

How the city's newspaper can become a newspaper of its people

written by Christian Olesen,
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In 1937, the Aarhus City Council announced an architectural competition to determine the design of the city's new town hall. Arne Jacobsen and Erik Møller presented a proposal consisting of three connected, grey modernist buildings. Their design won the competition, and the next day, the people of Aarhus could see the drawings on the front page of *Århus Stiftstidende*.

The reactions poured in.

"I don't believe that a building like this, which will be located on the city's finest square and at the highest point in the inner city, appears monumental enough. I think it's missing a tower," declared engineer Børge Bak, among others, to *Stiften*.

The debate was nuanced, but the vast majority of Aarhus residents felt that the town hall looked wrong. In the following months, the newspaper was filled with letters to the editor and commentary.

At first, the city council took the criticism in stride and defended the drawings. But as the city's newspaper continued to report on public opinion, the politicians' stance began to shift.

Eventually, a furious Arne Jacobsen and Erik Møller were sent back to the drawing board. They returned with a more monumental town hall, clad in Norwegian Porsgrunn marble and featuring a more pronounced copper roof. And so, the people of Aarhus got their tower. A rather peculiar one, to be sure—but suddenly it stood tall.

Today, Aarhus City Hall is one of the country's most iconic buildings—mainly thanks to the tower. Some love it, others hate it, but without *Århus Stiftstidende*, it wouldn't exist.

That's why, to me, the town hall tower has always symbolized the purpose of *Århus Stiftstidende*. As journalists, we must listen to the people of Aarhus and hold those in power accountable. And if we do that well, Aarhus becomes a better city. And maybe we'll get a tower to look at along the way.



So, what's the problem?

Århus Stiftstidende has existed since 1794 and has played a significant role in Aarhus' transformation from a mid-sized provincial town into Denmark's second-largest city—with big-city mentality, culture, business, and its fair share of problems.

Today, the newspaper's articles are still widely read at City Hall and among the city's decision-makers. But a large portion of Aarhus residents seem to have lost interest and barely even know who we are.

When I joined the editorial office at Banegårdspladsen in January 2022, *Stiften* had around 70,000 daily online readers, with the goal of reaching 100,000 that same year. Today, the number is lower, and the goals have been adjusted downward—partly due to Facebook's new algorithms and a number of other factors.

Despite unstable readership figures, the business is actually doing quite well.

Over the past three years, *Stiften* has delivered solid profits, and in 2024, the number of digital subscribers grew by 60 percent. At the same time, the decline in print subscriptions has been slower than expected, and media subsidies have increased significantly in recent years. The advertising market remains challenging, but not as much as in other parts of the country.

However, the economic surplus of recent years doesn't seem to be benefiting *Stiften*'s readers or newsroom much. Over the past three years, there have been four rounds of budget cuts, resulting in layoffs and eliminated positions. This is because JFM, the parent company, is generally struggling to meet its financial targets, leading to cuts across the entire mediagroup under its wings.

Meanwhile, as *Århus Stiftstidende*'s newsroom and readership shrink, Aarhus continues to grow.

The municipality now houses 373,388 residents, and in the past year alone, the population increased by 6,000. That means Aarhus is now growing at the same pace as Copenhagen.

At the same time, the City of Smiles has changed dramatically. New neighborhoods have emerged, with high-rises and cultural offerings; the city center has expanded, and the people of Aarhus are evolving along with their city. Aarhus is now Denmark's second-youngest city, and a wealth of new industries and jobs have emerged.

Aarhus has become a true metropolis—and that actually makes *Århus Stiftstidende* unique in the Danish media landscape.

The newspaper is the only true metropolitan paper in Denmark. That is to say, *Stiften* today focuses exclusively on the city of Aarhus and its suburbs. In the past, the paper also

covered the rest of East Jutland—and, at one point, even national politics and international news—but now stories from places like Ebeltoft and Skanderborg are few and far between.

Other newspapers like *Fyens Stiftstidende* and *Nordjyske* do cover metropolitan areas like Odense and Aalborg well—but they also include articles from smaller towns like Kerteminde, Thisted, and Assens, making them regional newspapers, just like *Århus Stiftstidende* once was.

This makes it difficult to directly compare *Stiften* with other local or regional media in Denmark.

One might be tempted to compare *Stiften* with Copenhagen-based outlets like *Politiken* and *Berlingske*. But those papers still have a primarily national focus in much of their journalism, so that comparison doesn't hold either.

In other words, *Stiften* is something of an anomaly in the Danish context—and it's hard to point to any place in Denmark that has found success in a similar market.

The consequences of the Newspaper War

At one point, *Stiften* held a near-monopoly in Aarhus, but over the years, numerous competitors have tried to challenge its dominance. Especially over the past 30 years, the newspaper's position has been repeatedly put to the test.

In 1998, *Jyllands-Posten* launched *JP Aarhus* as a supplement to the newspaper. The main goal was to attract customers away from *Århus Stiftstidende*, leading to a competitive media market that earned the nickname “the newspaper war.”

Stiften and *JP Aarhus* battled for advertising revenue and subscribers for years. This led to heavily discounted ads that undercut the advertising market, along with various subscription offers that were likely unsustainable in the long term.

While the newspaper war raged in Aarhus, free newspapers suddenly swept across Denmark throughout the 2000s. These also featured plenty of quality journalism, but the monetary value of journalism was further devalued—since all content was now free and, quite literally, thrown onto the streets.

The devaluation was cemented further as journalism moved online, where nearly all content remained free up until recently.

Over time, new competitors have regularly popped up in Aarhus. For instance, *BT Aarhus*—which disappeared again after a short period. Now, there are reports that *Frihedsbrevet* is considering opening an office in the City of Smiles.

Today, *JP Aarhus* has all but vanished and only exists as a shadow of its former self. Stiftens primary competitors today are *TV2 Østjylland*, *Din Avis Aarhus Onsdag*, and *MigogAarhus*.

TV2 Østjylland stands out as a particularly strong competitor. They have increasingly invested in digital journalism and written articles, all while receiving 75 million kroner annually from the national budget and producing entirely free content.

The consequence of the newspaper war and the many competitors over the years is that *Århus Stiftstidende* has been forced to sharpen its journalism and cut costs wherever possible. This may have led to the newspaper falling behind the city's development and losing focus on what the people of Aarhus actually need. That, at least, is my analysis.

On the upside, the intense competition has meant that Aarhus has, for years, been the most thoroughly covered city in Denmark—and it still is today.

On top of the competition came a new media reality, where the entire industry has been disrupted. Now, media outlets compete more for people's attention than for their media consumption. Today, streaming services and social media are just as significant competitors as *JP Aarhus* once was.

As a result, there's been an increased focus on data and performance metrics in journalism—to produce the content that performs best. In many cases, numbers now dictate which stories get told.

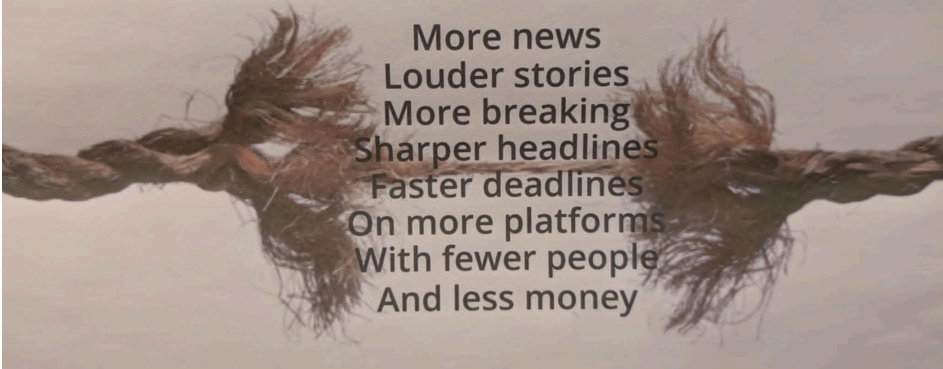
At the same time, *Stiften* has taken a more tabloid approach. That's not necessarily a bad thing, but in order to outperform the competition, the newspaper has become sharper in nearly every area and has trimmed the fat.

Have we become too sharp?

Our journalism has no value if no one reads it. In the fight for readers' attention, we've sharpened our headlines and fine-tuned our editorial angles. We also stopped systematically covering certain topics, which are now only reported on sporadically—because they simply didn't attract many readers.

On top of that, journalists are facing more demands. They're expected to write more articles per day, take photos and videos, work with AI, write analysis pieces and opinion columns, and foster more public debate. In recent years, there's been a tendency to add more and more responsibilities—without taking anything off the plate.

News Media Strategy



More news
Louder stories
More breaking
Sharper headlines
Faster deadlines
On more platforms
With fewer people
And less money

But sometimes, we become so sharp that people cut themselves on us. You can see it in the comments section on *Stiften.dk*, on Facebook, Reddit, and in emails from readers. There, the criticism is often aimed not at the article's content, but at the journalism itself—the angle or the headline.

Of course, our journalism should spark debate. But ideally, it's the substance—not the method—that stirs the people of Aarhus.

This is especially evident with editorial opinion pieces, where criticism frequently rains down on the writer. That criticism often ends up being directed at *Stiften* as a whole, even though our regular journalists have nothing to do with the editorials.

At the same time, sharp opinion pieces are often read by a large number of people. But it's hard to say whether they're reaching the readers we want to attract—or whether these pieces might be pushing potential new subscribers away.

Just the other day, an acquaintance told me that he once considered subscribing to *Stiften* because of our coverage of urban development and mobility. But then he read an editorial in which an editor was angry and wrote that “things are all wrong” and that “politicians need to step up.” After that, my acquaintance lost interest in subscribing and remained a free reader instead.

So the question is whether these opinion pieces add value to *Stiften*—or whether they create barriers to the rest of our editorial content. I believe in the latter.

Are People Tired of the News?

According to the annual *Digital News Report* from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 23 percent of Danes sometimes or often avoid the news.

That means more than one in four Danes actively avoids the news. The reasons are usually explained as: news ruins people's mood and creates anxiety; the stories feel irrelevant to users; and news coverage offers little hope or no solutions.

Denmark, however, performs quite well in the report—especially in terms of public trust in the media. Local media also tends to do better in many of the statistics, and it's often said that local outlets are less affected by the phenomenon of *news avoiders*.

After all, *Århus Stiftstidende* doesn't report on the war in Gaza or Ukraine. We don't publish daily images of Donald Trump or bombed-out cities. Many of the things that drive news fatigue are simply not found in our publication.

On the other hand, we may still suffer from the same negative bias as most other media. A conflict-heavy story usually draws more readers—especially when the words “chaos” or “madness” appear in the headline. So we do these kind of stories, because the current system rewards such journalism in the short run.

At times, it can be hard to recognize the Aarhus portrayed on *Stiften.dk*. Not because individual articles are inaccurate, but because the overall picture painted by our coverage can give the impression of a city in decline—one that's dysfunctional or falling apart.

That couldn't be further from the truth. The people of Aarhus have probably never had it better, and the city itself has likely never been more exciting or full of opportunity than it is today.

Here it is worth mentioning that as of late, *Århus Stiftstidende* have seemed to focus more on a constructive approach.

So maybe it's worth considering a better mix of stories. A few years ago, Carey Morewedge, a professor of marketing at Boston University, told the news site *Vox*:

“If there's enough negative information, it can reduce one's motivation to return to that site. It can negatively affect the reader's well-being. In the long run, it may be better for these sites to offer a more balanced mix, including some positive information.”

Research shows that even people who say they want positive news are more likely to click on negative stories. But that doesn't help much if they end up in such a bad mood that they stop visiting the site altogether.

Of course, we must report on the negative. We must hold those in power to account and pursue rigorous, critical journalism. Constructive news alone isn't the answer. But maybe we should focus more on adding nuance—on exploring possible solutions to Aarhus's problems.

That might not generate many clicks in the short term, but in the long run, it could help attract and retain subscribers. A healthy mix of stories might encourage people to return to *Stiften*, rather than tuning out due to a persistent negative slant.

Who are we, really?

I'm currently in the process of interviewing a number of 30–50-year-olds in Aarhus, as this is the new target audience for *Århus Stiftstidende*. The newspaper still has a strong hold on older readers, but something has gone wrong in recent years—we haven't managed to capture the attention of the slightly younger generations. It is partly due to the demonetization of journalism in the past 25 years but I also believe *Stiften* has lost some of its identity along the way.

When younger generations make purchasing decisions, they often care deeply about brand value. A strong brand can create trust and loyalty, and consumers are often willing to pay more for a brand they believe in.

For example, DR brands itself on broad and neutral coverage. *Politiken* is known for high quality, creativity, and a cultural focus. *Berlingske* has a business-oriented slant, a sharper tone than other national outlets, and a clearly conservative profile. *Zetland* is modern, calm, and offers clarity—plus, it's a leader in audio journalism. *Ekstra Bladet* is fast, sensational, and easily accessible.

But what is *Stiften*? Maybe slightly conservative, focused on urban development, AGF (the local football club), and food—but otherwise, it's a bit all over the place.

My analysis is that *Stiften* has a branding problem. First of all, many people in Aarhus don't even know what our brand is—and frankly, I'm not entirely sure either. Are we producing journalism that people in Aarhus can actually relate to? Do we even look the part?

A simple solution to the latter would be to change our visual identity. *Stiften*'s look is outdated, generic, and has long been in need of a refresh. But that's not something editorial staff can influence directly. So what can we do?

Instead, we could change the editorial profile. Maybe we, as a newsroom, should work on sharpening our direction—and with it, our brand. Imagine if every reader could sense that all our articles, videos, and photos came from the same editorial mindset. Not political values or opinions, but a clear and recognizable style and journalistic approach.

For example, some people subscribe to a publication like *Zetland* not just because of the content, but because it aligns with their values and their desire for a “calmer” news experience. They want to follow a media outlet's particular *take* on what's happening in the world rather than they want to pay to access the information the media provides.

A strong brand can also act as a lifestyle marker—and right now, it's hard to see how *Århus Stiftstidende* signals anything unique about someone's lifestyle. Sure, subscribing to a local newspaper might suggest that you care about your community. But any local paper could offer that. So what makes *Stiften* different?

Aarhus is now big enough that it's no longer "just" a local community. That means *Stiften's* brand needs to offer something more. And that begins with journalism.

Will AI save us?

Stiften has mastered online journalism with rapid live news coverage, breaking news banners, photos, and video. But now, our entire existence is being disrupted again.

The AI revolution is underway, and after a visit to Silicon Valley in the spring of 2025, it's clear that AI will be much bigger and more transformative than I had anticipated. Our entire society will change more profoundly than it did due to the internet or the smartphone. Some people are afraid, others excited.

Already, we are seeing layoffs in several industries because AI can handle jobs that humans used to do. The tech sector is especially affected, but soon this will spread to other parts of society.

The newsroom at *Aarhus Stiftstidende* will also change. Many of the tasks we journalists perform today will be done by AI and tailored to readers' needs and habits.

In recent years, there has been a growing expectation for *Stiften's* journalists to produce more articles to keep the site active. But many of the quick news stories can be handled by AI—especially reports based on police logs, press releases, and similar content built on easily accessible written information. The same applies to coverage of city council agendas, for instance.

So, soon we'll be able to produce even more news, even faster. But the question is whether that meets the needs of Aarhus residents.

I haven't been able to find any studies suggesting that Danes want more news or more information. On the contrary, many people want less—but more relevant and balanced—news. People want an overview and guidance. Today's society is so full of information and decisions that everything quickly becomes overwhelming.

Perhaps AI can help create overview articles, morning briefings, and the like.

AI could also become a valuable tool in other areas of journalistic work—and already is for several editorial staff members at *Stiften*. But I doubt that AI is a lifeline.

We've recently seen how *Politiken* made errors in a profile of an author due to AI. Similar cases have happened abroad. There are even media outlets that publish only AI-generated news. For example, the American outlet *Hoodline* operates in 42 U.S. cities without any real journalists behind the bylines. There may even already be Danish examples of purely AI-run media.

I'm not convinced we should fully embrace the AI wave. Perhaps this is actually the chance to become something different—and brand ourselves on that. *Aarhus Stiftstidende* could instead publicly commit that all content on *Stiften* is written by humans, and that our journalists do not use AI at all. In this way, we could build more trust in ourselves as a media outlet and use it as a strong part of our identity.

Of course, one could also decide that AI is only allowed to handle police reports and press releases, and that these types of stories are published as secondary pieces on the site, while everything else must be created by humans.

For example, JFM already has guidelines on when AI-generated illustrations may be used, to ensure readers don't mistake them for reality.

David Barstow has won four Pulitzer Prizes as a journalist for *The New York Times*. I met him at the journalism department at UC Berkeley, where he runs an investigative journalism program for some of the most talented young journalists in the U.S.

David Barstow believes we should be cautious with AI use. He uses it in investigative journalism to sift through thousands of documents—a task that used to be extremely time-consuming for many journalists, but can now be done with the blink of an eye.

However, he doesn't think journalists should use AI to write. On the contrary, he has forbidden his students from letting AI write.

"Writing is suffering. Writing is thinking. And I want my students to suffer through every sentence and think about each word they put on the page," he told us.

What can we learn from other media?

But if AI is not the solution, and if we want to do something other than just sending more and more news out to fewer and fewer readers, what should we do?

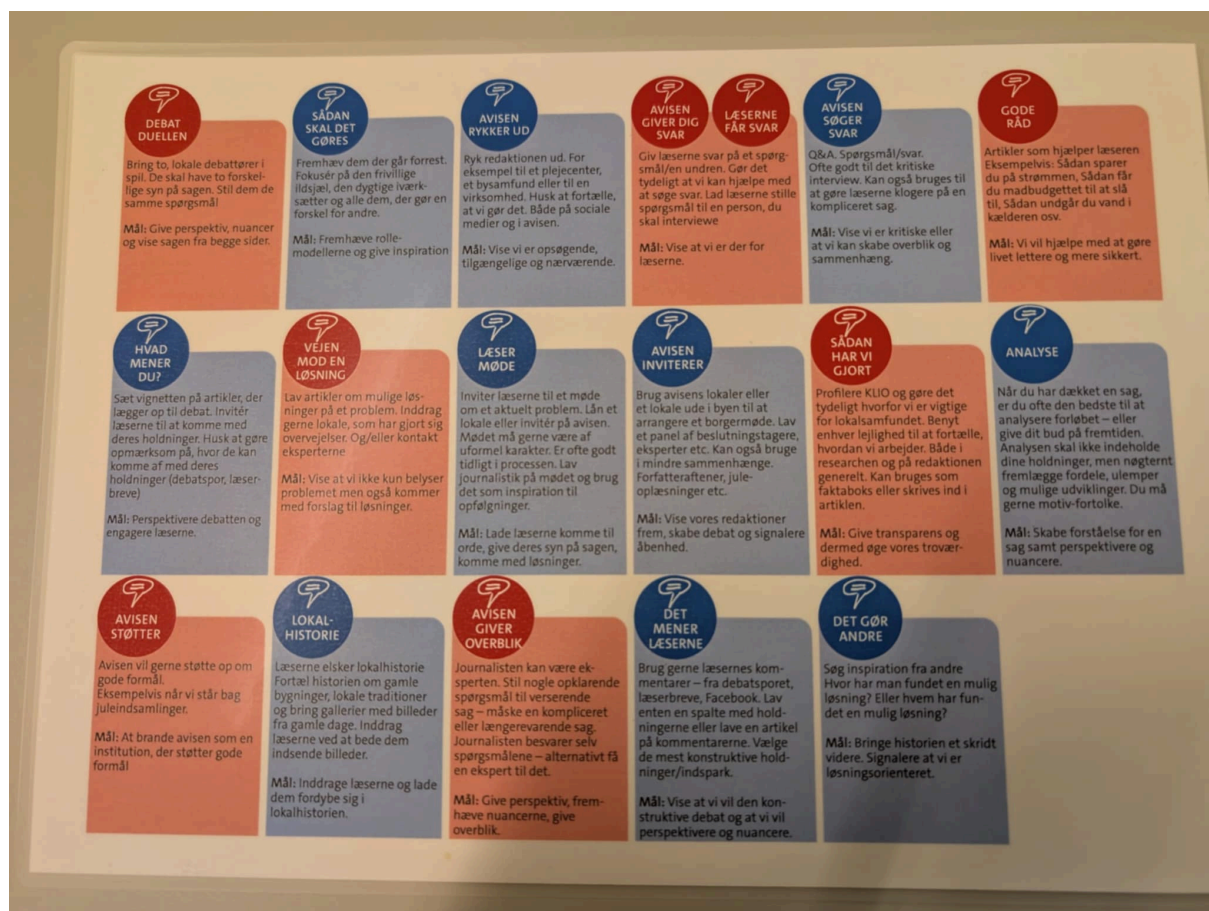
In recent months, I have visited, researched, and read about the strategies of other media outlets. Here are some of my findings I think are valuable for *Århus Stiftstidende*.

Midtjyllands Avis

MJA is one of the Danish private written media that has tried to implement constructive journalism.

They have created a number of “bubbles,” which are formats that can be used constructively. The idea was that it was not enough to only talk about a constructive mindset, so instead the mindset should be put into formats.

Some of the bubbles include “The Newspaper Gives You Answers,” “The Newspaper Moves Out,” and “The Newspaper Provides Overview.” Midtjyllands Avis’s goal is to use one to two bubbles per day.



The bubbles are a good solution because they are so concrete that they are easy to apply in the daily work of a journalist. However, I think there are a few too many, and some of them are a bit fluffy.

Stiften could introduce something similar, but if so, I think the bubbles need to be sharper, and article formats and best practices should be developed for each bubble so that it is even easier for journalists to follow a constructive path.

MJA also works a lot with project journalism. Here, the newspaper puts a theme on the agenda and uses it as the main focus in the newspaper for about a month. This means that readers quickly become clear about what to expect from MJA, and that the newspaper covers a topic fully, such as traffic in the city or architecture.

During the projects, people from Silkeborg can engage in different ways, which provides new angles and tips for stories that journalists otherwise would not have discovered.

MJA has experienced no decline in the number of subscribers as a result of the constructive approach. The media outlet remains stable around 10,000 paying subscribers, most of whom are print and e-paper readers. This is a good result compared to the trajectory of similar media outlets.

At the same time, the majority of journalists at MJA feel that it has become more fun and inspiring to go to work due to the constructive mindset.

NRK

NRK has attempted to implement constructive journalism across all of their reporting. Leading this development was constructive director Ingrid Tinmannsvik, who also studied at the Constructive Institute in Aarhus.

In Norway, a survey showed that half of Norwegians in 2024 feel sad after reading the news. At the same time, about a quarter of the population actively avoid the news. Both trends are increasing.

NRK is trying to address this development to counteract news avoidance. In this context, an editor stated in an internal survey:

"I understand why people can no longer handle the news. I can hardly manage it myself."

During the corona crisis, NRK launched a new media outlet called Lyspunkt. It features exclusively constructive news, and at the top of the website, users can choose what they are looking for—for example, inspiration for activities with friends or positive news about the world.

Lyspunkt became such a success that people still talk about it today, even though the site has not been active for a long time. The outlet reached a much younger audience than NRK normally reaches. You can read some of the reactions here:

Lyspunkt er helt fantastisk!! Elsker det og trenger det 🥰🥰

**«I love it. Reading all
the headlines made me cry»**

Vell, jeg begynte å gråte da jeg bladde nedover overskriftene.

Jeg har så savnet en sånn side, og spesielt det siste året! Både for meg, datteren min og elevene mine!

Ikke at man ikke skal holde seg oppdatert på det som skjer, men jeg har kjent mer og mer på hva scrolling på nyhetssider gjør med meg, og jeg har hatt så lyst å bli føret med noe trivelig!

Så tusen tusen takk 🙏🙏

Du har fått en stor fan i Bode!

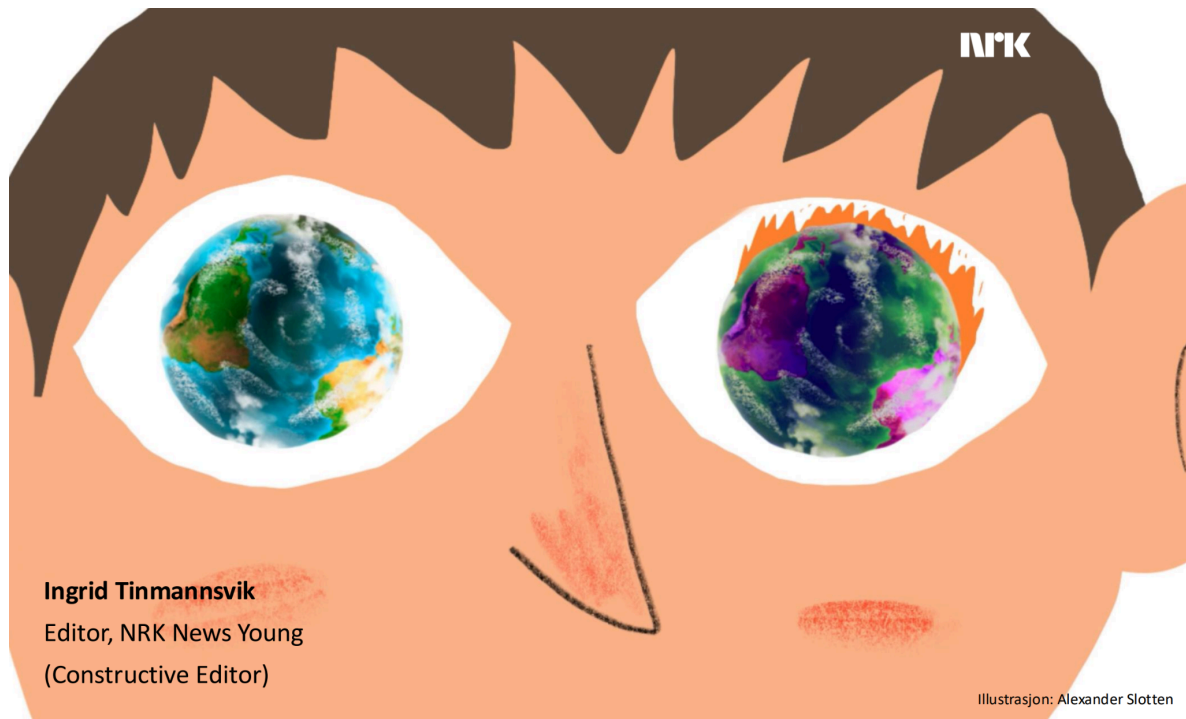


Since then, NRK has tried to implement constructive journalism throughout the entire organization. According to the organization itself, this has been a success.

Recently, NRK attempted to measure the effort. The share of constructive articles had increased significantly. On average, constructive articles received 15 percent more readers than traditional news. However, constructive news rarely ranked among the most-read articles, but overall, they performed better than other content.

Ingrid Tinmannsvik explains that NRK has focused on two things: concrete initiatives and mindset.

That is, there need to be concrete ways to implement constructive journalism. But there should also be a change in the mindset of journalists and editors, moving away from always framing stories around chaos and sensation. According to her, they now see the world with both eyes, as illustrated here:



However, Ingrid Tinmannsvik points out that it is necessary to appoint a person responsible for maintaining and leading the implementation. Otherwise, the constructive approach quickly disappears again.

Today, NRK no longer has a constructive editor despite the positive numbers, and without a leading figure, the share of constructive journalism is declining.

Zetland

Zetland is built around six principles that are reflected in all their journalism. The six principles are:

1: We are our members

Zetland exists because of the people who contribute to our mission. Together we spread important knowledge, curious conversations, and room for deep reflection in a world that desperately needs it.

2: We provide overview and dig deep

We hunt for the big stories of our time, not just what happened five minutes ago. We don't just report that something happens – but also why it happens and what it means.

3: We explain without oversimplifying

Most of society's big questions are full of nuances and dilemmas – so is our journalism. But we tell the stories from the beginning so that everyone can follow along.

4: We fight cynicism and look for solutions

When we investigate the problems of our time, we also explore possible solutions – and all the other things that bind us together rather than divide us.

5: Our technology is human-friendly

We have no ads and do not steal your data. We believe ethics and technology belong together. Our product should be easy to use – and respect your attention.

6: We are honest, even when in doubt

Journalists used to claim the monopoly on the truth. That's not how you build trust today. We are humans who can doubt and make mistakes – and we gladly share both.

Except for number five, Stiftten could easily implement the same principles. However, it would require a major overhaul of how the newsroom operates in our day to day work.

In 2018, Zetland asked its subscribers why they were “members.” 56 percent responded that they wanted to support the development of a new media outlet. In other words: they weren't there just to consume journalism, but also because they found it important to support it.

You hear the same when researching other new membership-based media outlets across Europe and the USA, with whom Zetland regularly shares experiences. Their members subscribe because they believe quality journalism is vital to society – and therefore important to support, especially in the startup phase.

Zetlands members are subsequently used in campaigns to attract new subscriptions. Because they have a sort of stake in the media, they help recruit new members by sharing good offers.

Subscribers are thus seen as a resource. Also in the journalism itself. Lea Korsgaard describes it like this in her series *Zetland om Zetland*:

"In the old days, a journalist guarded their story closely until publication day, often gripped by a misunderstood paranoia that made them suspect everyone of trying to steal the story. That practice is strange. When you don't dare reveal what stories you are working on, you also cut yourself off from gaining knowledge from readers who might have exactly that."

Århus Stiftstidende does not use its subscribers as a resource. Over the years, there have been several attempts to involve readers, but none have lasted long.

Therefore, Stiftten should perhaps learn from media like Zetland, which are skilled at involving readers and subscribers. Because if people feel heard, it can create trust in a brand, and trust creates loyalty — which is crucial when running a subscription business.

Zetland's approach to journalism is thus shaped by members' suggestions. This also applies to the entire media structure. Originally Zetland was a written media outlet, but

today it operates equally much in audio. This happened because members requested more audio content.

JFM (Århus Stiftstidende) is also experimenting with audio. But I don't know if the desire comes from the management or the readers.

At the same time, it is interesting how Zetland's journalists are open about their own doubts, challenges, and thoughts during the making of articles.

I believe this is one reason why Zetland has a healthier debate culture than many other media outlets. A few years ago, Lea Korsgaard wrote:

"You don't have to wander long on the internet before encountering a depressing comment thread, mostly resembling digital vomit or cynical showmanship. But I want to say, hey, of course, such comment threads are not representative of how we talk together in this country. We can debate in a way where great disagreement can coexist with respect for others' views and acknowledgment of factuality. Even online. It just requires us to create that debate culture together. And our members have really helped us do that. So far – after three years – we've only had to delete contributions from one member (during 2017-2019), because the content was unsuitable for publication. That's pretty amazing and totally uplifting."

Among Zetland's strengths is also the personal touch. Journalists often write in the first person and use themselves and their everyday experiences to shape their journalism.

Stiften's journalists also sometimes use themselves, especially in columns, which are often widely read and shared. But it is not systematic, and there is no clear line except a general encouragement from local management for journalists to use themselves.

It seems the personal angle helps create a deeper bond between readers and journalists, increasing trust. Therefore, Stiften should experiment more with this kind of writing style.

Cityside

In California, you find the media outlets Oaklanside, Berkeleyside, and several others. They are part of the small media group Cityside, which runs local journalism as an NGO.

Cityside has found a sustainable business model by being a non-profit organization. All content is free on the platform, but journalists and editors still receive decent salaries without being publicly funded.

That means, for example, Berkeleyside survives on voluntary donations from wealthy local people who support the media as a kind of philanthropic cause. In the USA, such donations can be tax-deductible.

The wealthy support the media because they want their local area to be covered better than it currently is. It's philanthropy — something rarely seen in journalism in Denmark.

Additionally, Cityside media receive support from their readers. Here, members can support the media with a monthly amount, for example, \$20. For that amount, you get a tote bag and access to some events. But most do it because they want to keep the media alive.

Cityside does journalism with the best interest of their local communities in mind. They don't cover daily police news, burglaries, and flashing lights stories. But they are happy to cover crime stories to create a systemic story if there is development one way or another. The reason is they believe many crime stories create a false narrative about how the local community is doing.

Cityside's editor-in-chief says the group only launches media in cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants. A similar model might be possible in Denmark. But all cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants already have solid local media today.

However, it is hard to imagine Århus Stiftstidende as a non-profit organization. But maybe we should reconsider how we cover crime stories. Is it a strength to cover them as closely and daily as we do now? Or are we helping create a false narrative that scares potential subscribers away and makes Århus residents more afraid of living in the city than necessary?

The same crime stories usually appear in all other media in the Aarhus area, and the most interesting stories quickly reach national media.

Crime stories are therefore not unique content, and as a private media outlet that depends on paying subscribers, we need to deliver something that cannot be found for free.

Heromkring

Heromkring is a new newsletter service in Aarhus that also posts on various social media platforms. The style is young, fresh, and attractively wrapped in sleek design.

With *Heromkring*, readers get a weekly overview and recommendations for a wide range of cool and exciting events in Aarhus. Occasionally, there are also interviews with, for example, the mayor or local musicians.

Heromkring fulfills a need to create clarity amid the sea of cultural offerings a city like Aarhus provides. This used to be a task handled by *Stiften*, but that has long since been cut back.

Heromkring was created when the founder moved to Aarhus and found himself missing an overview of the city's exciting events and offerings.

In under six months, *Heromkring* has gained over six thousand followers on Instagram — roughly half of *Stiften*'s followers on the same platform.

Based on *Heromkring*'s Instagram and Facebook pages, there doesn't seem to be much interest in the interviews they publish. That need is apparently being met elsewhere for Aarhus residents.

Heromkring is interesting because the newsletter has very quickly built a strong and appealing brand. That's something *Stiften* could learn from.

Personally, I find that the list of recommendations is a bit too long, making it overwhelming — which goes against the medium's stated goal of providing a clear overview.

But the design and concept are so well-executed that people are quick to subscribe.

Village Media

Village Media is a media network with 144 outlets spread across Canada and the United States. The core idea is to create small, hyperlocal media outlets in areas where there are no major competitors.

Village Media delivers standard local news, and the journalism itself doesn't appear to be particularly remarkable.

However, the business model seems to work. Village Media is advertiser-driven and typically establishes outlets in towns where there's no competition. That means local business owners are happy to advertise in the outlet.

Village Media seems to have moderate success in ensuring that local news is published in areas that might otherwise go without.

Richard Gingras, who was until recently Google's Vice President of News, is involved with Village Media. He believes that an ad-based model offering entirely free journalism is the way forward for local media.

The advertising market in Denmark is so challenged and competitive that I find it hard to see this model as sustainable here. But it may make sense in larger countries where towns are more spread out and markets more distinct.

Substack

Substack isn't a media outlet, but a platform. It allows creators to publish articles, podcasts, and similar content, and to distribute newsletters. It's a place where you can

easily start your own blog or independent media outlet — and just as easily charge for your content. In return, Substack takes 10 percent of your income on the platform.

Stiften can't really use Substack, but the platform might become a competitor in the future. For example, if a journalist decides to start their own AGF-focused outlet or a hyperlocal site like *Viby-Liv* on the platform.

Substack is also part of a broader trend in the media landscape, where individual journalists and creators break away and start their own media ventures built around their personalities. We're seeing this with news influencers, YouTubers, and podcast hosts.

Substack is not widely used in Denmark today. But the idea behind it — that you trust the individual journalist — aligns somewhat with what *Zetland* is doing. And perhaps *Stiften* should begin cultivating its own talent more intentionally, allowing individual journalists to build their own brand identities in support of *Stiften's* overall brand.

TV2 Kosmopol

TV2 Kosmopol is one of the best Danish media outlets when it comes to using the Hearken tool. They have a format called “Ask Us”, where they regularly ask their readers what Kosmopol should investigate further.

They then follow up with polls where readers vote on which topic should win. Kosmopol does not promise to cover every suggestion, but the format generates ideas that they otherwise wouldn't have considered.

There are two journalists at TV2 Kosmopol who are specifically responsible for “Ask Us.” The station finds that they receive questions they would not otherwise have looked into.

Stiften has previously attempted to use Hearken. But no one was responsible for finding the answers, so the effort never succeeded. Kosmopol's experience shows that it is essential to assign a journalist whose primary task is user engagement.

If *Stiften* wants to involve Aarhus residents more — and perhaps take inspiration from Kosmopol — the editorial team should therefore appoint a journalist to handle that part of the editorial work.

San Francisco Chronicle

At one time, the *San Francisco Chronicle* had over half a million paying subscribers. Now, the paper has around 150,000 — and the number continues to decline.

We visited *The Chronicle*'s newsroom in central San Francisco, and it was an eye-opener. The offices had recently been renovated and looked nice, though a bit bland. But there were hardly any people there.

Most of the editorial staff work from home — which is also the case for many other companies in San Francisco.

While we were there, we observed a digital editorial meeting. The participants were mainly editors, with a few journalists present. The meeting began with a discussion about how poor the previous day's reader numbers and data were, and everyone seemed discouraged. They were unsure which major stories were on the agenda, and no one appeared inspired.

The Chronicle came across as a decent newspaper, but also as a place that had run out of ideas — and grown afraid of its own shadow. It is unlikely to be the place where *Stiften* finds its solutions.

And that's a shame, because of all the media outlets I've visited or researched, *The Chronicle* is the one that most resembles *Århus Stiftstidende*. But perhaps *The Chronicle* can serve as a cautionary tale — a warning of where *Stiften* shouldn't go. Maybe having people work more and more from home is not the solution. Many ideas and much of the energy come from collaboration among colleagues in a newsroom.

Like JFM, *The Chronicle* works extensively with data. And perhaps they do it more thoroughly than we do. In addition to looking at reader numbers, *The Chronicle* also studies a reader's journey from free user to paying subscriber. The data team analyzes every single purchase by examining the 14 days leading up to the subscription. They look at what types of articles a reader clicked on, how much time was spent on each piece, and how they navigated the site. It seems to be an effective way to understand the consumption patterns of their audience.

However, this extreme focus on data is not without downsides. It appeared to shift attention away from journalism. Particularly disheartening was the fact that the first thing editors discussed in the meeting was the disappointing numbers from the day before.

So what now?

Aarhus has changed, but perhaps the paper hasn't kept pace with the city's transformation and evolution.

Today, *Stiften* fulfills its watchdog role well. We monitor those in power, ask critical questions, and carry out our journalistic duty. But somewhere along the way — amid media wars, disruption, and digital shifts — we've lost touch with the people of Aarhus. At least, that's how I see it.

If Aarhus were to build a new city hall today, I doubt *Stiften* would represent the people as well as we did in 1937. Back then, we helped unite the city. Today, I'm not sure we even know what the city thinks.

During the harbor expansion debate, we heard the loud critics and we wrote about the harbours opinion as well as the politicians. But what about the majority? Did they support the project, or was the opposition just more vocal?

When Vesterbro Torv reopened in 2024 – after political pressure forced the change – protests suddenly emerged demanding it be closed again. But where does the broader public stand?

And with the current stadium project – do the majority of Aarhusians prefer savings or to complete the venue according to plan? I honestly don't know. And I should.

That's why I believe we need to rethink part of *Stiften* as Aarhus' newspaper.

Here are five principles I believe could help us reconnect with Aarhus. They're inspired by other media outlets and conversations with locals. They're not revolutionary. But together, they might be just what we need.

1. A clear editorial profile

We need a shared direction. Inspired by Zetland, we should gather as a newsroom and define what we stand for journalistically – and what we don't.

It mustn't be ideological or political. But it should be clear and strong enough that people feel proud to support us. Or at least know who and what we are.

I suggest holding workshops with journalists, editors, and citizens. Together, we define our values and vision. Then we actively promote it – so that *Stiften* becomes a brand with a purpose.

2. Away from the desk

Far too much journalism in Denmark is done from behind a desk – with no face-to-face sources. The same is true for us.

That's a problem, especially for a local paper claiming to be close to its readers. And with AI taking over much desk-bound reporting soon, we need to deliver what machines can't: presence, conversation, and real-world observation.

I propose a goal: At least 50% of all journalism from *Stiften* must include a source the journalist has met in person.

And I'll lead by example: In my first month back, every article I write will feature an in-person source.

3. Ask the people of Aarhus

We must make it a habit to involve our readers regularly. That could mean events like those Politiken hosts, subscriber collaboration like Zetland, or user-driven story leads like Kosmopol.

Maybe we should be more active on Reddit. Maybe we should improve our own comment sections. There are many ways to start.

Most importantly: we should dedicate at least one journalist (maybe with an intern) to focus entirely on audience engagement. Their job would be to hit the streets, host events, monitor comments, polls, and digital communities – and bring citizen-driven stories into the newsroom.

4. Write as yourself

Stiften has a proud tradition of personal journalism. But we haven't truly structured it or defined what we want from it.

I believe we should lean further into it and treat our journalists as personal brands. Not everyone in the newsroom will be comfortable with that, but it can build trust – by putting a face and voice to the reporting.

We should also be more open about our process and doubts. Transparency builds credibility.

5. Project-based journalism

We should embrace project journalism more systematically – with the citizens at the center.

We already produce occasional themes, like traffic in Gent or love and dating in Aarhus. But these are sporadic, and we rarely follow up. Much of the impact gets lost.

I propose creating ongoing editorial tracks that reporters can sign up for and be responsible for. These should require citizen involvement – and include tools for follow-up and impact assessment.

And then what?

There's much more we could do.

We could officially rebrand as *Stiften* and develop a new visual identity to reflect a more modern and distinctive voice. Back in 1989, we brought in Mario Garcia – the man behind *The Washington Post's* layout – to redesign the paper to reflect our evolving journalism. Maybe it's time again.

Back then, editor-in-chief Aage Holm-Pedersen said:

“We must surprise, inform, delight – and avoid being dragged down by endless crises and bickering. When everyone says something different, no one gets wiser – and people grow tired of it.”

Those words still ring true.

But here's the real question:

Would Aarhus City Hall have received its iconic tower if it were built today? I am not sure.

Stiften would have written critical articles about the costs and aesthetics. Social media backlash could've mounted a storm against the politicians. And the city council may have been pressured into compromise. But, I am not sure the tower would arise.

Aarhus needs a strong *Århus Stiftstidende* – a paper that creates journalism **with** the city, not just **about** it. Because when *Stiften* works at its best, Aarhus becomes a better city.