HAS CRIME REPORTING BECOME THE JUNK FOOD OF NEWS?

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Introduction

Do news outlets really serve democracy and local communities by writing intensively about crime when crime in society is in fact decreasing?

And how do we write about crime and public safety without making audiences more fearful? Can it be done without being boring and unengaging?

These are some of the questions this final project for my fellowship at the Constructive Institute will explore.

I am interested in how high-attention journalism, such as crime reporting, can incorporate constructive elements to better reflect the statistics and how we can use the attention crime stories always seems to have to add more vitamins to the news diet in general.

At Pointers Institute, a Florida based nonprofit organization working to strengthen democracy by improving the relevance, ethics and value of journalism, Senior Vice President Kelly McBride poses the question "has crime reporting become the junk food of news?"

For the past five years, she has been leading a program aimed at U.S. news organizations wanting to rethink their crime coverage so that it better serves local communities and citizens.

Instead of quick news hits about isolated criminal acts, crime coverage should give media users reason to reflect and help them make better decisions in their own lives, seems to be the reasoning at Poynter's.

But what does it take for crime news to become more useful to media users — and do these users even want that kind of journalism?

Can crime reporting be critical, nuanced, and solution-oriented? In other words, can crime reporting be constructive?

User needs

In 2023, journalists and editors from the JFM organization carried out what was called the World's Largest Reader Meeting. Every journalist and editor in the media group spoke with a reader or potential reader between the ages of 30 and 50. This resulted in 385 interviews.

All interviews were conducted within the coverage areas of 16 local and regional newspapers — meaning both among core readers and users of local and regional journalism, as well as among residents who rarely or never use the local print media or website.

The aim of the study was to identify what the target group is interested in, what they think of JFM's journalism — if they were familiar with it — and to gather ideas on how we can better meet their expectations for quality journalism in the future.

One of the many conclusions from the study was that many in the target group were tired of negative news and in some cases consciously tried to avoid it. According to their own statements, these readers wanted news that uplifts our local communities and points to solutions rather than conflicts.

Studies show that audiences are affected by the way crime events are described by the media which places a great responsibility on the shoulders of journalism to report accurately and fairly in order to maintain the trust of local communities.

As *Fyens Stiftstidende*'s editor-in-chief Poul Kjærgaard pointed out to me when I began my fellowship at the Constructive Institute:
"Feeling a little more unsafe after reading the paper is definitely not a user need of Fyens Stiftstidende's readers"

Media users should not become more fearful from news coverage but rather become more informed and gain as accurate a picture of reality as possible. This will help them make decisions about their own safety and safety in society in general.

Traffic drivers

Crime journalism is and has always been extremely popular among media users, and many newsrooms are increasingly relying on crime reporting to drive traffic to their news sites. And it seems to work. Crime journalism both attracts and retains readers, according to data from JFM's sites.

This is also why the crime coverage has increased in recent years at least at JMF. At *Fyens Stiftstidende*, the crime desk was recently expanded, resulting in significantly more crime

stories than before. The local newsrooms of the entire JFM Reach also cover a great number of court cases and closely follow the daily police reports.

However, compared to other countries, Denmark is a relatively safe place to live — with low crime rates and a high level of trust among its citizens.

This makes it seem paradoxical that the media landscape is overflowing with crime stories. Although crime journalism is often important and fair, one could argue that it also displaces other types of important journalism — for example, reporting on local democracy, welfare, or other issues that public-service media have a responsibility to cover.

The aim of this report is not to criticize existing crime journalism, but rather to explore whether constructive elements can be added to crime reporting in order to better reflect the broader trend of declining crime rates and place those rates in a societal context that fosters understanding of the development.

As part of this project, I have interviewed several people and organizations who have a particular insight into — or interest in — crime and crime prevention in Denmark.

They offer a few suggestions on how crime journalism can be qualified and improved. Their ideas are merely examples, and there are undoubtedly many more perspectives - for example, from the police, the judiciary, and others.

But since the perspectives of the police and the legal system are already the most used sources in crime journalism, I have chosen to leave them out this time.

I have also spoken with Maria Bendix Wittchen, associate professor and Ph.d in media ethics at University of Roskilde and consulted the book *"What We Know About Offenders and Their Crimes"* by Lars Højsgaard Andersen and Bent Jensen, published by the Rockwool Foundation and I also refer to first booklet of Magtudredningen 2.0.

The Poynter Institute has published several articles about their teaching program *"Transforming Local Crime Reporting Into Public Safety Journalism"*, which I have written a section about and drawn inspiration from.

During my fellowship Constructive Institute, I have taken courses in criminal procedure and legal history at the Department of Law at Aarhus University, as well as the course *"Concepts*

and Narratives of Conflict" in Humanistic Conflict Studies and *Critical Social Psychology*. All of these have served as inspiration for this project, even though I do not refer directly to their content here.

It is important for me to emphasize that this report should not be read as an academic paper, but rather as my reflections and thoughts after nine months at the Constructive Institute.

Finally, I have compiled a set of recommendations for other crime journalists and newsrooms who want to incorporate constructive journalism into their crime coverage.

My recommendations are not a finished recipe for how to produce constructive crime journalism, but they may serve as inspiration for how a crime desk can supplement its usual coverage with constructive approaches.

Citizens' will formation

The major digital transformation of the media landscape has significantly impacted how citizens in Denmark and across the world consume journalism during the last 20 years. This development is not solely positive when measured against the needs of a well-functioning democracy like Denmark's.

This is one of the conclusions of Anne Skorkjær Binderkrantz, Lene Holm Pedersen and Michael Bang Petersen in the short publication "*Det danske demokratis udfordringer" (The Challenges to Danish Democracy)* which is a part of Magtudredningen *2.0., The Danish Power Investigation*,

Citizens' ability to engage in what the authors describe as *democratic will-formation* is challenged and the media — broadly speaking — play an important role according to the three writers.

Michael Bang Petersen et al., in*"*, write:

"It is important that many can participate in the public conversation so that relevant experiences and viewpoints are represented and help shape shared understandings. (…) The first condition for making that possible is that will-formation occurs within frameworks that enable citizens to become democratically informed."

Whereas it was previously the established mass media that provided this kind of information, today citizens increasingly orient themselves via digital channels.
This development provides new opportunities for conversation and access to information — but it also presents challenges, the authors point out.

These challenges relate to the established media's ability to produce high-quality political information. To the willingness of new social platforms to distribute democratically relevant information, and to citizens' willingness to engage with high-quality content.

The established commercial media are under financial pressure, raising concerns about the quality of the news they produce.
Another concern, highlighted by Michael Bang Petersen and his co-authors, centers on social media and the tech giants' control over information. These companies have no editorial responsibility and are therefore not invested in the quality of the information Danes receive. If their commercial interests are best served by, for example, fast and unnuanced news — such as reports on singular criminal incidents — then the algorithms will reflect that.

A third concern is that Danes are no longer presented with the same news. This can be both liberating and democratizing — but also problematic, as noted by the authors of the *Power Investigation*.

The liberating aspect lies in the fact that anyone can search for information and choose the sources they prefer whereas the problematic aspect lies partly in the systemic differences in the sources people use — such as different social platforms for different age groups.

The fragmented media landscape, as Michael Bang Petersen et al. describe it, may result in some groups not being exposed to news at all. On social media and streaming services, news competes with all kinds of other content, and people don't stumble across daily news in the same way as before.

The three challenges described above are directed primarily at political journalism, but they apply to journalism in general — including crime reporting.

In financially pressured newsrooms, there is a risk of resorting to quickly produced stories, often delivered directly by the police and the justice system. These are stories that may lack

depth, investigation, context, and nuance. In other words, there's a risk to the quality of the news.

This risk may be particularly high when it comes to crime journalism, because it is "easy" to write unnuanced stories about crime and punishment. Society has already decided what is legal and illegal, which makes it easy to demonize offenders.

Tech giants' algorithms can reinforce this tendency. Although the algorithms are constantly evolving, the trend so far has been that quick, conflict-laden stories are favored. More complex and nuanced messages are not widely distributed in people's feeds.

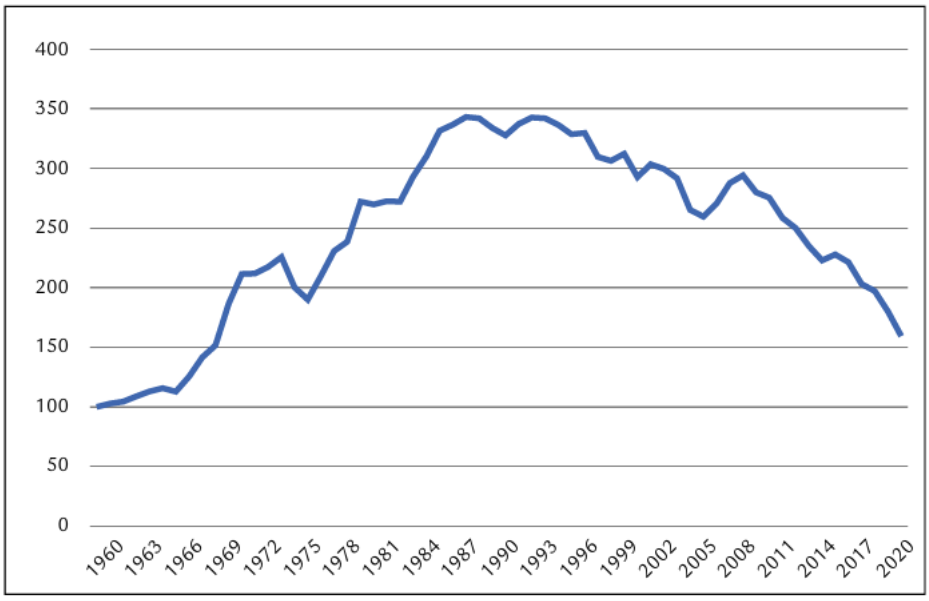
So even if a media outlet invests in producing constructive, high-quality journalism, there is still a risk that it will never reach the many users who primarily access news through social media.

Crime is Decreasing

For many years, the Rockwool Foundation has conducted research tracking and analyzing crime in Denmark.
In 2023, the book *"What We Know About Offenders and Their Crimes"* was published by the Rockwool Foundation and written by Lars Højsgaard Andersen and Bent Jensen.

According to the authors' research, crime in Denmark has declined since the turn of the millennium, although the level remains higher than it was during the early years of the welfare state in the 1960s.
Measured by the number of reported crimes and the number of court rulings, crime increased until the mid-1990s, after which it began to decline.
And when measured by the number of short sentences (up to one year), the drop has been quite significant, according to the Rockwool Foundation's study.

Figur 2.1 Antallet af anmeldte straffelovsovertrædelser pr. år, 1960-2021 pr. 100.000 indbyggere på 15 år eller derover, 1960=100



Kilde: Danmarks Statistik, Statistiske årbøger 1960-2014 og Statistikbanken.

Above is an illustration from the book *"What We Know About Offenders and Their Crimes"*, published by Gyldendal in March 2023.

It is important to note, however, that crime is not a fixed concept over time. There are differences in what we perceive as criminal, in the legislation itself, and in how we collect and count crime data.
The types of crime also change significantly over time, and entirely new forms of crime emerge — for example, cybercrime.
The perception of what constitutes a crime is also subject to change — for instance, in Denmark there is now legislation against psychological violence.

Another factor that influences developments in crime statistics is the reporting tendency — that is, how willing citizens are, at a given point in time, to report or tolerate violent incidents.

Some trends are noteworthy in themselves — for example, that youth crime has declined significantly, or that the types of crime on the rise are new forms, such as online fraud and other types of cybercrime.

Also for example, while the number of homicides may be similar between Denmark and Sweden, their composition differs: gang-related shootings are more common in Sweden, while partner homicides are more prevalent in Denmark.

Since 2006, the Rockwool Foundation among others has allocated funding for research and analysis of crime in Denmark. These analyses focus, among other things, on the social conditions of offenders and convicted individuals — both before and after sentencing.

There is therefore a wealth of data and research available for crime reporters who wish to balance increased crime coverage with facts and knowledge about crime.

Strong Interest in Crime Journalism

Traffic on JFM's sites is closely monitored, making it possible to track readers' interest in various content areas.

Data shows that users have a strong interest in crime reporting. Crime stories have always attracted more readers compared to topics like municipal welfare or local politics. Alongside housing, retail, and business coverage, crime is one of JFM's "super topics," and this has led to increased focus on crime coverage in recent years.

When journalists from JFM's many publications finish their shifts, reporters at a centralized live desk continue to cover crime events from across the entire coverage area — and, when necessary, enlist local support to report on crimes and major accidents that occur outside of "normal hours."

Crime reporting is the second most exposed editorial category for users across JFM's entire publishing network, surpassed only by the "business and economy" category.

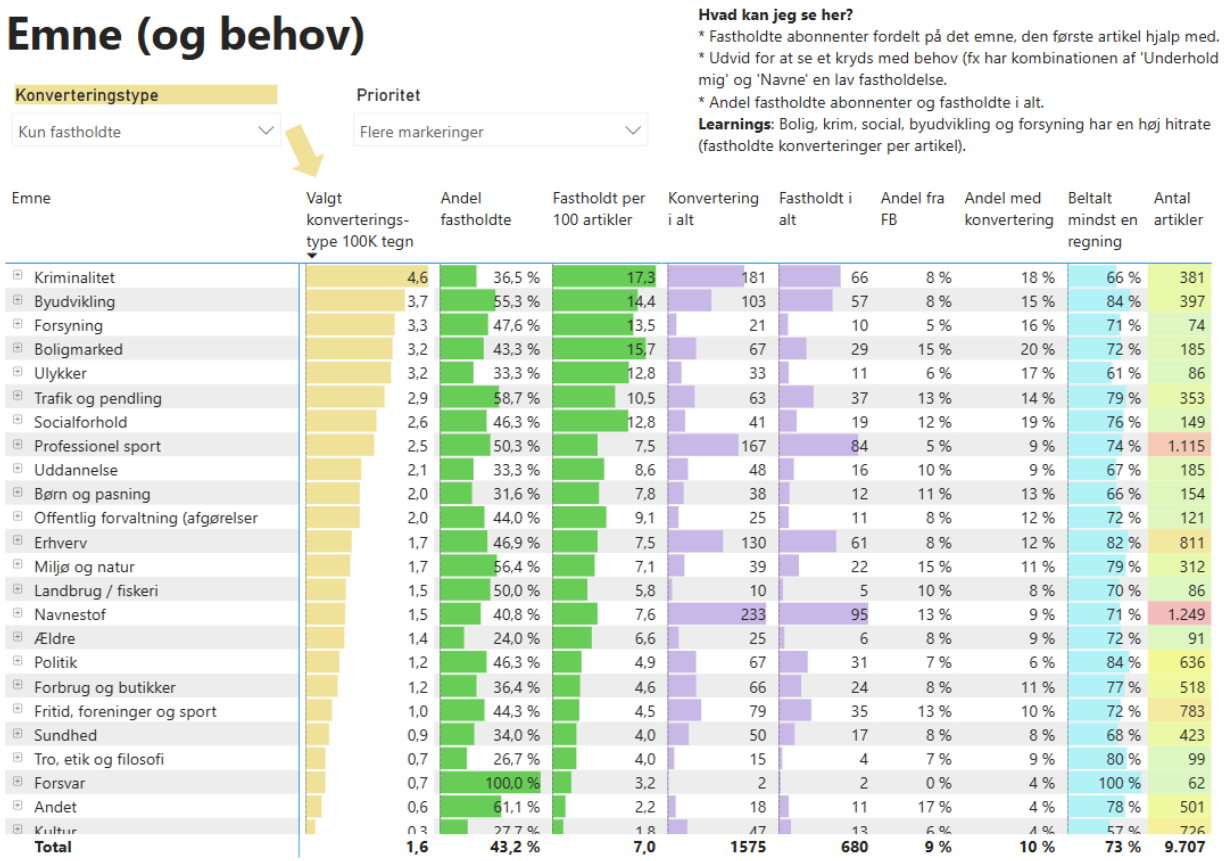
In the past month (May/June 2025), the category "crime and accidents" accounted for 15 percent of the content users across all JFM sites were exposed to. In terms of reader interest, the topic has performed as expected, according to Jesper Nørgaard, Editor-in-Chief for Editorial Development at JFM.

JFM has not yet linked content categorization directly with conversions, so the data does not show whether crime reporting generates more conversions — i.e., new paying customers.

However, a data analysis from spring 2022 examined whether JFM was able to retain subscribers who initially signed up due to an interest in a crime article.

The analysis showed that the company had relatively strong retention of these subscribers six months after their initial sign-up.
Whether it is continued interest in crime reporting that holds on to these subscribers is uncertain — but likely to some extent, says Jesper Nørgaard, Editor-in-Chief for Editorial Development.

The graphs below illustrate the retention trend.



Emne (og behov)

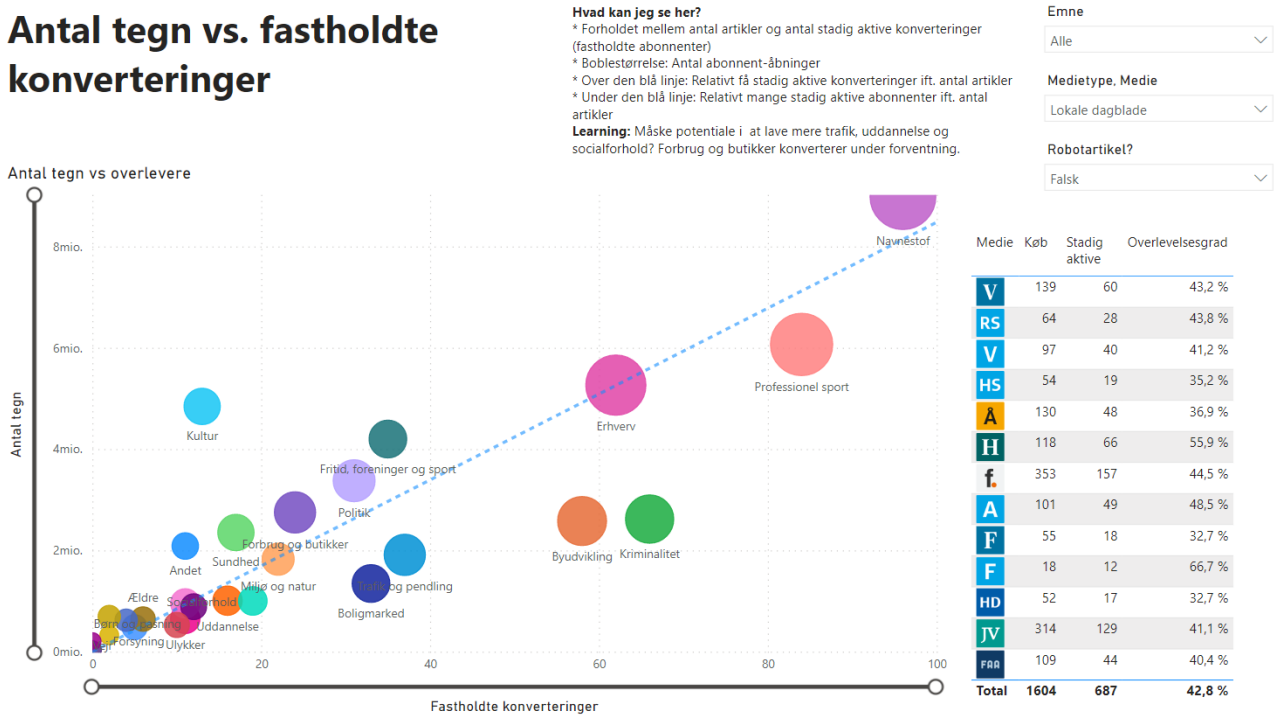
Hvad kan jeg se her?
* Fastholdte abonnenter fordelt på det emne, den første artikel hjalp med.
* Udvid for at se et kryds med behov (fx har kombinationen af 'Underhold mig' og 'Navne' en lav fastholdelse.
* Andel fastholdte abonnenter og fastholdte i alt.

Learnings: Bolig, krim, social, byudvikling og forsyning har en høj hitrate (fastholdte konverteringer per artikel).

Konverteringstype: Kun fastholdte

Prioritet: Flere markeringer

Emne	Valgt konverterings-type 100K tegn	Andel fastholdte	Fastholdt per 100 artikler	Konvertering i alt	Fastholdt i alt	Andel fra FB	Andel med konvertering	Beltalt mindst en regning	Antal artikler
Kriminalitet	4,6	36,5 %	17,3	181	66	8 %	18 %	66 %	381
Byudvikling	3,7	55,3 %	14,4	103	57	8 %	15 %	84 %	397
Forsyning	3,3	47,6 %	13,5	21	10	5 %	16 %	71 %	74
Boligmarked	3,2	43,3 %	15,7	67	29	15 %	20 %	72 %	185
Ulykker	3,2	33,3 %	12,8	33	11	6 %	17 %	61 %	86
Trafik og pendling	2,9	58,7 %	10,5	63	37	13 %	14 %	79 %	353
Socialforhold	2,6	46,3 %	12,8	41	19	12 %	19 %	76 %	149
Professionel sport	2,5	50,3 %	7,5	167	84	5 %	9 %	74 %	1.115
Uddannelse	2,1	33,3 %	8,6	48	16	10 %	9 %	67 %	185
Børn og pasning	2,0	31,6 %	7,8	38	12	11 %	13 %	66 %	154
Offentlig forvaltning (afgørelser	2,0	44,0 %	9,1	25	11	8 %	12 %	72 %	121
Erhverv	1,7	46,9 %	7,5	130	61	8 %	12 %	82 %	811
Miljø og natur	1,7	56,4 %	7,1	39	22	15 %	11 %	79 %	312
Landbrug / fiskeri	1,5	50,0 %	5,8	10	5	10 %	8 %	70 %	86
Navnestof	1,5	40,8 %	7,6	233	95	13 %	9 %	71 %	1.249
Ældre	1,4	24,0 %	6,6	25	6	8 %	9 %	72 %	91
Politik	1,2	46,3 %	4,9	67	31	7 %	6 %	84 %	636
Forbrug og butikker	1,2	36,4 %	4,6	66	24	8 %	11 %	77 %	518
Fritid, foreninger og sport	1,0	44,3 %	4,5	79	35	13 %	10 %	72 %	783
Sundhed	0,9	34,0 %	4,0	50	17	8 %	8 %	68 %	423
Tro, etik og filosofi	0,7	26,7 %	4,0	15	4	7 %	9 %	80 %	99
Forsvar	0,7	100,0 %	3,2	2	2	0 %	4 %	100 %	62
Andet	0,6	61,1 %	2,2	18	11	17 %	4 %	78 %	501
Kultur	0,3	27,7 %	1,8	47	13	6 %	4 %	57 %	726
Total	**1,6**	**43,2 %**	**7,0**	**1575**	**680**	**9 %**	**10 %**	**73 %**	**9.707**



Fascinating Crime Stories

Crime journalism has always been popular — for many obvious reasons.

A good news story about crime often meets the classic news criteria: relevance, identification, sensation, and timeliness.

Many crime stories are simply fascinating, and even the smallest crime brief can contain a hint of mystery. For example: Who broke into the local school — and why?

Crime stories always have an inherent conflict: someone has violated society's rules and norms. Stories from courtrooms, for instance, often involve intense human drama. The presence of gruesome details, murky motives, sinister intentions, and strong emotions adds even more intrigue to journalism about crime.

Much of journalism — not only crime journalism — is driven by personal narratives, and crime stories are particularly well-suited to this approach. Victims and perpetrators are clearly defined.

All of this echoes elements found in traditional storytelling, which humans can psychologically use to understand their own emotions and lives — much like in good literature.

And when the stories are not fictional but drawn from real life, they allow us to reflect even more deeply on our own existence and mortality.

At the same time, there is something simple and recognizable about journalistic stories of individual criminal incidents, making them easy to digest — unlike other types of journalism that deal with intricate political contexts, complicated economic conditions, or technical solutions to problems in a complex world.

In other words, these stories naturally attract drama and familiar narrative structures. Crime stories can even serve as a kind of reassurance — that things are in order, when criminals are held accountable and receive their due punishment. These stories become evidence that our society and justice system are working.

For all the reasons above, crime journalism is already in a strong position when it comes to capturing the attention of readers and audiences.

This poses a window of opportunity to add a constructive layer to the reporting, I think.

True Crime

True crime has become extremely popular over the past 10–15 years, spreading across the publishing industry, the podcast world, and major streaming companies like Netflix and Viaplay.
Classic storytelling techniques and dramatizations are used to describe real events, and sometimes investigative elements are mixed into the narrative. In this way, true crime can become an interesting blend of fiction, entertainment and journalism.

Productions which are produced for merely commercial reasons do not always hold to the same standards of objectivity as journalism and are not necessarily required to be socially relevant in the way that good journalism is.

This in my view can create confusion among media users when publishers produce true crime content in which genres are mixed. Some types of content appear to be journalism but are not.

The straightforward explanation for the rise of true crime, according to Maria Bendix Wittchen, Ph.D. at Roskilde Universitet is commercialization. It simply sells tickets.

It is, however, important to add that true crime can also be very relevant and in fact good journalism, she stresses.
“Certain stories, in addition to selling tickets, are not only engaging and commercially successful, but also important because they inform the public about the work being done by, for example, the police — or about poor police work. In some cases, true crime stories bring new information to light and thereby contribute with important developments to a criminal case” Maria Bendix Wittchen points out.

The ethical guidelines in journalism play a special role when it comes to crime reporting. According to Maria Bendix Wittchen a driving force behind the development of the ethical guidelines of the press has been crime journalism.

Over time examples from crime journalism have prompted criticism and resulted in new guidelines, she explains and cites the example of the kidnapping of two Danish sailors on the Aden Peninsula, where several newspapers received severe criticism for their coverage of the case. This lead to new guidelines calling for “extreme caution in cases of kidnapping.”

The increasing popularity of the true crime genre has led to a growth in documentaries and podcasts about old criminal cases, both among established and new media.
Nordjyske has successfully launched the podcast series *Behind the Crime*, which revisits old criminal cases, as has Jyske Vestkysten, which recently launched the podcast *Faces of Crime*. Fyens Stiftstidende also has plans to produce a true crime podcast based on old cases.

However, revisiting old criminal cases can raise ethical dilemmas, as pointed out by Torbjørn Bertelsen, the press adviser for the Victim Support organization in Denmark, Offerrådgivningen.

“It is important to remember that these stories concern real and often tragic events involving victims and their surviving relatives, who deserves to be respected,” he reminds us.

Problematic Media Pressure

It is not difficult to understand the many reasons why crime journalism is popular, and it is also clear from data that journalism about crime attracts readers and clicks.

In a highly competitive media landscape, this easily results in increased production of such content. A wider range of crime journalism inevitably becomes available.
When journalism can be published in unlimited quantities and around the clock, it becomes tempting to present multiple angles on, for example, the same criminal case.
Where in the past, well-prepared court reports might have been published once daily by newspapers, it is now possible to provide live updates from courtrooms across the country—if the courts allow it.
Especially large, spectacular cases receive close coverage, but even ordinary and less serious types of crime attract readers' interest. In JMF's publications, police daily reports are often covered quite extensively, and it is not uncommon for even an arrest for drunk driving or other traffic offenses to reach the newspaper columns and the company's news sites.
This level of media attention on crime can in itself be problematic, according to Maria Bendix Wittchen.

She has studied the coverage of major spectacular criminal cases such as the murders of Mia Skadhauge Stevn and Kim Wall, and she considers the wall-to wall coverage in these cases to be a problem:

- "When cases are covered this intensively, it can give people the impression that this is the most important thing of the news, and that it is relevant because it could also happen to you. But the truth is that these kinds of murders are extremely rare and – according to police - difficult to prevent," she says.

She points out that extensive media attention on crime has the risk of creating a distorted picture of societal relevance and take "space" away from other important stories, for example, other and more relevant crime stories as how so called femicides is the most common type of murder in Denmark and how it can be prevented.

The Crime Prevention Council

Arne Simonsen, Press Officer at the Crime Prevention Council, Det Kriminalpræventive råd, makes the same point in the conversation I had with him about crime in Denmark and developments in Danish crime journalism.
The ambition of the Crime Prevention Council is to highlight solutions to society's challenges

with crime. The council consists of a wide range of member organizations, each with interests in crime prevention and research.
Towards 2028, the Crime Prevention Council's goal is to reduce the number of offenders and victims, as well as reducing at-risk places and situations where crime occurs, while promoting safety and society's resilience against crime.
The council holds no special interests but focuses solely on information and crime prevention, making it a useful source of inspiration and knowledge for constructive crime journalists who want to inform their readers about crime.
The council's website is a treasure trove of knowledge about all forms of crime and crime prevention, and the council's press service is also available to assist journalists needing information or contact with experts possessing specialized expertise, Arne Simonsen explains.
He sees no general problems with the media's coverage of crime and crime prevention in Denmark but at times experiences that the coverage is characterized by quick headlines and lacks nuance and depth.

As an example, Arne Simonsen points out that one could get the impression that the development in crime rates is alarming when following the media news flow.
The media often take the police' numbers at face value without investigating the underlying causes of a possible increase in numbers. That way the media can easily create an exaggerated focus on for instance, knife violence when a few individual cases receive extensive media coverage. An increase in numbers may in fact be due to police focusing particularly on knives in stop-and-search zones or other targeted operations.
Arne Simonsen also draws the attention to the surveys on Danes' feelings of safety, published by Trygfonden annually. These show that Danes increasingly feel safe.

Another area where Arne Simonsen sees an opportunity to improve the quality of journalism in his field is in the media coverage of the political debate on being tougher on crime by harsher penalties.
When successive governments and parliaments over the past 10 years have passed over 100 bills of penalty enhancements, research shows that this has little impact on crime prevention.

Only in rare cases—such as traffic offenses—do harsher punishments help reduce crime in a given area. Longer sentences can dampen some types of crime, but in most cases, sentence extensions and expansions of penal laws only create bottlenecks in the judicial and prison

systems.
By taking a more critical approach to politicians who advocate tougher sentences and confronting them with research, media consumers would gain a more nuanced view of what is achieved with harsher punishments.

Journalism plays an important role in holding politicians accountable for whether they legislate in ways that reduce crime. Do they invest resources in the long-term work needed—such as early intervention for youth on criminal paths for example.

Why We Punish

Journalists and media outlets in general have a responsibility for how the debate about sentencing is conducted—whether it is based on knowledge or emotions.
Just as a political agenda influence what the media covers, the media's coverage influences how politicians legislate, and the media must be aware of that responsibility.

In the book *What We Know About the Convicted and Their Crimes*, Lars Højsgaard Andersen and Bent Jensen describe the reasons why society punishes crime. We punish because we want it to have various preventive effects. First and foremost, so that the convicted person learns a lesson and is deterred from committing new crimes.

The so-called individual preventive effect may also mean that the convicted can receive treatment and be rehabilitated in prison for a life without crime after release.
The general preventive effect concerns deterring citizens who might consider committing crimes.

Finally, sentencing frameworks also matter for the sense of justice, that is, citizens' feeling that offenders receive a fair and appropriate punishment.

One sometimes gets the impression that it is consideration for the sense of justice that drives politicians when they tighten sentences over the years.

Research shows that longer sentences have little significance for whether an offender commits violent crimes, for example.

At the same time, both Danish and international research show that victims and citizens generally tend to favor lighter punishments the more they know about the offender's situation.

The nuances above are seldomly not a part of the coverage of crime and politics about crime legislation.

Victim Support

At Victim Support Denmark, the way major crime cases are covered in the media is somewhat of a concern. Press and Communications Advisor Torbjørn Næs Bertelsen points out that the true crime genre is more popular than ever, but that this renewed interest in old cases sometimes comes at the expense of victims and their families.

In a conversation about the organization's work, Bertelsen explains how media coverage of serious crimes can have a profound impact on victims, witnesses, and their relatives.

Victim Support Denmark offers assistance to anyone affected by traumatic or shocking events—free of charge, anonymously, and around the clock. Victims and witnesses can contact the organization's phone counseling service, staffed by volunteers across 12 local branches around the clock.

Bertelsen acknowledges that most Danish media generally handle violent crime cases ethically correct and stresses the importance of factual and accurate reporting. However, he urges the media to take particular care when revisiting old cases within the true crime genre. "These stories often reopen old wounds for victims and their relatives, and it is rarely in their interest to see the case brought up again," he says.

He suggests that media outlets should carefully consider whether there is genuinely new information or developments that justify renewed coverage. "For example, are there new investigative methods, new facts, or other reasons that make it relevant to revisit the case?" Bertelsen asks.

Bertelsen also offers a concrete suggestion for how the media can help those affected by crime or accidents. While it is usually the police who refer victims and witnesses to Victim Support

Denmark, he believes the media could play a vital role in helping to ensure that more victims know about the support services available to them.

“When media outlets cover suicide, it is standard practice to mention the national suicide prevention hotline. This is an excellent approach, which the media could expand on when reporting on criminal cases and major accidents,” Bertelsen explains. “Not everyone knows that Victim Support Denmark offers free and anonymous counseling, but with the help of the media, more people who are affected by trauma can get the support they need.”

The Human Side of Criminals

At the Danish Prison and Probation Service, which manages Danish prisons, and at the Prison Officers’ Union, the trade union for prison officers, there is understandably a focus on ensuring the Danish penal system functions as well as possible.
For many years, Danish prisons have been overcrowded, and there have been problems recruiting new prison officers, with relatively low wages also being an issue.

Stories about these challenges have featured in the media, and Bo Yde, chairman of the Prison Officers’ Union, believes the subject at times been covered superficially with quick news bites and a demand for short comments from the various sources.

He calls for the media to go deeper into the issues covered and to be more critical of both politicians and union representatives on the matter.

Bo Yde misses a more thorough debate about which types of punishments are effective, as well as media interest in how criminals are rehabilitated and how to ensure they do not return to the prison system.

Harsher punishments, such as those recently enacted in the government’s January 2025 law package, are not necessarily the solution to this problem.

Overall, tightening punishments is pointless if there is neither enough room in the prisons nor staff to guard the inmates, he remarks.

An overlooked topic is the possibility for convicts to serve their sentences with electronic ankle monitors or community service. This is a topic rarely covered by the media but one that

can have many positive effects for a convict who, for example, can stay with family and keep a job while serving their sentence.

This gives the convict a better chance of rehabilitation instead of risking losing family and employment during imprisonment and being released in a worse social situation than before incarceration.
In Danish prisons, inmates have statutory rights to education and work during their sentence, and significant rehabilitative work takes place in prisons, which the media rarely covers. Similarly, efforts are made to help released prisoners return to a normal life without crime. This area also offers good opportunities for constructive journalistic angles on the Danish penal system.

Like Arne Simonsen, press officer of the Crime Prevention Council, Bo Yde points out that it is easy to demonize criminals in the way they are portrayed in the media.
Both remind us that behind stories about hardened criminals there are often neglected and failed children—sometimes also failed by society. These structural stories could be a subject for a constructive crime reporter as well, they suggest.

Transforming Local Crime Reporting

For four years, the Poynter Institute in Florida has offered the course "Transforming Local Crime Reporting to Public Safety Journalism" to crime desks across American news organizations.
The course, initiated by the Associated Press and Poynter's Institute, is now in its fifth year, and over 500 journalists from more than 80 different media outlets have completed the nine-month online course focused on improving local news coverage of crime.

The course is offered to news organizations that want to move away from "if it bleeds, it leads" journalism toward explanatory and accountability reporting. It aims to ensure that citizens in local communities can use journalism to better understand their community and improve their ability to ensure their own safety. It addresses crime prevention and how news outlets can avoid retraumatizing communities already heavily affected by crime through their coverage.
In its course description, the Poynter Institute states:

"Why is there a disconnect between what your audience wants out of crime reporting and what your newsroom traditionally delivers? News consumers want information about crime trends, personal security, and system accountability, but newsrooms devote their resources to covering breaking news about violence."

This results —in an information gap that leaves the public misinformed, receiving inaccurate narratives rather than well-informed news about what creates security and accountability in their communities.

After four years of teaching, Poynter's instructors have made several key observations:

One finding is that changing the newsroom culture is difficult. Covering court cases and stories from police is often cheap, relatively easy, and quick.

Going deeper into crime statistics and the causes of different types of crime is much harder, experience at Poynters shows. It takes a long-term effort in which crime desks must rethink their content and reporting methods.

Like commercial local Danish media, American media struggle to retain paying users and remain relevant to new users in the communities they cover. This is one reason news organizations are interested in Poynter's courses, according to the institute's own articles. There is a need for innovation and development in journalism if media are to continue being perceived as relevant in local communities.

According to Poynter's course leaders, one problem is that classic crime news does not help readers understand how they can live safer lives or how crime can be prevented more broadly.

At the same time, media often overlook that the police and justice system have their own narratives—whether consciously or unconsciously promoted when talking to the media. This can concern their role in solving cases or issues of resources. Thus, police work is also political, and for this reason both American and Danish police districts often employ press officers to manage media relations.

Several news organizations who have attended the Poynter's program state that one way to change newsroom culture is to be more transparent with the public about what is known and what is not known about a case, and where information comes from.

Poynter suggests that changing the news culture around crime reporting happens in three steps:

Step 1: Consider why your media outlet covers crime, with answers that go beyond mere interest. What should readers/viewers use crime journalism for?

Step 2: Consider which types of crime are covered. A crime desk in the US stopped covering non-fatal shootings and became more attentive to following up on dropped cases.

These experiences may not directly transfer to a more peaceful Danish context, but it may still be worth considering whether it makes sense to cover every minor offense over the course of a day, as sometimes happens in local media.

Step 3: Acquire data, understand trends, and make your readers and media users more informed. Like in Denmark, crime rates have generally declined in the US, but most people believe the opposite, according to Poynter. The institute also point out that media typically do not reduce the amount of crime journalism even when crime rates fall.

Does it work then?

Experience from the Poynter Institute shows that it can be difficult to maintain a high number of pageviews when the number of articles and the content changes from quick breaking news to more in-depth articles with added context and facts.

However, according to Poynter Institute, experiences from some of the many news organizations that have completed the program indicate that these comprehensive changes in how crime news is produced pay off in the long run.

Although it initially results in fewer articles and a drop in pageviews, data from several newsrooms show that the new type of journalism leads to more paying subscribers over time, according to Poynter's Institute.

But changing newsroom culture is not easy, notes leader Kelly McBride, who wrote in 2023: "Going beyond mostly cosmetic reforms is much harder for news companies because it requires the entire staff to rethink how it defines breaking news. … Most crime stories are the junk food of the daily news budget. Nobody wants to run them, but breaking the habit is incredibly difficult."

The Danish Context

Reading about Poynter's Institute's findings after five years working to improve crime journalism at local news outlets in the US, it is clear that conditions differ somewhat from those in Denmark. In and around large US cities, there are neighborhoods affected by very high crime rates, gang crime is widespread in many places, and firearms are generally common in society. In comparison, Denmark is a very peaceful country.

Still, I believe some of Poynter Institute's experiences can be transferred to a Danish context, and several points align with observations from the Crime Prevention Council, the Victim Support Service, and the Prison Association.

The first point concerns trust: News media have a responsibility to deliver the best obtainable version of the truth in order to maintain public trust. Media coverage of crime influences public opinion on crime prevention and sentencing, and when public opinion shifts, politicians' positions often shift as well.
Thus, media can contribute to skewing the public's perception of crime and indirectly affect how politicians legislate on the issue.

A second point related to the first concerns facts and statistics:
A 2016 analysis by Rambøll and the Crime Prevention Council shows that Danes are overly pessimistic about crime trends in Denmark.

This analysis indicates that people who typically read tabloid newspapers such as BT and Ekstra Bladet, as well as local media outlets, have a more negative perception of crime trends than those who read major national newspapers.
The study takes into account typical socio-economic variables, but the direction of causality cannot be definitively established. It is unclear whether the media shape perceptions of crime trends or if people who read certain types of media already have particular views on crime.

The analysis references American, Finnish, and British research showing that media portrayals of crime affect how worried interviewees are about crime in everyday life, with the effect being stronger when the media are local.

Overall, citizens derive most of their knowledge from the media, according to the study.

In any case, it is in everyone's interest to have a balanced picture of crime that reflects actual trends, some types of crime decrease while others increase. If cybercrime and online fraud are rising, these should be covered more prominently in the media than, for example, nightlife violence, which is declining.
Overall, a media outlet might consider whether too much space is devoted to crime if crime is not a major societal problem. Crime coverage inevitably takes up space and journalistic resources that could go to other important stories.

The third point is about the social aspects of crime:
Both the Crime Prevention Council, Victim Support Service, and the Prison Association point out that behind crime statistics are often stories of criminals who have been failed—people who have been abused or let down by the system during their upbringing.
Stories about who commits crime rarely make it to the news media's "columns," and when they do, they often become either victim or hero stories.

These stories are often a lot more time-consuming and difficult to produce, which may be why they are quite rare. But they are worth the while, especially if they succeed in painting a nuanced picture of a person portraited.

The fourth point concerns the prevention of crime:
In Danish prisons there is significant amount work done to educate and prepare inmates for a life without crime and researchers have substantial knowledge about what works preventively to avoid young people, for example, ending up in prison. In other words. There are plenty of issues that can pose more solution-oriented stories of crime.

Constructive Approaches to Crime Journalism

Constructive journalism is solution-oriented, nuanced, critical, and promotes democratic dialogue in society. The role of journalism is not to tell audiences what to think but to help them think in order to make up their own minds about the world—on the best possible and most informed basis.

But can constructive crime journalism be both critical and solution-oriented, and how does it help citizens better understand and make decisions in everyday life and form opinions about what is happening in society?

None of the sources I have had conversations with for this project believe that crime in society should not be described or closely covered, especially when there are large, unusual cases that naturally interest readers. Clearly it is important for citizens to gain insight into how the justice system works, how criminals are tried, convicted, or acquitted.

Similarly, media users and citizens have an interest in knowing about police work and crime investigation generally, as well as understanding how burglaries and cybercrime occur and media can play a role in how citizens protect themselves from crime and help each other, for example through neighborhood watch programs.

However, it is not the media's role to make citizens unnecessarily worried by creating a distorted picture of the amount of crime in society.

This can be a risk if crime is covered solely as isolated incidents detached from broader societal developments and with a strong focus on sensation and outrage.

In my view, constructive crime journalism is more about *what* we write about than *how* we write about it. Using good narrative tools and dramatization is not a problem if this is what it takes to make people consume quality journalism. But it is clearly problematic if crime coverage consists solely of crime stories without perspective and only to entertain.

How ever such articles could be easily enhanced with nuance and a systemic perspective by adding simple facts from crime statistics and by emphasizing that a particular situation/event is unusual.

In court reporting, journalism can relatively easily add fact boxes about the justice system that educate readers about, for example, the Administration of Justice Act, which protects defendants but also considers the sense of justice among victims and ordinary citizens.

These hands-on and in my view easy "tricks" of adding fact and context to the traditional coverage of crime can improve the overall coverage.

A balanced diet

Kelly McBride from Poynter is in my view right that crime reporting often functions as a kind of junk food on news websites.
She's also right that media consumers shouldn't live on junk food alone — they need vitamins too. And the vitamins are stories with societal relevance. Stories that bring something new to the table, that matter to the Danish public, and that contribute to the democratic formation of opinion, as described by the researchers behind the Danish Power Inquiry (*Magtudredningen*).

In my view, the daily coverage of crime should occasionally - or even often - rise above the individual cases as they unfold in courtrooms and police logs and instead add a more systemic perspective on crime in society.

However, junk food isn't always bad. If fast-paced crime news shared via social media can draw new users to established news sites — where they are also exposed to other forms of journalism — then these stories become a kind of device for delivering other kinds of journalistic content. They can serve as a method by which, for example, young people "stumble upon" other news stories that are important for local communities to share a common frame of reference — something that is essential in a democratic society.

In my view, the fact that much crime journalism is now delivered in more entertaining true-crime formats, using techniques borrowed from fiction, is not in itself a problem.
But it becomes a balancing act when established media organizations become overly eager to reach large audiences through dramatizations and slick narrative devices. Here, it is important to hold on to the principle that journalism must have societal relevance and perspective.

The balancing act lies in daring to tell important stories about crime in new and engaging ways — without undermining credibility and public trust.

With relatively simple tools crime reporting can become more constructive but it takes work to make a sustainable and long-lasting change.

It all begins with the journalists and editors asking simple questions of why we report on crime and what we want our audiences to gain from our stories.

Finally, some pieces of advice to become a more constructive crime desk:

Recommendations :

- Be transparent about the process and about what we know and don't know in crime stories.
- Create a fact sheet with boxes, experts, and interest groups that can help qualify journalism on crime.
- Consider how much crime journalism should be part of the overall news mix. Should the volume of crime coverage decrease when crime rates go down?
- Invent new formats, develop ideas.
- Follow up on old cases.
- Add nuance and context — include data.
- Approach politicians and the police with critical questions.
- Add fact boxes — they provide quick "vitamins": What do we know about punishment? What do we know about types of sentencing? What do the statistics and public opinion surveys tell us about people's sense of justice, legal codes, and the justice system?
- Be aware of biases. Both your own and your sources'.
- Remember the sometimes overlooked stories that are also stories about crime in society:

  For example stories about:

  Sentencing forms such as electronic tagging and community service.

  About the reintegration of convicted and formerly incarcerated individuals.

  About the social dimension of crime: Who commits it, and why?

  Femicide – the most common kind of homicide in Denmark