate their concerns and expectations in order to find good solutions. Omnipartiality requires empathy: it is about putting oneself in the perspective of all parties involved without favoring anyone. This can also help build bridges and find solutions in a journalistic context.

Diversity: In too many news organizations, there is a lack of diversity, whether in terms of education, gender or social or ethnic origin. Numerous parts of society are not well represented or even not represented at all in the media. This makes it all the more difficult to reach and engage with those people and groups. Diversity must therefore be at the center of change related to content and discussion formats from the perspective of the audience. In this respect, diversity is also highly relevant for the economic future of a media company.

Transparency: Journalists need to be much more open, both about themselves and about how they specifically work, if they want to maintain the trust of the public or win it back from certain groups who believe they are biased and distort the daily news. Journalists should be detailed and open about their decision-making and sources. Why did the news editor choose one story over another? Why does he or she invite this politician to talk and not that expert? But they should also be equally transparent about their own mistakes. Transparency can help preserve journalism's greatest asset: public trust.

Trial and error: Digitization has revolutionized the media landscape. Change is not a phase. Change is the default setting of our being – and shaping it is an ongoing task for journalism. In concrete terms, this means constantly developing, testing, evaluating and optimizing ideas – or discarding them again. Without a culture of experimentation that is deeply rooted in newsrooms, change cannot succeed, because experimenting means learning, becoming better. But in the process, you should never lose sight of your goals. The Irish writer Samuel Beckett once put it this way: “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”

The above factors and all three levels (conversation, format, culture) of the “turbine of constructive conversation” must work together and should form a coherent whole, so that constructive conversation succeeds in a journalistic context. The more such turbines are in operation, the more energy is created – for society and democracy.

6. What now?

Polarization of society can corrode democracy. As we have pointed out, journalism is part of the problem because it too often intensifies spirals of outrage and conflicts. But the examples we present in this booklet also show that journalism can be – and, in many places, already is – part of the solution. It has the power to push back polarizing tendencies and can contribute to social cohesion and strengthen democracy.

It is an ongoing task for journalists to reflect on their role again and again. Today journalists are not only urgently needed to report, explain and analyze in a fact-based and nuanced manner, so as to monitor the powerful and expose wrongdoing. Especially in times of polarization, it is extremely important for journalists to fulfill their role as trustworthy intermediaries between citizens and politicians and between different groups and people across divides and to bring the whole society back to a better exchange. Journalists are needed to design, organize, moderate and to promote constructive public conversation and to find common ground and convincing solutions for relevant problems. For this to succeed, journalists must first and foremost listen better, listen louder. This also creates trust. If trust is lacking, neither journalism nor democracy have a good future.

Media outlets must break new ground, including in the development and implementation of future-proof discourse formats. That also means continuously exploring what can be learned from other professions facing similar challenges and from other media houses around the world – as we have done in this project. In the model of the “turbine of constructive conversation,” we have systematized what, according to our research, is important for promoting constructive conversation in a journalistic context, on the conversation level but also on the format and cultural levels.

The best practice examples and the tools in our booklet are intended to show that new, constructive approaches have potential. However, we are also aware that they can only show a small excerpt

from the multitude of inspiring innovations in this field. The ones listed are just a starting point, an invitation to explore the journalistic space of possibilities. We hope this little booklet will serve as a conversation starter. We would like to continue looking for formats that are inspiring, that work and that can move the industry forward – together with you. Which format or approach also deserves more attention and why? Visit us on www.constructiveinstitute.org and tell us your ideas. We look forward to your input! It's an ongoing task to further develop journalism, but more important than ever, because democracy needs strong journalism to remain viable.

Authors

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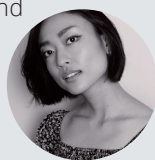
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Authors in the lounge of the Constructive Institute, Aarhus, Denmark / Photo: CI

Bad media practices and ever-increasing competition for public attention contribute to polarization. For too long, journalists have failed to listen to a public that is losing faith in the democratic conversation and the media itself.

The Constructive Institute asked some of the most curious minds in journalism to dissect the causes of polarization. They hunted for inspiring and imaginative ways in which journalists from around the world are trying to counter polarization. This booklet is the outcome.

The findings offer grounds for optimism and hope. But it is just a starting point for what is intended to be an ongoing process. Listen Louder at www.constructiveinstitute.org.

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