Between the sharp angle and the scientific limitations:

Understanding potential barriers to researchers in the news media – and a tiny attempt to bridge the possible gap

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Content

Intro: what is this report (not) about?

Over several years, different aspects of my work have consistently pointed in the same direction: the encounter between journalists and researchers. I've engaged with this topic in multiple ways - first, in my own role as a news journalist at outlets such as Ritzau, Altinget, and Kristeligt Dagblad, where I've called countless experts as sources for articles; second, as a press officer at the Faculty of Health at Aarhus University, where I've collaborated with numerous researchers to communicate new knowledge; and third, as a lecturer at the Danish School of Media and Journalism, where I've taught hundreds of journalism students how to interview experts. In other words, I've been on both ends of the phone line and have therefore gained a fairly broad understanding of what unfolds on both sides - be it uncertainty or enthusiasm.

In this report, I will alternate between drawing on my own experience, making observations from my year as a fellow, referencing selected scholarly articles on the topic and incorporating input from five qualitative interviews, I've conducted with researchers as part of this project.

The structure of the report is as follows:
In this introduction, I begin by outlining the scope of what the report covers, and, just as importantly, what it does not cover.
I will then argue why the topic is important enough to warrant an entire fellowship report, after which I'll delve further into my own experience to explain the foundation of knowledge I bring to the subject and what gaps in that knowledge I have attempted to fill through this work.
On that basis, I will describe in very concrete terms how I intend to use this new insight when I return to my job after the fellowship and once again begin teaching journalism students how to conduct interviews with experts, and specifically researchers who are only part of the broad category.
All of this culminates in my modest attempt to improve the encounter between researchers and news journalists - a new analytical tool for the journalism students and a typology for the barriers that may deter researchers from participating in interviews.
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So, this report is about **news journalism**. **Not** science journalism. In the latter, mutual understanding between journalists and researchers is, to a much greater extent than in the world of news journalists, already in place (Reed, 2001). News journalists, on the other hand, are often generalists without a specific beat, and are therefore constantly required to familiarize themselves with new subject matter in a short amount of time due to constant deadlines. While the science journalist is accustomed to communicating complex topics based on varying levels of research quality and scientific limitations, the news journalist typically tends to move away from complexity and toward simplification, with as few limitations as possible - if we are to paint it in broad strokes.

The science journalist's focus is science communication, while the news journalist may simply be looking for an "expert source" to lend authority and credibility to a story - and may not always distinguish between the different types of experts out there, which is, frankly, a bit of a mess. My colleagues Kresten Roland Johansen and Jakob Dybro Johansen (Johansen & Johansen, 2020) mapped this out in an analysis showing that nearly half of the expert sources quoted in Danish daily newspapers are privately employed analysts or representatives from, for example, banks, think tanks, and interest groups. Only about half of the so-called experts are thus independent, university-affiliated researchers. The need to better equip our students to make these distinctions is, therefore, rather obvious.

So the greatest tension - and therefore, in my view, the most interesting place to see whether I might help create slightly better conditions - is exactly where the problem seems most pronounced in the literature: the meeting between the news journalist and the researcher. Research points to a number of structural and cultural tensions between researchers and news journalists, especially when it comes to communicating complex scientific knowledge to broad audiences. I will return to this in more detail, but in short, one could say that while researchers work long-term with a focus on both precision and limitations, news journalists are driven by deadlines, demands for clicks and the need for sharp angles. This can lead to a risk of simplification and misrepresentation, which in turn can generate frustration and mistrust (Peters, 2013; Reed, 2001, Schmidt & Mørk, 2022)

An example of exactly this kind of frustration and tension from this year emerged when a group of fellows from the Constructive Institute visited our fellowship program at the Aarhus Institute of Advanced Studies (AIAS). There, a talk on science journalism was given by Swiss fellow Samuel Schlaefli, and the audience consisted of the other fellows who are researchers from all over the world. One of them spoke up and, clearly frustrated, shared an experience she had had with a journalist who had already settled on an angle before even contacting her. The researcher had felt that the journalist tried to force her into that angle no matter what she said. Around the room, people nodded in recognition.
And this was definitely not the first time, I heard that negative narrative from researchers.

So, no matter how you look at it, it certainly can't hurt to try to create better conditions for the meeting between news journalists and researchers. And this is precisely what's (kind of) new in my report. Because when it comes to science journalism, expert sources in Danish media, and the relationship between the media and researchers, there is (fortunately) already plenty of literature out there. My own modest contribution, then, is to focus on how we at DMJX can further strengthen our teaching. This is something I plan to address when I return to teach first-semester students, where the focus is on news reporting.

This report does not offer generalizable findings. It does, however, through all the above mentioned research offer two concrete teaching tools for DMJX:

1) A new typology to understand potential clashes / gaps between news journalists and researchers.
2) A new template to work with source analysis before interviewing.

Why is this topic worth one more report?

First, I want to declare that I come from a normative standpoint: I believe our role as an educational institution is to create the best possible conditions for researchers to participate as knowledge sources in relevant journalism. After all, if, say, a vaccine researcher doesn't pick up the phone when a journalist calls about possible side effects, there will almost certainly be other voices, other "experts" with an agenda, who will pick up the phone and may base their statements on feelings rather than knowledge.
So: how can journalists best enrich public discourse with the best possible knowledge? We do this, among other things, through interviews with researchers, at least when done thoughtfully. But even though the claim that knowledge is important for the quality of democratic discourse is hardly controversial - more of a given - here's (a longer) justification from
Michael Bang Petersen, professor of political science at Aarhus University, whose research specializes in political psychology, and who also serves as Director of the Danish Democracy and Power Study (Magtudredningen 2.0), currently taking stock of Danish democracy, including the media's role and precisely the participation of experts in the media. He explains why it's important to include researchers in journalism and not any so-called expert:

"*A central aspect of having an informed public debate is that we know what's true and what's not. The societal institution with the highest standards for defining what is true is the research community, and that's why it is absolutely crucial that it contributes. Not just to say what we do know, but equally to clarify what we don't know. First, the researcher's knowledge has been peer-reviewed by experts. Second, researchers are thoroughly trained in how to define truth. And finally, there is a system of sanctions: if you say something that's wrong, the institution will hold you accountable. There are many people in public debate who are referred to as experts, but they often don't have the same qualifications - and they're not subject to the same level of scrutiny or consequences*."

Just to add a little nuance, since it is of course not that simple: more facts is not always the solution.

As Stuart Soroka (2006) has shown – and told us about when visiting the lounge at Constructive Institute – people are generally more responsive to negative information than to positive or neutral content, a phenomenon known as negativity bias. In the media, this can amplify emotional reactions and attention. Combined with motivated reasoning – the tendency to interpret information in ways that confirm pre-existing beliefs – even well-intentioned, factual communication can be perceived as threatening or antagonistic when it contradicts people's core values (Kahan, 2013; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010).

As journalists, we can use this insight to be more careful about how we present facts, so we don't risk deepening the very divides we aim to bridge.

A good example is the vaccine debate during COVID-19. It became clear to me early on that more facts and more researchers in the public debate did not automatically create trust or connection between the group of Danes who distrusted authorities and media, and the group who had high levels of trust. On the contrary, hammering away with facts often made the gap even wider. That topic, of course, deserves a full report in its own right - so I'll leave it there.

My main point is this: more knowledge does not necessarily lead to greater unity, but it still remains a guiding principle in my work to promote better public use of knowledge through news media – with all the nuances as always ☺

My own experience

Let's rewind to 2012. I was a political reporter at Kristeligt Dagblad, working on a news article about the European integration process against the backdrop of an EU in crisis. It needed to come together quickly, so I called a researcher I knew always picked up the phone - and who was great at explaining things in a clear and accessible way in low lix. A dream expert.
That was a common approach for me as a news journalist: I had deadlines to meet, and I needed sources who could speak in a way that readers with no prior knowledge of the subject could easily understand. In fact, for almost any topic, I knew exactly who to call if I wanted to get a story done before the daily deadline.
But this time, things didn't go quite as planned - and that's why I remember the episode so clearly, and with a sense of shame. The researcher was Marlene Wind, and I just needed her to say something obvious on the record, something that would neatly support the angle I had already chosen. Instead, I got a well-deserved talking-to: why on earth should she spend her time stating something I could easily have read myself? Oops.
I felt embarrassed because I suddenly saw that she was right. I had lazily and thoughtlessly called just to get her to say what I had already decided needed to be said.

I drew on this personal experience when I later worked as a press officer at the Faculty of Health at Aarhus University – with for example life science. When writing press releases based on new research findings, I could explain very concretely to researchers how journalists think and work methodologically. On that basis, I tried to craft the sharpest possible angle and translate the findings into language that was as accessible as the research could reasonably bear, striking a balance between including enough nuance and limitations, without making it so complex that no journalist would pick it up.
It was in that role that I truly began to understand what's at stake for researchers, an understanding I would have benefited from when I was working as a journalist myself, and which I've since brought into my teaching at DMJX.
I learned, among other things, just how much weight researchers give to the judgment of their peers. While journalists are focused on communicating to the public and care relatively little

about what colleagues might think, researchers (speaking in general terms) tend to be most concerned with their academic peers and the fear of stepping outside accepted boundaries and losing credibility. That's why limitations and precision are so crucial—as Michael Bang Petersen also pointed out in the opening of this report.
This insight taught me to weigh every word carefully, very carefully when writing press releases or pitching research stories. An example:

"Researchers find a possible overlap between symptoms before and after the HPV vaccination"[1]

Not exactly a catchy headline, but it is correct. I keep trying to balance the scientific limitations and the nuances in the subheading:

"*A new study from Aarhus University shows that girls who are referred to one of Denmark's HPV centres had already visited the hospital more frequently when compared to other girls who were also HPV vaccinated. Furthermore, some of the most frequent diagnoses among the girls who were referred are similar to the most common suspected HPV side effects*."

I guess a more tabloid journalist would have dreamt of something like:

"*Now proven: HPV Side Effects Were Pure Fantasy*"

Maybe it would generate clicks and applause from the news editor, but it just wouldn't be accurate. My approach as an educator is therefore to find that sweet spot between including enough nuance and complexity, and still acknowledging that someone on the other end needs to want to click and read the story. To find that sweet spot – or the best possible compromise - I believe it's essential for researchers to understand the conditions journalists work under—and for journalists to understand why researchers may hesitate to engage.

[1] https://newsroom.au.dk/en/news/show/artikel/researchers-find-a-possible-overlap-between-symptoms-before-and-after-the-hpv-vaccination/

We're now – finally - approaching what I see as my own contribution to that increased mutual understanding. First, I'll describe what I've done so far in my teaching—then what I plan to do following my fellowship.

Back at DMJX after a year at Health I made an educational podcast[2] where I interviewed my former Health-colleague Nanna Jespersgaard (also a journalist and former DMJX-teacher) about what typically goes through a researcher's mind when a journalist calls. That podcast became a staple in our teaching, used year after year when our students were preparing to interview expert sources. On my to-do list now is an updated teaching podcast, this time based on the insights and findings from the present report.

In my role as academic coordinator for the postgraduate diploma program in specialized journalism at DMJX, I developed a new elective course in science journalism[3] in collaboration with Videnskab.dk. Methodologically, we based the course in part on Videnskab.dk's 11 good tips for journalists[4], which include an introduction to the evidence hierarchy. Anyone who reads and works from that guide is already in a solid position before calling a researcher.
I have also taken part in a masterclass program for journalism students at DMJX[5] and early-career researchers at Aarhus University, with the same overall goal: to practice both interviewing and being interviewed. As part of the interview training, we've used a so-called "source evaluation tool" at DMJX for years, something I will now take a closer look at.

[2] https://soundcloud.com/dmjx-test/forskerpodcast-nanna-jespersgaard
[3] https://dmjx.nu/public/D2024-0021367.pdf
[4] https://videnskab.dk/kultur-samfund/undgaa-de-vaerste-broelere-videnskab-dk-udgiver-guide-til-journalister/
[5] https://www.dmjx.dk/aktuelt/nyhed/journaliststuderende-og-unge-forskere-hjaelper-hinanden-med-forskningsformidling

A new source evaluation tool for interviewing researchers

Based on everything outlined above, I now want to do something very concrete, something that can help create a greater sense of security for researchers participating in public debate. Having had a foot in both camps, I hope I can help bridge the gap in mutual understanding, and perhaps, in the best-case scenario, contribute to more informed (news) journalism by making researchers feel more confident about picking up the phone when a news journalist calls.
What I'm referring to is a new version of our source evaluation tool, something I've long wanted to improve, but haven't previously had the time or the input to do so.
At DMJX, we always ask students to fill it out before conducting an interview, and this is what it looks like today:

Topic / issue:

Source: GOAL: TYPE OF SOURCE: (EXPERIENCE-BASED SOURCE, PARTY SOURCE, EXPERT SOURCE)		
Dimension	**Description**	**Evaluation**
Relevance	Has tried, has experience with, has opinions on, or has knowledge of the topic.	
Competence	**Formal competence** Power, e.g., position to speak on behalf of a company, organization, etc. **Actual competence** Knowledge, e.g., education, experience, insight into the topic	

Tendency	The source's tendency. Favoring an ideology, political stance, religion, scientific direction, etc.	
Dependence	Dependence (personal, work-related, financial) on groups, companies, organizations, etc	

Considerations BEFORE the interview based on role and issue (and research on the source):

Motive for participating	Self-interest? What's in it for me? Public interest? Serve the public?	
Desire to control the interview	Responsible party/a source with an agenda? Does the source have its own agenda? Will the source dodge questions? Will the source try to control the interview?	

Include considerations about proximity, accessibility, and representativeness, if relevant.

(Especially with sources that are hard to categorize clearly as party/expert/experience-based)

Proximity	**Primary sources** Documentation/Own experiences **Secondary sources** Refers to other sources' documentation/others' experiences	
Accessibility	**Primary** Closest accessible source **Secondary** Not the closest accessible source	
Representativeness	Generalizability. Can the source represent more than themselves? E.g., case: Is it a typical case? E.g., sample: Can it be generalized to the population? (Formal representativeness. E.g., association chairperson: Does the chair know what the members think?)	

However, I don't believe the tool fully captures the most important parameters that a journalist or journalism student ought to reflect on. In my experience, students often end up more confused than informed when working with the current version, for example, when it comes to the concept of "accessibility." What does it actually mean for a source to be the "most accessible" or "not the most accessible"?

I've long wanted to retire the existing tool, but haven't had anything solid to replace it with. So in an effort to both frame journalistic source criticism and increase understanding of researchers' circumstances, I've developed a new version of the tool in close dialogue with a number of researchers. I plan to introduce it to my colleagues at DMJX when I return, and we will collaborate on finalizing a new version together.

Methodologically, I started by conducting a series of structured conversations with people working in both research and journalism, including press officers at Aarhus University and researchers I've engaged with throughout the year. I combined this with the experience described earlier in the report to produce an initial draft.

I then carried out five semi-structured interviews in which I asked participants to read through the draft version of the tool. I encouraged them to think aloud as they read, offering feedback on what might be missing and what they thought of the individual parameters.

This will be the focus of the next section, where I'll present and discuss the new draft of the evaluation tool.

The interviews

First an overview of all of whom were selected in a completely non-scientific manner and are affiliated with Aarhus University (AU), due to Constructive Institute's collaboration with the university.

For the interviews my research questions were: **What is the relationship between (news) journalists and researchers? What are the potential barriers today?**

And my selection criteria were as follows:

- The majority should come from the life sciences, as my fellowship focuses on that area. Moreover, an extra layer is added when talking about communication, since life sciences are quite loosely defined, which makes it even more interesting.
- The group should include both media-experienced and less media-experienced researchers.
- I had to have a personal interest in their research fields.

Here they are (their quotes are translated from Danish with a little help from AI):

Overview of Interview Participants

Name	Title	Department
Dorte Rytter	Associate Professor	Public Health
Christina Bisgaard Jensen	PhD Student	Public Health
Jakob Giehm Mikkelsen	Professor	Biomedicine
Michael Bang Petersen	Professor	Political Science
Rune Slothuus	Professor	Political Science

All interviews were conducted face to face in the researchers' offices at Aarhus University and lasted approximately one hour. All interviews were transcribed. While I did not formally code the material using a strict scientific method, I have organized the data thematically.
I also made a clear distinction between when I asked about personal experiences and when I asked about research-based knowledge. This is particularly relevant for Rune Slothuus and Michael Bang Petersen, whose research areas are highly relevant to the focus of this report.
The interview guide is included as an appendix.

The new source evaluation tool – draft

Since we're on the topic of the source evaluation tool, this is the first area I want to focus on based on my interviews.

First, I will present my draft of the revised tool along with the thinking behind it. Then I will highlight relevant quotes from the five interview participants.

Source and topic:	Xxx and xxx
Purpose:	I would like the IP to explain / elaborate / justify xxx
Selection of the source:	Do you have the right expert - or just someone on speed-dial? Might others have more relevant expertise? Are there dissenting views?
Media experience:	Is the researcher used to being quoted? Do they stay strictly within their field, or do they offer opinions and interpretations? Be aware of the role you're casting them in.
Academic level and evidence quality:	What weight or experience does your source carry? Has the source conducted research on the topic? Does their statement concern a specific study or the wider topic? What type of evidence is at play? How extensive and clear is the existing research?
Topic sensitivity:	Is the topic sensitive, potentially controversial, political, or otherwise likely to cause concern for the researcher?

Independence / conflict of interest:	Are there financial interests or agendas that need noting
Paradigms / Schools of thought	Are there conflicting academic frameworks or schools within this field?
Bias-awareness:	Have you considered representation and the risk of confirming your pre-existing beliefs?

It's important for me to emphasize that what I'm presenting here is very much a work in progress. Whether the tool should ultimately take the form of a checklist or table, and whether the parameters I've included are the right ones, is still open for discussion. That said, judging by the reactions of the interview participants, I seem to be on the right track.
I won't go through each item one by one, as many of them will be fairly self-explanatory to readers of this report. However, I would like to briefly highlight the parameter "sensitivity of the topic", as it emerged as a recurring concern in the interviews, and because it is a relatively new consideration in a teaching context.

The political or societal sensitivity of a topic:

- Certain topics, such as climate change, vaccines, technology, gender, or race, are politically charged. It is a good idea for the student to be aware of that when asking for an interview.
- Researchers may fear being placed in a political context or used in ideological debates.

In contrast, a field like biomedicine isn't immediately seen as politically sensitive. While areas like gene editing and animal testing may stir public emotion, much of the work is highly data-driven and "dry". But as Professor Jakob Giehm Mikkelsen points out, where he has been in more sensitive areas. As a member of the Danish Council on Ethics (Etisk Råd), he has experienced being contacted by journalists looking for quick reactions on deeply sensitive topics such as abortion, euthanasia, and surrogacy.

"*These are extremely sensitive issues, with direct relevance for politicians, and I've sometimes declined to participate. It would be helpful if the journalist had done a bit of groundwork beforehand—like thinking, 'I'm calling a professor in genetics to talk about surrogacy, so he may be a bit out of his depth*."

It can become even more difficult when there are multiple levels of evidence and when the stakes are particularly high, such as in vaccine research for instance. In these cases, the topic "sensitivity" parameter in the new source evaluation tool becomes especially important.

"*If a mouse has been treated with a new technique, journalists naturally want the researcher to say when that treatment will be available for humans. And if we then say, 'we're nowhere near that yet,' well, that's not exactly the story they want to write. There's a gap there*," says Jakob Giehm Mikkelsen.

With the new version of the evaluation tool:

- I'm taking the first step toward moving away from a one-size-fits-all approach to source criticism. Since sources vary greatly, students will instead be required to apply different kinds of analytical thinking depending on the type of source they're working with.
- I aim to push students to make conscious, critical decisions about which sources to choose, not just rely on the most convenient or familiar expert.
- Beyond simply filling out the tool before each interview, my intention is that students also receive instruction in the barriers I have identified throughout the work on this report (and which I will return to later).

Taken together, I believe this approach will better prepare students to contact researchers and communicate research findings more accurately and with greater nuance. And in turn, it might just help researchers feel more comfortable agreeing to be interviewed, because the student is well-prepared and has done their homework.

A (surprisingly?) nuanced view of journalists

Before starting my series of interviews, I expected to hear stories of frustration and distrust toward journalists. That is often what is voiced when the topic of journalists comes up.

But though scientific literature throughout the years has been talking about a somewhat negative relationship with incompatible logics and stereotyping between news journalists and researchers (Peters, 2013; Reed, 2001), the negative view was not something that all of my interview persons could recognize from their own experience with news journalists. On the contrary, they have overall positive experiences, accepting and acknowledging that journalists operate under different conditions. The most cautious is the researchers working with sensitive topics like vaccines and side effects.

As Michael Bang Petersen puts it:

"During the COVID crisis, I spoke with an exceptional number of journalists and had very, very few experiences that I, in good old Aarhus fashion, would call annoying (træls, red.)"

He continues:

"My experience of the negative consequences was relatively limited. Some of the things I've shrugged off might not have been so easy for others to ignore, but overall, my impression is that the specific interactions with journalists – including news journalists – have, at the end of the day, been positive."

And of course, there are nuances to the story and a variation depending on whether the research area is sensitive – where researchers have to be more alert – or more "boring" / not potentially controversial. And the perception of an interaction is, of course, highly individual and therefore difficult to generalize from. Further down in the report, Michael Bang Petersen will explain what he means when he says he "shrugs it off" – perhaps there is something in that approach that could inspire other researchers.

All five interviewees could recall individual cases where, for example, articles was far from sufficiently nuanced, something had been clearly misrepresented, or where journalists approached them with a fixed angle. But what stands out most in their memory are the situations where fellow researchers have spoken publicly about topics they don't actually have research-based knowledge about, in other words, where the journalist may have forgotten basic source criticism. So yes, negative examples certainly exist. But overall, their experiences and reflections on journalists are relatively positive.

The most negative experiences are associated with live radio, where the interviewees often feel that they're mostly there to fill airtime, despite having to spend quite a bit of time preparing and getting familiar with the topic or the angle in advance. This applies to both professor Jakob Giehm Mikkelsen from department of biomedicine and professor Rune Slothuus from department of political science, who are both committed to contributing to public debate, but also wish to be contacted by journalists who have actually done some preliminary thinking, selection, and analysis beforehand, otherwise, it starts to feel a bit like the time I lazily called up Marlene Wind.

Let's hear what some of the other interviewees said about their experiences with journalists. Professor Rune Slothuus is not one of the most used sources from political science, he has "predominantly positive experiences":

"*I've had some experience that were very positive. The positive ones are about communicating my own research or when I get to share my own academic perspectives and points. Then there's another, broader category where I often say I don't have time – namely when I'm asked to comment on current events*," says Rune Slothuus, who, incidentally, has a tiny bit of editorial experience himself from many years ago and therefore may be more familiar with the working conditions of journalists than most.

"*For me, it's a matter of time prioritization. And if I'm just being asked to comment on a single opinion poll, I'm not really sure it's even necessary to have an expert involved. I simply can't get the important things done if I'm constantly being interrupted, so I'm a bit selective about what I agree to*," says Rune Slothuus.

Jakob Giehm Mikkelsen is also conscious of what he chooses to spend his time on when he says yes or no to interviews:

"*As researchers – or at least that's how I see it – we tend to tone things down a bit, whereas journalists sometimes have an interest in doing the opposite, for instance in headlines. But overall, I'm not dissatisfied, and many journalists are well-informed. Journalists can't be expected to know everything about every topic in the world, but as the person being called, it makes a big difference when you get the sense that there's already some level of understanding*."

The field of vaccination is, for obvious reasons, one of the more potentially sensitive areas. For one thing, there are strong emotional forces at play among citizens who are highly critical of vaccines, something that was seen in full force during the COVID-19 pandemic.
PhD student Christina Bisgaard Jensen has only had one media appearance, which occurred when she, in collaboration with the communications department at Health, issued a press release about risk factors for self-reported menstrual changes following COVID-19 vaccination. Every word was chosen with care, and prior to her interview with Radio IIII, she received thorough guidance. She was alert of journalists' "clever tricks" and approached the situation with caution, as it is a "conflict-ridden" topic.

"*I was nervous. I had prepared how to stay within the boundaries. Careful, careful, careful. I went into the interview with the concern that the journalist would try to get me to say something about the vaccine's effect on menstrual disorders – rather than the risk factors*," says Christina Bisgaard Jensen.

"*It's important that one's research findings are understood correctly. Some people who are already skeptical about vaccines might interpret what you're saying differently than it was meant*," she says. The interview went well, she adds.

My interview with her was conducted together with the more media-experienced Dorte Rytter from the same department. She is being very cautious when meeting journalists, based on experience and her specific research field. Dorte Rytter has previously spoken with journalists about COVID-19, endometriosis, and the HPV vaccine, in connection with research investigating whether there might be alternative explanations for the symptoms some individuals experience:

"*I remember being interviewed by a journalist who wanted me to say that it wasn't the vaccine. And we simply couldn't say that – because that wasn't what we had investigated. And in relation to endometriosis, I've experienced a journalist who wanted me to point fingers at general doctors. And I wouldn't do that. That was the worst experience I've had. I've also had many conversations with journalism students about endometriosis, and it's often like: 'When it's so underdiagnosed, can't we then blame the doctors?' And with the HPV vaccine, there was a counter-narrative that these girls were just being hysterical, where I felt that journalists wanted me to say the side effects weren't caused by the vaccine – and I didn't want to say that, because I didn't want to contribute to stigmatization. But I've also had good experiences, so I've come to feel more at ease with you (journalists, red.)*.

Both Christina Bisgaard Jensen and Dorte Rytter explain that the controversial 2015 documentary De vaccinerede piger (The Vaccinated Girls), which had serious consequences for HPV vaccination rates in Denmark, still lingers in the back of their minds and shapes how they approach journalists today.

"*We're very cautious in how we interpret our findings – probably more cautious than many others*," says Dorte Rytter.

Mind the three gaps

In addition to the different parameters in the new source evaluation tool, I have identified three potential culture clashes that are worth being aware of on both sides of the phone. After trying to explain I will sum them up in a simple model. The three clashes are based on my combined experience from both fields, existing literature, and insights from the five interviewees. Here they are - with slightly catchy titles for now: Sense of time. Fear of peers. Angle clash.

1: Sense of time

"It's not supposed to be art – it just has to be done." That's a sentence journalism teachers have more or less shouted at their students for decades, as they've trained them to produce news. Time pressure has always been a core element in journalism education, because it reflects the reality for many journalists: delivering fast.

I've experienced this myself – for example, sending so-called "clock bulletins" (klokketelegrammer) from Ritzau's Bureau just seconds after an event. That kind of sentence might make many researchers cringe, as the publishing process in academia – with peer review and revisions – operates on a completely different timeline.

This is where clashes can occur: when a journalist needs a quick quote and ideally also wants to fit in a quote check before deadline. It would be helpful if both sides had a better understanding of each other's sense of time, to find some kind of middle ground between a few seconds and several years.

Another point regarding time is that researchers are often extremely busy and must prioritize between, say, writing a crucial grant application or agreeing to an interview. This, too, is worth knowing for journalism students before they reach out. In short: don't waste their time with unprepared or lazy requests – like the one I once made to Marlene Wind – but show that you've done your homework. Use the new source evaluation tool to demonstrate that.

2: Fear of peers

When a researcher declines an interview, it's not necessarily due to mistrust of the journalist, but often a reflection of their awareness of how their statements will be received within the

academic community. Several interviewees mention that they consider what their colleagues will think when they appear in the media. Academic recognition is closely tied to precision and loyalty to one's field, and the fear of speaking too broadly, too simplistically, or on something outside one's own research can weigh heavily.
This is especially true in fields with clear disciplinary boundaries or political implications. If journalism students understand that both academic credibility and professional reputation are at stake in an interview situation, this may improve the collaboration.

"*As a researcher, they say your only capital is your reputation*," as Michael Bang Petersen puts it.

And Dorte Rytter adds:
"*I do think about what my fellow researchers will think (...) It really matters what your peers think. In extreme cases I honestly think: wow, that could make it hard to get research funding. But of course, that's an extreme case. Still, it raises the question: what kind of reputation do you end up with? Are you seen as solid and thorough, or as someone just chasing a quick headline?*"

Jakob Giehm Mikkelsen agrees:
"*I definitely also assess it when others speak publicly: 'What does he actually know about that? Funny that he's commenting on this when it's not even his research area...' I've been trained to hold my tongue if I don't know what I'm talking about*."

3: Angle clash

The sharper the angle, the better the news. That has always been the classic approach to journalism. And when something needs to be razor-sharp, too many nuances, limitations and caveats can feel inconvenient.
On the other hand, the researcher stands there with all their scientific uncertainty and necessary reservations – and sees the sharp angle as a compromise with the truth.

"*We're often told, 'we can't include all those limitations,' but it's precisely the limitations that matter. That's actually where the journalist could start: 'We understand you have some*

reservations – should we get them out in the open so we don't end up overselling this?' And of course, we also need to accept that we can't get every single limitation into the final piece," says Dorte Rytter.

Michael Bang Petersen says:

"*It makes it harder to be in an interview at times, because journalists often push – it might be toward a particular angle or to test how far you're willing to go. At one point, I experienced it as a conflict between me and the journalist. But I've since adopted a different perspective: that the journalist is actually just doing their job – probing to find out what can be said in an article. Still, it can feel like a conflict*," he explains and adds:

"*It's important to understand that uncertainty is not a bug, but a feature of being a researcher. So when a researcher gives an answer that seems hesitant or inconvenient, it's not because they're being difficult or refusing to play along with the media format – they're doing exactly what they're employed to do: being very clear about what they know and what they don't.*
We know that declaring uncertainty increases trust in communication – or at the very least, it doesn't reduce it."

So, here it is:

Three (potential) clashes between researchers and news journalists

Clash	Researcher perspective	Journalist perspective
Sense of time	Long processes, careful wording, peer review, no rush.	Fast deadlines, instant responses, "done not perfect."
Peer panic	Concern about how statements are received by colleagues.	Focus on audience impact, not professional reputation.
Angle clash	Nuance, caveats, and scientific limitations are essential to accuracy.	Sharp angles and simplification is the go-to way of storytelling.

After the fellowship / my contribution

When I return to DMJX after the fellowship, I plan - as previously mentioned - to complete the new source evaluation tool together with my colleagues. In order to anchor a new tool in our teaching, all colleagues naturally need to be on board. I'm not entirely sure whether it will ultimately take the form of a template or something else, let's see.
But for now, I simply want to emphasize that it must include elements that require students to engage with the three clashes, the tool itself, and to reflect on the role they cast the researcher in.
Here, I will draw on the knowledge developed by my colleagues Kresten Roland Johansen and Jakob Dybro Johansen (2022) in their work on the relationship between researchers and journalists. They identify three key roles expert sources are typically cast in:

1. to provide factual knowledge (constative),
2. to provide assessments, speculation, interpretations (evaluative),
3. to provide action-oriented input such as recommendations, requests, calls to action, or proposed solutions.

I will suggest incorporating this type of reflection into the revised teaching on how to work with researcher sources as part of the new tool.

Although my interviews were conducted in a reasonably systematic way and included a fair spread among informants, I make no claim that the results are anything more than indicative. That doesn't make the insights useless - not at all - but to use them as the basis for broader claims would require a more representative selection and a larger number of informants. A survey study could also be interesting in order to get a clearer sense of how researchers in general perceive and experience interactions with news journalists. In other words: more research is needed.
That said, I do believe that my attempt to capture nuance and understand the barriers gives a reasonably broad picture.

To sum up, my concrete contribution is:

• An updated source evaluation tool tailored specifically to researcher sources, along with suggestions for how it can be didactically integrated into teaching.
• A set of empirical insights into the barriers between researchers and journalists – reframed as three archetypical clashes – which can be used directly in teaching and, ideally, help students approach researchers in a way that makes them feel more at ease.

Engaging with the meeting point between journalists, the public conversation, and researchers is by no means new. What I nevertheless believe I can contribute with is something slightly different, precisely because I narrow my focus specifically to news journalists who are generalists and therefore not necessarily well-equipped to understand research, the world of researchers, or the specific topic they need to produce a quick story about. I will argue that there is a need for more understanding here.
In addition, I focus on how this knowledge can be applied directly in teaching at DMJX and, hopefully, within a short time have a concrete impact on how future journalism students approach and engage with researcher sources – and hopefully also when they enter journalism practice.
Whether this will lead to the increased sense of security among researchers when the telephone rings remains to be seen - this could, of course, easily call for yet another study in the future. But I am pretty sure that it will be a beneficial new tool at DMJX.

And maybe, hopefully, a little broader than that☺

A warm thank you to the institute and to the Novo Nordisk Foundation for making this fellowship possible. And to all the people we met along the way – in Denmark, Nairobi, and San Francisco – thank you. Researchers, journalists, and so many others who generously shared their time, perspectives, and knowledge. And of course the staff at Constructive Institute.

Ida Skytte Asmussen, Constructive Institute 2024–2025

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Bilag 1

Interviewguide Hvordan er forholdet mellem (nyheds-)journalister og forskere? Hvad er de eventuelle barrierer i dag?	
Briefing og formalia	Formål: Først forklare projektet kort. • Jeg sidder her med en liste med spørgsmål, som jeg skal igennem. Det betyder, at jeg måske undervejs skifter emne for at sikre at vi kommer hele vejen rundt. Hvis der er noget, du gerne vil omkring, er du selvfølgelig mere end velkommen til at bryde ind undervejs. • Jeg optager interviewet af hensyn til den dokumentation, og fordi det efterfølgende skal transskriberes og sammenlignes med de øvrige interviews. Du er velkommen til når som helst at bede mig slukke optageren. • Har du nogen spørgsmål, inden jeg starter optageren, og vi går i gang?
Indledende spørgsmål	• Vil du præsentere dig selv? Hvad arbejder du med? • (Vil du kalde dit arbejde life science?)
Erfaringer med medier og potentielle barrierer	• Hvad er din erfaring med journalister? • Herunder, hvis ikke det kommer naturligt: hvilke gode oplevelser har du haft? Mindre gode?

	• Hvad kunne holde dig tilbage ift at deltage? (Kom ind på shitstorms, konfliktframing, fastlåste vinkler, peer-tanker… mv. Belyse alle mulige potentielle barrierer.)
Skema	• Nu kunne jeg godt tænke mig at vise dig et konkret bud på, hvad jeg vil bede studerende arbejde med inden kontakt til forskere. Vil du læse og kommentere undervejs? Både på det, der står samt det, der burde stå?
Brev (kun vist til de første, eftersom jeg droppede idéen undervejs)	• Jeg underviser kommende journalister og vil gerne lave et håndskrevet brev til dem fra jer – lidt som en gimmick / nugget af den viden, jeg samler ind om forskerkontakt. Hvad ville du ønske, de vidste og havde tænkt over, inden de ringede til dig?
Er der noget, du gerne vil tilføje, inden jeg slukker optageren? Er noget, du vil tilføje nu, nu hvor optageren er slukket?	
Afslutning	[Debriefing..)