

Changing the Narrative for Local Journalism

Indholdsfortegnelse

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Abstract:

If local journalism is to survive, new thinking is required. The well-known and well-tested traditional models of advertising and subscriptions are declining throughout the Western world. Advertising, once the golden calf for media outlets, has long been overtaken by the big tech giants. With precise and targeted advertising, online ads are cheaper and more effective than ads in traditional media.

The subscription model also shows an apparent decline. Year after year, fewer Danes subscribe to media outlets, thus paying for journalism.

Despite several attempts to create more local journalism and experiment with formats, profitability, i.e., the media's ability to make money, still shuts down most of these attempts.

In a few places in the country, newly established local media make enough money to be self-sustaining. While this is remarkable and inspiring, it is not necessarily a sustainable model. Success is much more due to individual efforts and geographical circumstances.

The starting point is that journalism, in general, and local journalism, in particular, helps to shape and correct the democratic entities we all live in. Journalism must be objective and describe, illustrate, control, and facilitate the local community's daily life and crucial decisions to benefit citizens, society, and local democracy.

Associations that take new paths are very successful in attracting members. Hammel GF, north of Aarhus, has 5,400 paying members in a town of about 7,000. And Lolland-Falster Lovestorm, which arose in protest against the TV2 program "On the ropes in Nakskov," (På røven i Nakskov) gathered 35,000 members in a few months.

Meanwhile, several media outlets are working with a free model, where all content is available to everyone. The Guardian is the most prominent example, but several others work with various Free-for-all models.

Journalism is not free, but instead of protecting its content behind a paywall, The Guardian encourages readers who can afford it to support it with a voluntary contribution for the benefit of all.

I am inspired by the association's ability to bring people together around common interests and The Guardian's new ideas of giving away most content in the hope that those among the readers who can contribute financially voluntarily will form the framework for the thoughts that will subsequently describe a possible model for a sustainable, independent, critical, and constructive local media.

As a pilot project, the media "Fælles om Syddjurs" (Together for Syddjurs) will soon see the light of day in the municipality of Syddjurs.

Still, the vision and potential of the project are much more significant. The idea is that the thoughts behind and the model for a new type of local media can bring local journalism back to the centre of democratic conversation and citizens' everyday lives. The model and experiences should be available to everyone in Denmark, Europe, and the world. For free. Of course.

The three central elements of the new media model are that the media is connected with an association is non-profit, and should be measured on community reach instead of profit.

Civil society, local businesses, and the public sector, in this case, Syddjurs Municipality, should jointly sponsor the association to strengthen cohesion and local democracy in Syddjurs. A crucial element in this endeavour is to publish a media outlet – "Together for Syddjurs."

If market forces cannot solve the task themselves, one of the future models for local journalism may be that local communities come together and do it themselves, entirely in line with the association and cooperative idea, where we share the costs of something we collectively find essential.

Introduction

Over the past 20 years, as a local journalist, I have personally experienced the challenges the media industry faces. Getting people's attention and getting citizens to pay for a professional journalistic product is almost impossible.

As a journalist, I have observed that local and regional newspapers are becoming increasingly expensive and of lower quality.

The costs of salaries for journalists, editorial cars, office rent, paper prices, printing costs, distribution prices, and general economic fluctuations in society, combined with a drastic decline in ad sales, make publishing a newspaper costly.

As a publisher, you are forced to raise prices and reduce expenses, which can almost only be done by laying off journalists.

In my opinion, newspapers do not become worse because journalists become worse. Newspapers have become worse because fewer and fewer journalists have to produce more and more stories. At the same time, media houses cross their fingers and hope that the citizens, and thus the readers, overlook the naturally declining quality when fewer people have to accomplish more.

Of course, it is noticed.

Citizens, especially locally and in peripheral areas, experience increasingly less coverage of their region and everyday lives. Thus, from a journalistic point of view, they experience the double evil: the local newspaper becomes both more expensive and worse.

Naturally, this leads more and more people to cancel their subscriptions. This, in turn, makes the local newspaper less attractive to advertisers, who additionally get far more precise marketing to their target groups via the internet.

When I started as a newly graduated local journalist at Nordjyske Medier's local editorial office in Hobro in 2008, the editorial staff, covering three Himmerland municipalities, consisted of more than 15 journalists, an editor, a deputy editor, two duty editors, and an editor for the weekly paper. This provided the opportunity, among other things, for me to devote a large part of my time to investigating the conditions in Rebild Municipality, where vulnerable and disabled children, young people, and their families did not receive the help they were entitled to. For this work, I received the Cavling Prize in 2012. A significant reason this was possible was a well-staffed editorial team with the capacity for meaningful work.

When I left the Himmerland area centre in 2014, the number of journalists at the Hobro editorial office had nearly halved. When I met a former colleague in the spring of 2024, he told me that there is now a note in the window of the former editorial office announcing that the editorial office has

moved to Aalborg. Now, two journalists are covering three Himmerland municipalities—from Aalborg, which, mind you, is not in Himmerland.

After two years at TV2Østjylland, I was close to giving up in 2016. I was deeply frustrated by how difficult it was to be allowed to create relevant local journalism without focusing on conflicts and divisions between people. Therefore, I left journalism in the spring of 2016 for other challenges.

After three years in the European Parliament as an investigative researcher for a Danish MEP and then nearly three years as an independent filmmaker at Nordland Productions, producing documentaries, I was enticed back in 2021 by a promising local journalistic project that, for the first time in my career, thought innovatively and tried to do something different.

JFM, the second largest private owned media cooperation in Denmark, decided to establish a series of new local media in four "news deserts" in East Jutland: Syddjurs, Norddjurs, Favrskov, and Skanderborg. The "LIV" media would be published as newsletters with fewer and more thoroughly researched stories about local life. Funding was allocated for three years to develop the format.

I rediscovered my love for journalism, particularly local journalism. I was drawn back into telling relevant stories about fellow human beings in their local areas and daily lives. The citizens of Djursland responded very positively to the initiative. Still, it proved impossible to make the LIV media financially viable. 2,500 people received the newsletter, but only 200 paid for a subscription.

Soon after the establishment in 2021, I noticed that JFM's interest in the LIV media waned. The payment module did not work for long periods, substitutes were not hired during maternity leave, and the energy was drained from the project. When both Jyllands Posten's and BT's local initiatives closed shortly after each other, interest in the future of the LIV media diminished further.

Shortly after I started as a fellow at the Constructive Institute in September 2023, I was laid off. JFM closed most of the titles in the LIV format. Six months before the announced trial period ended.

I am deeply frustrated that a sustainable model has not yet been found to ensure that there can be local journalistic coverage everywhere in Denmark. The importance of journalists helping citizens in a well-functioning democracy to keep up with societal life and make informed decisions cannot, in my opinion, be underestimated.

Therefore, my project at the Constructive Institute has been precisely about this: How can we find a new narrative for local journalism so that it can once again and continuously be a central part of a well-functioning local democracy?

Context

Since the dawn of time, we humans have always told each other stories. And as Peter Plys says, I'd rather hear a story about myself.

When said by a furry and lovable bear, it's charming but holds far beyond that. If a story does not somehow relate to me, my daily life, my situation, my family, my area, my country, or my understanding of the world, why on earth should I spend time on it?

Stories help us connect in groups - some we belong to and others we do not. Stories tell us about ourselves. We pass on knowledge, belonging, and traditions, and we tell stories about others. Beyond defining ourselves with stories, they are also our access to other ways of living and thinking. Thus, stories have always been central to our development as humans, both as a race and as individuals.

As our societies grow and our horizons expand, storytelling becomes a livelihood. While there are still stories that aim to pass on knowledge and traditions through generations, stories also begin to travel over greater distances.

When a troubadour, a craftsman, or a merchant arrives in a new place, there is a growing interest in hearing new stories from new places, countries, and people. Humans always crave knowledge, which we incorporate into our opinions, attitudes, dreams, and hopes.

With the invention of the printing press, it becomes possible to distribute stories in a whole new way to the masses. Thus, newspapers emerge.

Initially, the content of newspapers had little to do with journalism as we understand it today. Denmark's first newspaper came into being by royal decree and was first published on August 1, 1666. It was written in flowing Alexandrine verse accompanied by small poetic reflections by the poet Anders Bording. The verses praised the king's achievements. But there is also a view of the rest of Europe when *Den Danske Mercurius*, as the newspaper was called, is published on two quarto sheets once a month.

With the Constitution of 1849, freedom of the press was established, and newspapers experienced a golden age for many decades. Each party has its newspapers, which, throughout the country, both nationally, regionally and locally, keep citizens informed about everything from the happenings at Christiansborg to the local assembly house in Bøvling.

Nearly every Danish household read at least one newspaper, preferably two, throughout the late 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century. For many years, newspapers have been a source of information, and traders can advertise everything under the sun in hopes of tempting newspaper readers to spend their money in their shops.

Many newspapers are sold individually on streets and squares, but subscriptions have become prevalent gradually. The newspaper is delivered daily to your mailbox or letter slot, so you are constantly updated on the latest developments in society and the world. Some newspapers are published in the morning, while others are published in the afternoon or evening. A few newspapers have both a morning and an afternoon/evening edition.

Ove Korsgaard, who is trained as a teacher, is also an author and professor emeritus of pedagogy at Aarhus University, where he has researched particularly folk high schools and democracy for many years. He says:

"A community lives off shared stories, which precisely bind people together by being the basis for different interpretations. The strength of democracy lies in the ongoing tension between conflict and consensus."

This statement clearly frames the highest purpose of journalism. Whether it is about defining us as Danes in a nation-state, Jutlanders or Randrusians, Copenhageners or Molboers, the population must be informed as much as possible to enable them to participate in democracy on an informed basis.

Storytelling still serves as an identity marker, knowledge transmitter, and cohesive force, just as it clearly distinguishes us from "the others." It distinguishes Jutlanders from Zealanders, Danes from Swedes, Nordics from Europeans, etc.

Nicola Tesla invented the radio in the late 1800s, but many years passed before it became a common source of information. The advent of radio did not significantly impact newspaper circulation, as

radio broadcasting in Denmark was occupied with high culture and not notable news dissemination as we know it today.

However, when television arrived in the 1950s and 1960s, newspapers' business model was challenged for the first time. People found something else to spend their time on. Not that newspapers were in serious trouble, but it was the first time citizens genuinely experienced alternative sources of information.

With TV2, advertisement-funded television arrived, and since then, the competition for advertising revenue has been fierce and unforgiving.

With the internet in the late 1990s, and later in combination with the smartphone in the mid-2000s, newspapers and news dissemination were severely hit. Almost like a thief in the night, the advertising money that newspapers thrived on disappeared, and the mobile phone consumed so much of people's time that it seriously disrupted the media's position as those who tell people what is happening in the world.

At the same time, anyone can be their own media. Politicians begin communicating with citizens through their profiles on social media, bypassing the media.

Many Danish media houses need to be faster to recognize the severity of the development and adapt to the new digital age. In desperation to be "digital," a tendency emerged in the 2000s and 2010s for media to give away their journalism. Danes became accustomed to journalism being free if you use the Internet.

Only later, while everyone struggles to be digitally present and relevant, do media houses establish various paywalls. Since then, the big task has been to reaccustom the population to the fact that the information they just got used to being free now costs money.

The Current State

When describing the current media landscape, there are positive and less favourable aspects to consider. Media, especially professional and journalistic media, remain the most trusted source for Danes seeking news and stories about Denmark and the rest of the world.

DR and TV2 are still accessible to almost all Danes, providing a relatively accurate framework for understanding Denmark and its developments. This is available through traditional TV broadcasting, streaming services, and their respective websites, dr.dk and tv2.dk. DR's national and regional radio stations and TV2's regional TV stations still reach many Danes. Still, both listener and viewer numbers are declining in terms of news dissemination.

The so-called nationwide newspapers still publish in large volumes. Still, increasingly, the economically and socially affluent can afford to pay for a newspaper and have the time to read it.

In other words, newspapers are becoming a form of silo, where those who read the same newspaper receive the same information, while those who read another get different information. An essential fact is that a steadily smaller portion of the Danish population subscribes to a newspaper at all.

Fortunately, media across Denmark are also developing digitally. However, the business model still revolves around getting people to pay for access to stories. Payment, in the form of digital subscriptions, is crucial for many media outlets to be able to pay the journalists who create the content.

Apart from DR and the regional TV2 stations, which, as a public media, is funded by all of us through taxes, the commercial market frames the media in Denmark.

Although the state provides various subsidies to the media in Denmark, such as media support and VAT exemptions, the press still operates on commercial terms. This means that advertising revenue, subscriptions, and market forces determine what is most profitable for the media to focus on.

It has been shown that the two primary business models for media worldwide - advertising and subscriptions - are not sustainable.

In Denmark, advertising revenue is rapidly declining, with double-digit percentage drops year over year. This is particularly noticeable in local journalism, where fewer and fewer journalists exclusively cover regional and local issues.

This means that the two traditional media models in Denmark and most of the Western world, subscription and advertising financing, face increasingly challenging conditions.

"Advertising revenue is flowing out of the traditional media houses (in Denmark). In the past year alone (2023), it has cost at least 200 editorial positions at Danish daily newspapers, and it's hard to see the light at the end of the tunnel."

- **Fagbladet Journalisten**, October 3, 2023

At the same time, local readers are also dropping off. They experience a diminishing number of local journalists covering their lives and daily activities. The same goes for the media's focus on the locals. Naturally, this leads more people to cancel their subscriptions to the local news provider.

The consequence is that regional newspapers are increasingly concentrating on the major cities with the most "customers." This means that many areas and municipalities today need consistent and ongoing coverage by a local subscription-based medium such as a regional daily newspaper. At the same time, others can look forward to the household-distributed free newspaper, which will soon disappear.

What remains is a civil society whose shared conversation, knowledge transmission, fact-checking, oversight of politicians' actions, and broader societal challenges risk being left to Facebook groups and other social media, where it is often the one with the most resources and ability to shout the loudest who gets airtime at the expense of all those who do not wish to participate in the debate and local democracy on the unregulated terms most social media offer.

Social media do not fulfil the journalistic and democratic tasks. It is different from their business model.

The number of journalists consistently engaged in local journalism is falling. The same goes for the number of local editorial offices, newspapers, advertising revenue, and subscribers. The trend is both clear and unequivocal. In the past ten years, media revenues, including local ones, from advertising have fallen by almost 90 percent, and the circulation numbers for traditional media are broadly declining year over year.

"The number of readers across local and regional daily newspapers fell by 5.4 percent from 2022 to 2023. Looking back to 2021, the decline is slightly higher, at 6.5 percent."

- **Mediawatch**, March 18, 2024

Of course, some media exceptions from the general trend exist, but broadly speaking, media as we have known them since "time immemorial" are seriously challenged.

Moreover, Danish media are facing a trust crisis concerning the population.

The number of Danes who actively avoid news is increasing. They turn off, turn away - or don't turn on. So-called news avoidance (or news fatigue) is now a reality, concludes the latest report from DR's Media Research from 2022.

This is supported by the Reuters Institute Digital News Report from 2023, which indicates that 20% of Danes often or sometimes actively avoid news. This number has risen from 15% in 2019. According to a Reuters report, it is mainly young people who do not actively seek out news. Nearly one-third of young Danes avoid the news, and the number is rising.

At the same time, a survey conducted by Epinion and the Danish Youth Council in 2016 shows that young people increasingly opt out of participating in public conversation and debate. This is often not because young people don't want to but because they have already had many bad experiences engaging in democratic dialogue.

This is especially true for young women, who, for example, often experience severe messages and deeply personal attacks on social media.

Finally, the Reuters Institute Digital News Report from 2023 states that distrust in both media and politicians is rising, which does not benefit democracy.

Thus, there are at least three challenges that need to be addressed in order to try to change the narrative for local journalism:

1. Local journalism is disappearing in many places, leaving citizens without independent and professional oversight of those in power. Information about important local issues is disappearing, and the democratic conversation becomes fragmented. It is primarily left to the unmoderated and unedited echo chambers of social media, where those who can gain the most attention often get heard.
2. There is no convincing economic model to ensure independent local journalism outside the established media houses.

3. Citizens in Denmark are gradually losing trust in politicians, media, and journalists.

These three challenges have been the basis for my project work at the Constructive Institute and the background for my course selections at Aarhus University.

Real-Life Inspiration

Empirically, I have investigated who has attempted to create new media in Denmark and abroad, who has thought differently, and what success they have achieved with it. The purpose has been to get an overview of which innovations have already been attempted in the quest for a new narrative for local journalism.

I will concentrate my experiences on six initiatives: three Danish and three international. It is recognized that many different constellations and initiatives are attempting to crack the code for a sustainable, professional, and local medium. Fortunately, however, for my project and the development of my answer to the new narrative of local journalism, I have chosen these six, each of which has excellent ideas and practices that have been particularly inspiring in the work on my project.

KunMors:

KunMors was created in 2020 in response to Nordjyske Medier first taking over Morsø Folkeblad and closing newsrooms, so there was no longer a permanent representation on the island in the Limfjord. The purpose of KunMors is to ensure that the residents of Mors, former residents, and others interested in the Limfjord island have their own medium that tells about everything happening on Mors.

It costs 69 kroner per month, or 49 if paid annually. There is no free content.

The model has proven economically sustainable on Mors. More than 1,100 residents subscribe, and a new journalist/editor has been hired, bringing the staff to two. This is quite impressive for an island with about 20,000 inhabitants.

“KunMors was created in 2020. The purpose of the website is to ensure that Mors, its residents, former residents, and others interested in the Limfjord island have their own online media that covers everything happening on Mors.”

The success is primarily due to good journalistic work every day, where the editorial team takes pride in serving the residents with all the news about their island. However, it is also evident that part of the success is due to Mors being a clearly defined geographic area with a powerful identity for those who live there.

Being a resident of Mors is something special, something people are proud of and cherish. KunMors aligns well with the residents' perception of themselves, their daily lives, and their island. If it happens, KunMors covers it. At the same time, the island is geographically manageable, making it easy and quick to travel from one end to the other. Its municipality, with political and administrative functions, makes the island a self-contained unit in several ways.

KunMors is a shining and inspiring example of how it is possible to survive as an utterly local medium and that it can be done on commercial terms.

However, the success of KunMors might be difficult to replicate elsewhere for the reasons mentioned earlier. However, the medium still serves as a beacon in a media landscape where newly started local media surviving the first two years is more the exception than the rule.

Vores Brabrand:

In the Aarhus suburb of Brabrand, there is another shining example of successful hyperlocal journalism. And the journalist is making a living from it.

Vores Brabrand has proven viable over the past seven years despite being run by just one person.

“Vores Brabrand is local journalism rethought. First and foremost, it is about you, the nearly 20,000 people who live in 8220 Brabrand. The goal is not just to deliver ‘local news’ and ‘stories,’ but also to contribute to making Brabrand an even better place to live.”

The idea is to cover only the postal code 8220 Brabrand. It is a journalistically exciting area. It includes both large, old villa areas by Brabrand Lake and the large grey apartment blocks in Gellerup

Park, which have made headlines in national media for decades partly because it is a designated ghetto under Danish law. But in recent years, the Aarhus City Council has also launched one of the world's most ambitious plans to transform an entire housing area.

Vores Brabrand covers both big and small stories. With deep and growing knowledge of the local population, institutions, businesses, sports clubs, schools, churches, and other actors in the district, Vores Brabrand enjoys increasing support.

The business model is a mix of subscription payments - about 530 residents pay 39 kroner a month - and several associations, institutions, and the church, which pay small annual sponsorships. There is no return for these sponsorships, and all content from Vores Brabrand is available to everyone. All stories are published on the website voresbrabrand.dk. The only extra benefit for subscribers is an exclusive newsletter every Friday at noon.

There is much inspiration to be drawn from Brabrand. Vores Brabrand is genuinely innovative in the context of Danish media. It combines several elements and business models into a patchwork that generates enough money for a journalist to be decently paid. At the same time, the content is available to everyone, regardless of whether they contribute financially to the medium.

However, the model relies on the commitment and diligence of this one journalist, making it difficult to replicate elsewhere.

[SønderborgNYT](#):

“We are proud and humbled by the 2023 financial results, which showed progress in every way for our local, digital medium SønderborgNYT. Growth across the board: readers, page views, revenue, web-TV views, and a positive bottom line.”

In the island of Als, in southern Denmark, SønderborgNYT has established itself as the new local medium for keeping the citizens of Sønderborg and Als updated on what's happening at all times.

On June 12 alone, twelve unique stories were posted for the readers of SønderborgNYT in Sønderborg and Als.

The medium aims to promote Sønderborg and Als. It clearly shows a love for local businesses, cultural institutions, citizens, and journalism.

It is about creating cohesion, local pride, and optimism about contributing to being a citizen of Als and Sønderborg Municipality, which has about 75,000 inhabitants.

The medium sees its role as keeping citizens informed about what's happening: where the ambulance or fire truck is heading, who is doing what and why locally. However, it is also about preparing citizens to participate in local democracy.

The medium broadcasts live videos, where a local politician is interviewed for half an hour about the upcoming economic committee meeting or with the head of Jensen's Bøfhus, who is opening a new branch in Sønderborg. Interest in these live video interviews is relatively high and provides excellent value for that part of the population interested in the specific topic.

SønderborgNYT is a commercial medium that lives off advertising revenue from local businesses. Because the medium has such a strong connection with local citizens in Sønderborg and Als, it has made itself very attractive to local advertisers. Thus, SønderborgNYT can enter a new year (2024) with a large part of the funding in place. This allows experimentation with new formats, TV, and artificial intelligence (AI).

The inspiration from Sønderborg is evident. Here, a journalist and a media entrepreneur have teamed up and created a medium that has truly placed itself at the heart of citizens' and decision-makers minds in Sønderborg and Als.

There is strong local support for SønderborgNYT from both citizens and advertisers. But it is also very demanding to deliver 10-12-14 stories a day and be everywhere all the time.

Users of SønderborgNYT have become accustomed to the site being updated throughout the day. Sixty-five per cent check in at least three times a day, numbers that most media would celebrate if they were even close.

But, like Vores Brabrand, the project relies on one journalist, placing high demands on flexibility and working hours, which rarely fall below 40 hours a week.

The advantages for SønderborgNYT are similar to those experienced on Mors. It is a defined geographical area, an independent municipality with a local business community that sees the value of advertising with SønderborgNYT. The fact that the stories are available to everyone is inspiring.

However, the business model for SønderborgNYT also underscores the importance of a medium being able to commercially seek out and gather the necessary financial support for the project locally if a model like SønderborgNYT is to be replicated elsewhere.

Santa Cruz Local:

“Santa Cruz Local is a local news organization that serves Santa Cruz County, California. Our Newsroom exists because we love Santa Cruz County. We strive to understand its story in all of its complexity.”

Outside Denmark, inspiration can also be found in new and different-thinking local media. In California, Santa Cruz Local covers Santa Cruz County, which has nearly 300,000 inhabitants in western California and coastlines to the Pacific Ocean just below the major city of San Jose.

Santa Cruz Local is the closest I have come to finding a fundamentally constructive medium that prioritizes journalism over profit and works primarily based on the questions and needs of the citizens far more than most other media.

Furthermore they strive to educate the users in how the municipality works. A basic and very important task, I think other media can learn from.

The model is the same as that of Vores Brabrand. All stories from Santa Cruz Local are free. Still, those who can afford it and believe that local journalism is essential can contribute with a monthly or annual amount.

The medium is non-profit, meaning no one makes a profit beyond the journalists' salaries.

Additionally, the medium acknowledges the population's composition and publishes in English and Spanish.

There is a website where stories are published, and newsletters are sent out a couple of times a week to subscribers.

The medium also aims to be transparent, publicly listing all donors who give more than \$5000 a year.

The editorial team consists of six people who find, write, and publish stories in English and Spanish on the website, in newsletters, and as podcasts.

With a journalistic approach that prioritizes the needs of citizens and users, Santa Cruz Local goes against the grain in some ways. Instead of being condescending and arrogant in claiming to know what people need, the editorial team listens to what the citizens want.

The Mill

In just a few years, hyperlocal media outlet The Mill has established itself as thousands of people's favourite news providers on the outskirts of Manchester, England.

"We believe in the power of proper reporting and good writing rather than chasing clicks, and we particularly focus on giving our readers the context they need to understand what's really going on. We know people are inundated with information so we purposely focus on offering quality rather than quantity."

The Mill was launched during the Covid-19 lockdown to give Greater Manchester a different kind of news coverage.

The model is part free, part subscription. Anyone can sign up to the mailing list and receive a free story every week, while subscribers who pay £7 a month can read all content.

The content is published on the website and in newsletters sent to subscribers' inboxes four days a week.

"Members also join our discussion threads, contribute to our reporting and support our growth as we build a new home for high-quality journalism in Greater Manchester."

In June 2020, The Mills' first newsletter was sent to just 23 email addresses. By the middle of 2024, more than 35,000 were reading it, and more than 2,000 were paying the £7 a month that is the backbone of The Mills' business model.

The media organisation has hired several journalists, and sister media organisations have been established in Sheffield and Liverpool, two other English cities.

The media challenge in the UK is similar to the challenges in Denmark and the rest of the Western world. In the UK, too, journalists and editors have been sacked en masse in recent years as the finances of the major media organisations have come under increasing pressure.

The Mill's paying members help support local journalism on local topics.

The model has proven worth in Manchester, Sheffield and Liverpool and is likely to spread to other major cities.

In a Danish context, 2,000 paying subscribers paying £7, or just over DKK 60 per month, is enough to keep at least one journalist employed full-time, pay for an office, IT equipment, telephone and whatever else is needed for even the most frugal digital publication.

But 2000 paying subscribers locally is a lot. The populations of Manchester, Sheffield and Liverpool are 600,000, 550,000 and 530,000 respectively. This means that the potential subscribers are far more than for most local media in a Danish context.

When jfm closed its two new local media ventures in Djursland; SyddjursLIV and NorddjursLIV, each title had around 200 paying subscribers with a population base of 37,000 in Norddjurs and 44,000 in Syddjurs. With a monthly price of DKK 49, more was needed to create a profitable medium.

KQED

San Francisco, California, is the headquarters of TV station KQED. It is a non-profit station that gets its money from voluntary donations and sponsorships. The station covers the Bay Area, i.e., San Francisco and the surrounding area, which is home to just under eight million people.

Channel 9, as KQED is also known, does not necessarily see itself as a hard-hitting, investigative, and power-critical media outlet. Not that it doesn't, but the focus is more on education, service, events that connect people in the area, and a community-based approach.

Because of the station's funding model, it's not about keeping your content unique behind some form of payment—quite the opposite.

KQED's inspiration is obvious when creating content, events, and happenings in which users can participate. This will create unity and new acquaintances, strengthening the station's position and credibility in the neighbourhood.

Hammel GF

It's not just media that can inspire new thinking about what local media can look like in the future to reclaim a central place in local democracy.

Every day, organisations in Denmark bring together 100,000s people with common interests across the country. This confirms that Danes are very willing to participate, get involved, volunteer, and pay membership fees if the purpose and meaning are clear and they can really contribute something that makes life better.

At SPORT 23, Danske Spil and DIF named Hammel Gymnastikforening as Sports Organisation of the Year 2023.

Hammel is an ordinary provincial town in East Jutland with just over 7000 inhabitants. The crazy thing is that 5400 of them are paying members of Hammel Gymnastik Forening.

The reason is simple. A sports pass that gives you access to everything your heart desires among the organisation's many offers once you've paid for your sports pass.

This flexibility means that members don't have to pay for football, yoga, or strength training, even if they attend only occasionally.

I think this is an exciting idea to transfer to the media industry. Many Danes subscribe to all sorts of things. Mobile phones, the internet, streaming services, Spotify, and more are very difficult for media to compete with.

Yet media, including local media, is built around closed subscription models. You have to pay for everything. Even if you only read the newspaper a few times a week or only want to read the news from your neighbourhood, you still have to pay for all the content the media has created that you are NOT interested in.

This makes the subscription less attractive. I'm not saying that media users should only get what they are interested in. One of the media's most essential tasks is introducing the public and citizens to topics, themes and stories they are not immediately interested in. This is the only way to expand the world and our horizons.

But, subscribing to a media you don't fully use is very expensive, even if it's only 49 kroner a month.

As journalists and media, we can try to travel with the story that it's as cheap as a well-poured pint, a cake at the bakery, or something like that, but no one wants to buy a big cake at the bakery for 49 kroner to take a single bite and throw the rest away, right?

To put it bluntly and with a fresh interpretation, Hammel GF's sports pass is the equivalent of the media industry taking a payment that gave people access to everything everywhere.

I think there is a lot the media can learn from associations' ability to gather and engage people, which Lolland-Falster Lovestorm is another excellent example of.

Lolland-Falster Lovestorm.

When TV2 broadcasts the programme "På røven i Nakskov" in early 2015, the citizens of Lolland and Falster had had enough. Once again, they were presented as the arse of the 5th division in a part of Denmark where you only live if you are a social loser, welfare client, drug addict or stupid.

According to the inhabitants themselves, nothing could be further from the truth. In a matter of months, a movement was born that, almost ten years later, still beautifully represents all that Lolland-Falster has to offer.

Lolland-Falster Lovestorm was launched on 19 April 2015, and within a few days, 22,000 people were members of the Facebook group. They wanted to show the rest of Denmark that Lolland and Falster also have strengths and potential. The mission was to show this through love via social media.

An association has long since been formed with a board of directors that drives and develops what has become almost a love storm movement.

Money is raised for events, and the association has the backing of a local group of entrepreneurs who see the idea of speaking up for Lolland and Falster.

Lolland-Falster Lovestorm has helped to strengthen unity and pride in the local area. It has succeeded in maintaining the brand as citizen-driven and maintaining awareness of the Lolland-Falster area with the four values of love, community, pride, and energy.

The academic inspiration

During my ten-month, two-academic semesters as a fellow at the Constructive Institute and Aarhus University, I have completed four courses. I chose these courses to learn more about some of the parameters I may not be so conscious of in my endeavour to rethink the future of local journalism.

My experience of my own journalism has always been that it has been thorough, nuanced, multi-sourced and tried to paint as accurate a picture of the complexities of society as possible.

But after ten months in the company of people other than journalists, I must also recognise that this is probably not the case. I mainly convey stories from my own reality to my own reality.

This means that many other realities may see my reality as inaccessible or, at worst, not aligned with their reality.

It may sound long-winded and pretentious. Still, it's one of the most important lessons I take back to the "real world" after ten months at the Constructive Institute, where there has been time for just this kind of reflection.

In my version of the local media future, a common concersation about the most impotant issues is the most impotant. That makes reach is the goal. Not revenue. With that in mind, I have to consider how a local media model can reach and include everybody in a community.

The courses I have taken are:

Social classes: A relic of the past or more important than ever?

Political legitimacy and value conflicts

Social media and communication

Conflict transformations.

In the following, I will focus on two courses that contributed most to my project of rethinking a narrative for local journalism.

Social classes: A relic of the past or more important than ever.

With a feeling in the back of my mind that I'm probably not very good at communicating with groups in society other than my own, this course piqued my curiosity.

"This seminar focuses on theories of classes and social groups and will address three interrelated questions: 1) What are classes and social groups, i.e. how can they be defined and delimited? 2) What do classes and social groups do, i.e. what meaning or effect do they have? and 3) Are social classes

a relic of the past, or are they more important than ever in the way we understand ourselves and others?"

The points made during the course were many and eye-opening. It applied theory, research, and words to many things I may have subconsciously known but not acted on regarding journalism and communicating with the world.

At the Constructive Institute, one of the guiding mantras is that journalists should see the world with both eyes—not just the negative and not just the positive. Reality is always somewhere in between. However, from the Social Classes course, I realised more than ever how important it is for a journalist and communicator to be able to see the world through the eyes of others.

What does their reality look like? What do others care about? What is important to them? And do they even understand what we journalists and media constantly try to tell them?

After a long and thorough introduction to different social classes, their starting points, values, and the difference between economic classes and cultural classes, I was struck by a guest lecturer's focus on language as an indicator of class.

Not an upper class, a middle class and an underclass, but a class division about the vocabulary you have grown up with. How do you understand cognitively? What do you take in, and how should things be communicated to different groups of people (classes)?

After that lesson, I found one of my favourite and most well-told stories from Djursland. It's about the rise of the global sea level and its specific impact on Ebeltoft.

I'm very proud of this story. It is accurate, nuanced, factual, visual, and filled with sources that each contribute in their own way to the story of the climate-proofing of Ebeltoft that is necessary in the coming years.

My boss was happy with the story. The mayor of Syddjurs and several other sources praised the story for being factual and thorough.

However, when I put the article in a Lix counter after the course on the importance of language for communication and understanding, there was a cash payment at checkout number one.

"Lix is short for readability index. It is a measure of how easy the text is to read. The Lix is calculated based on the number of long words (over six letters) and the length of sentences (number of words between each period)."

My Lix number in the article about the need to protect Ebeltoft from future sea level rise was 54.

- ≥ 55 Challenging, academic level literature, legal texts.
- 45-54 Difficult, e.g. non-fiction books, popular science, academic publications.

It goes without saying that a Lix number of 54 in a text that is more than 10,000 characters long and contains two fact boxes, seven sources, and 17 images is quite a mouthful for the reader in Syddjurs.

Privately, I'm married to a woman who, among many other things, is a trained NLP therapist. We have often discussed how differently humans absorb knowledge.

Some are digital and need clear and concise facts. Others are auditory. Still others are kinaesthetic, and still others are visual.

In other words, it's pointless to communicate a story in only one way if the mission is for as many people as possible to enjoy it and the knowledge it brings with it.

Together with the rest of the course's exploration of other classes' different perceptions and conditions, this knowledge remains central to my efforts to develop a new narrative for local journalism.

Conflict transformations

The glasses were completely different in the Conflict Transformations course. In relation to constructive journalism and the three main concepts we work with, Conflict Transformations was a direct and academic extension of those concepts.

"The purpose of the course is to provide the student with an understanding of different phases of conflict, with a particular focus on their transformation and ending (...) Special emphasis is placed on enabling the student to analyse the relationship between the weight of the past, the challenges of the present and the visions and utopias of the future that drive both conflict and conflict resolution. Such knowledge creates the basis for the student to examine and analyse concrete conflict processes in order to bring forth creative rather than destructive solutions and changes."

Conflict transformation is a part of peace research where the focus is always on what can move a conflict towards resolution. It's about understanding all the elements a conflict can consist of beyond violence, weapons, death and destruction.

Cultural values. Language, music, literature, land, resources, social conditions, governance and everything else that plays a role in a conflict.

Changing a conflict requires the parties to understand each other so that they are willing to change the status quo—rarely to a new perfect situation but to a different situation that can then form the basis for a new transformation and so on.

This is to reach a situation where the parties in the original conflict feel heard, seen, and recognised and can accept the situation, moving to a new starting point.

Translated to the world of journalism, it sits alongside the first and second pillars of constructive journalism, which focus on solutions and nuances.

Especially the perspective of seeing a conflict (a journalistic story) through three different lenses was inspiring and directly transferable to journalism and a new narrative for local journalism.

To summarise, conflict in the here and now does not benefit anyone. It can be described and explored, but it follows the vital process of figuring out where the parties to the conflict would like the conflict

to go from the medium-term perspective. Finally, transforming the conflict from a long-term perspective is the Utopia the parties would like to achieve.

However, given that Utopia does not exist, any transformation of a conflict always ends up somewhere else, which can naturally become the starting point for new conflicts.

Another key learning from the course is that conflicts are necessary for development. Thus, conflicts become the starting point for change, which, for me, is a new way of looking at conflicts, especially in a local journalistic context.

If the focus of a conflict story can also be about the exciting and interesting places a given conflict can take us, it will, all things being equal, mean more focus on solutions and change than on the conflict itself.

The new narrative

So, what will it be when my ideas and thoughts over ten months are combined with time for reflection, debates with fellow journalists, inspiration from the countless guests in the Constructive Institute lounge, study trips to the US and Kenya and four exciting courses at Aarhus University?

In autumn 2023, the first thoughts of a new business model for local media started to take shape.

I had just been fired from jfm's local venture in Djursland, which needed to be financially viable. However, I find it hard to reconcile myself with the idea that a municipality with around 40,000 inhabitants should not have a media.

In Djursland, the local free newspaper is still available. Unfortunately, as the national figures show, it's only a matter of time before the business model that combines a physical paper newspaper with advertising revenue is a thing of the past in the Danish media landscape.

Inspired by the power of associations to attract and bring people together, combined with the idea that everyone must have access to the same information if local democracy is to flourish, a new vision of what the local media of the future could look like has emerged.

It's been crucial for me to consider my future bid for a sustainable local media independent of profit. I have always believed journalism is too important to leave to commercial forces. If the journalism profession wants to be the fourth estate, then, like the other three estates, it should not be set up to make money.

This is not to say journalists should not be paid for their work. Of course, they should, but it shouldn't be the purpose of a media organisation that it can "pay off".

In my proposal for a new construct for local media that fulfils the mission of impartiality, constructive journalism, and a central part of local democracy, I try to combine the best of community life with the best of the idealistic media that still exists.

My proposal for a local media construct is not an attack on commercial media. It is an attempt to rethink ownership, publishing, and journalism in a local area where commercial media cannot financially survive.

I want to avoid local, geographical areas in Denmark, Europe or the world becoming so-called news deserts, where no journalists report on people's lives and everyday life, no one passes on inspiring stories, and no one holds the powerful and responsible accountable.

To make my thoughts concrete, the following describes my thoughts and ideas about what a new local journalism model, combined with constructive journalism ideas, might look like.

Community cohesion and the dissemination of stories should be the criteria for success instead of money. In a way, the idea goes back to associations and co-operatives, which has created a lot of excellent and sustainable progress in Denmark.

The model can also be used elsewhere, as it does not depend on geography but on the commitment and dedication of local people, businesses, and the public sector to succeed together.

The project is located in Syddjurs, where there is currently a free newspaper, but otherwise, there is no continuous journalistic coverage.

This is a summary of the results of my ten months at the Constructive Institute and Aarhus University in the form of a concrete proposal for a new narrative for local journalism in Denmark and elsewhere in the world, where commercial media must give up.

Project "Fælles om Syddjurs" (Together for Syddjurs)



A democratic and local journalism pilot project

Free, critical media is one of the essential components of a well-functioning democracy. Journalism allows citizens of a society to scrutinise their rulers, question the economic priorities of common resources and uncover unjust or illegal conditions. Journalism also allows citizens to expand their democratic horizons and gain insight into other people's ideas, thoughts, and lifestyles—different ways of prioritising.

At its peak, free and independent media and journalists proclaim themselves to be part of a fourth estate that oversees the legislative, executive and judicial branches on behalf of the citizens.

That's all well and good, but free media is only accessible and exists to the extent that it is possible to earn money to publish it, either through subscription or advertising. No matter how refined and ideological thoughts and values lie behind any media publication, there is also a business model.

This means that the "fourth estate", as opposed to the other three branches of government - legislative, executive and judicial - is almost always dependent on selling enough subscriptions or adverts.

The consequence is that there is no free, critical media in places in the country where it is not possible to sell enough subscriptions or adverts. This leaves more and more areas in Denmark needing independent journalism.

There may be enough ad revenue to fund a free weekly newspaper, if there is one. As everyone has realised by now, advertising revenue has plummeted over the past twenty years with the advent of the internet and the resulting endless opportunities to reach all of our pockets with targeted and personalised advertising via our mobile phones.

It's also increasingly difficult to convince subscribers to pay more and more for the local newspaper, if there is one at all.

Is it the media's responsibility or our unwillingness as citizens to pay?

The answer is not the most important thing. What matters is how we ensure that there continues to be a shared democratic dialogue and journalism in the growing number of areas in Denmark where traditional media is giving up and withdrawing.

New formats and journalistic ventures have been attempted in some of the major news areas. However, experience from JP/Politiken, BT, and jfm shows that these initiatives close down relatively quickly because they are too expensive to run and "sell" too little.

Local subscription media is in decline, and advertising-funded free newspapers across the board are following the same path. This leaves more regional areas and municipalities in Denmark without objective and independent journalistic coverage.

However, local citizen groups are emerging on social media, which are excellent at binding cities or smaller neighbourhoods together. In many ways, this is a welcome development and a new platform for cohesion and community. However, more is needed to compensate for the absence of journalism.

In other words, solutions need to bring local journalism back to the centre of democracy in the tension between citizens' willingness - or unwillingness - to pay for journalism and democracy's need for a shared conversation between citizens, institutions and those in power.

The shared conversation in a geographical area, such as Syddjurs Municipality, is also crucial for creating a stronger sense of cohesion within the municipality and helping to strengthen the experience and feeling of being part of a larger community regardless of geography and ultra-local affiliations.

The pilot project "Fælles om Syddjurs" will challenge the premise and commercial mindset that areas where it is not possible to make money from journalism can do without.

"Fælles om Syddjurs" will challenge and encourage civil society in Syddjurs Municipality to rethink the narrative and function of local, present, critical and constructive media.

Instead of creating yet another media based on citizens' willingness to pay a subscription, the pilot project "Fælles om Syddjurs" will investigate if and how it is possible to rethink ownership, publishing and financing of a media in Syddjurs.

The purpose of "Fælles om Syddjurs" is to:

- Increase cohesion and sense of community in Syddjurs.
- Strengthen local democracy and the opportunity for a shared conversation about what matters.
- Ensure information equality by making media content accessible to everyone and on various platforms such as SMS, Messenger, Facebook, Instagram, etc.
- AND involves citizens, civil society, the business community and the municipality in developing "Fælles om Syddjurs" and, ultimately, the common geographical entity, Syddjurs Municipality.

In other words, citizens, civil society, businesses and the municipality must be able to see the challenges and potential of a media owned and operated by the local community and its institutions based on the constructive, critical and independent virtues of journalism that characterise free and independent journalism.

In addition to ensuring independent, constructive journalism in Syddjurs, the pilot project is an attempt to rethink the model for local journalism in general.

It must be created with the citizens, for the citizens, and be based on the journalistic and constructive virtues that ensure objective and factual information, information equality, and the opportunity to participate regardless of which media you, as a citizen, seek your information on.

Therefore, the aim is also to experiment and gather knowledge that can eventually benefit other municipalities or geographical areas - not just in Denmark but potentially anywhere else in the world.

Grants initially fund the pilot project, but in the long term, citizens, civil society, businesses and Syddjurs Municipality must also be able to see the potential in continuing the support of "Fælles om Syddjurs" when the pilot project ends.

Conclusion

My version of a new narrative for local journalism has three central elements.

1. I recommend it to be non-profit.
2. I recommend it to be published by an association driven and motivated by representatives from pillars of the community; civil society, local business and the municipality.
3. Reach is the new KPI. To create a common conversation you need everybody to participate.

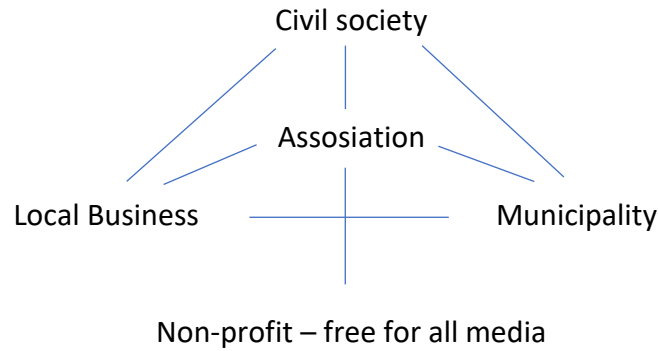
AD 1) I recommend the media to be non-profit, because the idea of journalism never has been about money and profit. It is about connecting communities and humans by storytelling, inspiration, troublefinding, correct facts, scrutinizing power on behalf of the public and telling stories about the important things, so every citizen in a community can make good decisions.

By removing the bottomline profit you increase trust. The media is not about money.

AD 2) When I suggest that the media is published by an association, it has to do with the fact, that the local community in my opinion has to be committed for a local media to strive in this model.

If nobody want to engage and nobody want to commit, a local media has no chance to succeed.

The association can be the link between a local media and the public. That media should be the peoples but without the peoples ability to control the editorial decisions.



The media has to be free and independent – editorely but also has to earn the communitys trust to be a credible additive to the everyday local life.

Civil society, local businesses, and the public sector, in this case, Syddjurs Municipality, should jointly sponsor the association to strengthen cohesion and local democracy in Syddjurs. A crucial element in this endeavour is to publish a media outlet – "Fælles om Syddjurs" – free for all and on a variety of digital platforms.

If market forces cannot solve the task themselves, one of the future models for local journalism may be that local communities come together and do it themselves, entirely in line with the association and cooperative idea, where we share the costs of something we collectively find essential.

Ad 3) The core task for journalism is to facilitate and correct society. Facilitate a common conversation about society by telling stories about the important issues, discover and uncover problems, inspire, point to solutions, engage, and hold power responsible.

But a common conversation is only common if everybody in a community is invited. That's why everything published should be free for everybody. And that's why a future local media in my opinion has to present stories on a variety of platforms.

It is not up to people to find the local media. It is up to the local media to find people.

I suggest, that local media focus on less stories, told in a variety of ways and widely on every available platform. And I suggest, that local media experiment with AI technology in the task of making different versions for different platforms and different users, without laying off the editorial responsibility.

Trust is still the most valuable currency in journalism.