

# The Great Loss of Control: We still don't really know what to do

Danish local media are getting closer to cracking the code, but still far from safe harbour

For more than 20 years Danish media has tried to balance clickbait with constructive journalism. With 350 jobs lost since 2021, local newspapers are struggling to stay alive. In this report, Anette Vestergaard from *Bornholms Tidende* - a local newspaper on the Baltic island of Bornholm with 5,800 subscribers - looks at how a handful of more-than-100-year-old local dailies are dealing with clever paywalls, digital transformation, and the battle against the algorithms of the tech giants.

Editors-in-chief from *Lolland-Falsters Folketidende*, *Nordjyske*, *JFM*, and *Bornholms Tidende* share their stories of fighting for survival. Some take a systematic approach. Others are searching for new business models. One paper has managed to slow the decline. But as the editor-in-chief in Northern Jutland puts it: "We've all been too slow."

Editor-in-chief and CEO Ole Sloth from *Lolland-Falsters Folketidende* is in the middle of navigating the shift from a print newspaper to a reality where Facebook and other social media platforms remain popular display windows for the local community.

Sloth, who has a background at the Danish tabloid *Ekstra Bladet*, has in his three years as the front figure for the country's oldest local daily - now with 6,700 subscribers - come to recognise the need for editorial development: introducing video journalism, improving planning, and taking a more critical approach to local reporting.

At the same time, Sloth openly acknowledges the financial challenges posed by declining advertising revenue and presents a vision of replacing the traditional paywall with a paid membership model instead.

Ole Sloth and *Lolland-Falsters Folketidende* illustrate how a local/regional media outlet isn't just competing with tech giants - but also the local TV2 station, which publishes its news online for free.

Ole Sloth is probably the editor-in-chief in Denmark who waited the longest before asking readers to pay for journalism. He explains that *Folketidende* had virtually no digital presence when he took the editor's chair in Nykøbing in late 2022. Back then, the website mainly consisted of wire stories from Ritzau and leftover photos that didn't make it into the print edition. The site was too slow, and the coverage lacked any real pulse. Three years later, Sloth still felt the digital journalism simply isn't good enough for people to pay for.

Only now, he says, is the newspaper's technical platform and editorial workflow catching up to the digital reality. In May 2025, the newsroom upgraded to a new website and implemented a digital planning system which, according to Sloth, means they finally have a quality product capable of supporting a paid model. He expects to introduce a paywall in 2026. But instead of a classic "hard" paywall for news, Sloth wants to transform the business into a membership model (*Klub FT*). The membership, he explains, should include journalism, services, and a sense of community.

The transformation from a traditional newspaper operation to a digital membership model with its own radio channel and video journalists represents a fundamental shift in the business model, organisational structure, and journalistic identity. At the core of this identity shift is a move away from the classic pursuit of newspaper subscribers toward a club-based mindset. As the editor-in-chief puts it: "*We don't believe future generations will pay for journalism behind a traditional paywall just because that's how it's always been done.*" The ambition is to create a product so deeply embedded in local life that being a member becomes the equivalent of holding a "*Lolland-Falster driver's licence*" - something you simply need in order to function as an informed citizen in the area.

Ole Sloth hopes that journalism and digital communities can one day outperform global social media in the provinces by focusing on human presence, identity-shaping memberships, and a deep local rootedness that algorithms cannot replicate. The strategy guiding *Folketidende* is built on the recognition that, even though rural Denmark is often "Facebook country", where much communication happens in groups, the local newspaper can offer a level of quality and belonging that the tech giants cannot provide.

According to Sloth, the strongest advantage over global players is the physical presence of journalists in the community. *Folketidende* has, for instance, 20 reporters covering an area of 100,000 people. His argument is straightforward: if Mark Zuckerberg were to match that level of coverage with journalists in every "cluster" of 100,000 inhabitants around the world, he would need to hire four million reporters - an impossibility. A local newsroom, however,

can offer a mix of news, features, everyday life, and “micro-communities” with an authenticity and intimacy that Facebook cannot match.

Sloth says this is done through citizen involvement, including public debates, reader events, and a desire to create more direct contact between citizens and journalists.

To compete with platforms like TikTok and Instagram, the newsroom is shifting to a *digital-first* rather than print-oriented production model. *Folketidende* is now investing in video journalism and short-form reels to draw younger users into the newspaper’s universe. Stories are published when they have pulse and relevance, instead of waiting for the print deadline.

Overall, Sloth’s strategy is about shifting from being a distributor of information to becoming the core of a community - where being a “member” is the key to understanding and participating in local life.

The price of joining the club will be set fairly high - around 300 DKK per month - because, as Sloth puts it, it must carry real value as the key to the local community.

# Kevin Walsh: Goodbye to Postcode Journalism

**In Aalborg - Denmark’s fourth-largest city with 130,000 inhabitants - the situation mirrors that of *Folketidende*: a significant decline in revenue and readership. The old *Aalborg Stiftstidende*, now part of *Det Nordjyske Mediehus*, is pursuing a strategy led by Kevin Walsh that prioritises quality over quantity. The print newspaper is scheduled to be phased out in 2027 in favour of a digital subscription model with a strong focus on video, audio, and authentic human connections.**

**The interview with Kevin Walsh took place in October 2025, when he was still editor-in-chief of *Nordjyske* (formerly known as *Aalborg Stiftstidende*). Two months later, he was replaced by an editor who has now publicly stated his intention to bring back traditional local journalism.**

Like Ole Sloth, Walsh stresses the need to build a new audience loyalty among younger generations by moving away from traditional postcode-based coverage and towards more constructive and relevant content. By using data and professional distribution, the newsroom aims to demonstrate its distinct value at a time where artificial intelligence and global tech companies challenge classical journalism.

The focus is now on creating value for people in Northern Jutland through trustworthy journalism that goes beyond shop openings and small-town sports rivalries.

To counter the dominance of the tech giants and the structural decline in the industry, Kevin Walsh points to a series of radical strategic moves that break with traditional local journalism and the passive distribution of news. The strategy is built on the recognition that you cannot cut your way out of the crisis – content must be reinvented at a fundamental level.

The strategy also acknowledges that the digital daily rhythm has changed. People no longer have time to read in the morning; they prefer to listen or watch. Hence the goal for *Nordjyske* is for the outlet, after 2027, to be consumed primarily through audio and video. Walsh has put it bluntly: “*We will stop publishing the print newspaper in 2027.*” He is therefore the editor-in-chief who intends to take the most drastic steps in an attempt to save a struggling business - by simply stopping the print.

This decision has been met with scepticism in the media industry. Many believe it is unwise to abandon the only reliable source of revenue in a media house and doubt the decision will ever actually be carried out. Walsh remains firm that it is the right move. It is rooted in a harsh economic reality and a strategic need to force a digital transformation before it is too late. “*We'll wait with the decision of whether it will be early 2027 or late in the year,*” Walsh says.

Walsh’s first years in Northern Jutland were a steep learning curve:

*“I arrived with a lot of experience from the major Danish media group, Berlingske, where I worked as digital editor from 2018 to 2022. We succeeded with many things back then. But it's clear to me now that we need to look much more closely at audience segments. Are we actually optimising for the customers we already have? Are we good enough at building a new following - and here I'm thinking about people under 60? Our current target group is 30- to 55-year-olds. My fear is that we're optimising for something that isn't relevant for the next generation of media users. After a year in local journalism, I realised we needed to do something completely different.”*

Instead, Kevin Walsh now wants to move towards multimedia journalism and train reporters to become video journalists. Daily reels are already being produced for *Nordjyske.dk*.

At the same time, the newsroom is investing in podcasts within niches such as sports (for example the local soccer team AaB and handball) and crime in order to build dedicated followings.

Kevin Walsh also wants to make journalists more visible with photos and extended bylines so users can feel the human presence behind the journalism.

To win over the next generation of media users (the 30- to 55-year-olds), *Nordjyske* is also working on changing its tone. “*We need to get away from being perceived as a media outlet made by ‘grumpy old men’ sitting in an ivory tower pointing out mistakes,*” Kevin Walsh says. In the future, the journalism should be constructive, solutions-oriented, and “*activist in its belief in Northern Jutland.*”

Behind these decisions lies not just a desire to try something new. The most direct reason for the radical reorganisation of the old newspaper is economic, Kevin Walsh says, emphasising that even though the media house is owned by a foundation with a solid equity base of 300-400 million DKK, “the cash box is empty.” *Nordjyske* has lost 30 percent of its revenue in six years, and although the print newspaper is still considered “the golden egg” on the top line, it is also extremely expensive to maintain. Distribution costs are high (“it’s a long way deliver it to Hans in Hirtshals”), and the costs of printing and delivery drain resources. The number of journalists has been halved over the past decade.

By setting a firm deadline in 2027, the media house forces itself to focus 100 percent on the new business model - digital subscribers - instead of spending energy trying to keep a dying platform alive.

Kevin Walsh puts quality over quantity. Many journalists instinctively feel that the key to surviving in a local newsroom today is the ability to produce - and produce a lot. Walsh says the opposite: we need to produce less.

The reaction among editorial staff was initially dismissive - which Kevin Walsh understands.

*“It was tough for the organisation with all those changes. At first, people simply couldn’t handle it. Their motivation collapsed. But today everyone knows it’s fine to spend two or three days to produce something of real quality.”*

## Walsh: We got lazy

While local journalists have spent the past 20 years working themselves to the bone, the situation has looked quite different in the executive offices and boardrooms. Today, with every third local-newspaper journalist job gone (according to the Danish Union of Journalists,) many leaders are still struggling to find solutions - that is, solutions other than laying people off. According to Kevin Walsh, a large part of the decline in Danish media can, bluntly put, be attributed to laziness.

Walsh argues that warning signs were ignored for years. Denmark has long been a “world champion in Facebook,” with extremely high usage rates, making it easy and efficient for outlets to simply publish stories on Facebook, thus generating both reach and new subscribers with very little effort, Walsh says.

But that convenience made the media forget that they historically owned the distribution - and therefore the information monopoly. By handing power over to the tech giants, they lost control.

The problem escalated, Walsh says, when Facebook changed its algorithm from a news-driven feed to prioritising relationships and interactions between friends, a shift that over the years has halved traffic to media outlets. Because Danish media had become so dependent on this “free” distribution instead of building their own digital strength, the algorithm change hit Denmark particularly hard. Walsh also points out that Danish media were generally too late in adapting to digital transformation, and because many began by offering their content for free, the industry now faces a major challenge in convincing users to pay.

Kevin Walsh wants to launch a tactical counteroffensive. A newly hired acquisition manager will help *Nordjyske* regain lost ground by professionalising content distribution and ensuring that journalism actually reaches the right audiences.

Whether it will succeed remains to be seen. *Nordjyske* currently has 25,000 subscribers. Of these, 10,000 are print subscribers, whose papers must be delivered across a vast area stretching from Skagen in the north to Hobro in the south. Kevin Walsh wants to raise the total number to 30,000. He therefore announced a major reorganisation in early October 2023, just two months after taking over as editor-in-chief. Since then, he has led two additional reorganisations. Today, the entire media house has 50 employees - down from 300 over a 20 yearlong period.

*Nordjyske* is not alone. According to Danish trade magazine *Journalisten*, 350 journalism jobs have disappeared in Denmark over the past four years. One employee at *Århus Stiftstidende* told the same magazine how he had lived through 24 rounds of cutbacks over 35 years - from starting in 1989 until retiring in 2025. During that time, the newsroom at *Århus Stiftstidende* shrank from more than 100 journalists to just 20, with Aarhus being the second largest city in Denmark with 370,000 inhabitants. A frightening - and all too familiar - illustration of how the crisis has hit local media like a hammer that keeps on punching.

Kevin Walsh sums up the crisis facing the proud old newspaper houses this way:

*“If I’m completely honest: this is an industry that fundamentally still doesn’t know what to do. And because we don’t know what to do, we’re not really dealing with it. We just let things run, and then we keep getting a little smaller. The goal is to shrink as little as possible, to keep revenue as high as possible, to keep things going. And here at *Nordjyske*, we’re saying: this can’t go on.”*

## JFM Opens the Doors to the Engine Room:

# We Track Performance Continuously

**JFM - *Jydske Fynske Medier* - is now headquartered in Vejle. But in the original buildings in Esbjerg, the company has spent the past 11 years carrying out an unprecedented acquisition and consolidation strategy in Denmark. Fourteen local media outlets from across the country have been bought and brought together under the same leadership. Strategic plans are still hatched in Esbjerg.**

**Along the way, JFM has implemented a Norwegian-inspired data-monitoring system that measures daily output across the now 15 units under the foundation-owned JFM umbrella - minute by minute.**

**The journey toward a streamlined, sales-oriented model of producing journalism has not been without challenges. But today, most of the early growing pains have disappeared. That's what Jesper Nørgaard, editor-in-chief for editorial development at JFM, explains as he, for the first time, opens the door to the engine room of the Jutlandic media giant.**

Jesper Nørgaard, 56, graduated from the Danish School of Journalism in 1994. A true diehard production journalist, he has spent his entire career within what is now JFM: first at *Jydske Vestkysten* for 21 years, including as local editor in Esbjerg, and since 2015 in various roles at JFM's old headquarters.

The story of how one West Jutland newspaper became 15 across the country began when *Syddanske Medier* (*Jydske Vestkysten*), *Jyske Medier* (*Fredericia Dagblad*, *Horsens Folkeblad*, and *Vejle Amts Folkeblad*), and *Fynske Medier* (*Fyns Amts Avis* and *Fyens Stiftstidende*) merged in 2015 and began introducing shared systems and workflows. *Avisen Danmark* was launched as a joint national section in the print newspaper.

A couple of years later, JFM bought the newspapers in Holstebro, Struer, Lemvig and Ringkøbing-Skjern, as well as local flagships such as *Viborg Stifts Folkeblad*, *Randers Amtsavis* and *Århus Stiftstidende* from Berlingske. In 2020, *Helsingør Dagblad* and *KøbenhavnLiv* were added, purchased from North Media.

But the story doesn't end there. In 2024, Norway's Amedia bought *Berlingske Tidende*. Afterwards, JFM and Berlingske exchanged shares and now own 30 percent of each other. Suddenly, JFM found itself with Norwegian co-owners.

The Norwegian way of operating was not unfamiliar to JFM, as the company, according to Jesper Nørgaard, has been inspired by Amedia for many years.

*"We are heavily inspired by Norway's Amedia, which has now bought Berlingske - and therefore a part of us. We've been working with them for several years, and we've spent an*

*incredible amount of time in Norway since 2015. Now we'll be working even more closely together as a result of the consolidation."*

The partnership with the Norwegian media giant has been an unconditional success, Nørgaard says.

*"We've achieved economies of scale along the way, which have freed up resources and given us a better overview of our data."*

Depending on how you measure it, JFM/Berlingske is today either the largest or the second-largest media company in Denmark. The other major players are Bonnier and JP/Politiken.

But the journey doesn't end here, says Jesper Nørgaard:

*"We want to be bigger. We always have an open door for those who can't make the finances add up. These aren't hostile takeovers - but we're always ready to talk. Essentially, we can produce your newspaper, handle the printing, the layout, the payroll."*

Among journalists, many stories have circulated about JFM's new way of producing journalism. Not all of them positive. But Jesper Nørgaard has agreed to lift the lid on how the group's 400 journalists actually work.

*"We take a scientific approach,"* he says.

In 2021, the organisation conducted a deep dive into its editorial data, pulling 20 staff members off their regular duties for a week to categorise 11,000 articles by topic and performance: What was read, what wasn't? The material was then translated into a bubble chart showing which subject areas performed best, which performed worst, and everything in between. The result was a graph with a curve that starts with the most-read articles and ends with the least-read - a steep downward slope with a long tail. From that came the term *halestof* ("tail content"), JFM's label for journalism with very few readers, and *Det Gyldne Snit* ("the Golden Threshold"), the point on the curve that stories should ideally perform above.

As soon as the results were in, action followed. And from his seat in the engine room, Jesper Nørgaard readily admits that the process initially met resistance, both internally and among sources. One reason was simply that certain types of stories stopped being produced, he explains.

*"Today we no longer produce as much culture or sports coverage, because the data dive showed these were some of the least-read categories. We also take far fewer press releases about events. That has undoubtedly disappointed many of our sources, who for years were used to having their events mentioned. Some things still slip through when a reporter wants*

*to be nice to a source. That will always happen when you have to execute a strategy through all 400 journalists we employ. But we continue to communicate clearly that we must focus our efforts on what interests our readers the most. That means you see much of the same type of content across all 15 of our publications - with a few exceptions, such as traffic, which matters more in large cities than in rural areas."*

The goal in the 2025 strategy was one billion DKK in annual digital revenue.

*"That goal has not been reached - nor has the goal of 200,000 fully paying subscribers,"* Nørgaard acknowledges.

## Busy With the Right Things

Looking at the editorial side, the new strategy has led to a different way of doing journalism - and therefore a different way of being a journalist.

The enormous shift in the work culture where journalists have long been used to working independently still requires constant attention, according to the development editor. To ensure that reporters focus on the topics that sell best, JFM established an *intervention team* in 2021 to help Jesper Nørgaard push the digital transformation and editorial development in the right direction.

The intervention team consists of five development editors who are each attached to a number of titles and specialise in areas such as AI, newsletters, social media, robot journalism, and more. The team visits all JFM newspapers once a month and reviews, among other things, whether there is *pulse* online - that is, whether journalists' articles are performing well in terms of reading time and conversions. Some development editors oversee many newsrooms, others only two - simply because the papers vary greatly in size, Nørgaard says. *JydskeVestkysten* has nine newsrooms; *Fredericia Dagblad* just one.

To gain a full overview of productivity across the country, JFM has developed a management tool called JourFeedback, inspired by Amedia. Here, key figures can be tracked at the level of the entire newspaper, each newsroom, and each individual journalist. Daily performance is monitored continuously on a dashboard - a digital panel showing how each story is performing. *"If you're above the green line, you're in calm waters,"* Jesper Nørgaard says.

JFM evaluates the productivity of each newsroom on a monthly basis.

*"We have a monthly status meeting with all the main newsrooms where we talk data. This was met with scepticism at first, but today everyone is on board. There's often an outcry if the numbers are down. Then we talk about what they can do differently,"* Nørgaard says.

Today, the intervention team is considered a support function out in the newsrooms, according to Nørgaard.

*“There’s no doubt that keeping track of development and diving into data is something the local newsrooms struggle to find time for. They already have more than enough to do keeping daily operations running. ‘Come and help,’ they say. Today the initial scepticism has been replaced with inspiration and input.”*

There are clear expectations for each journalists’ performance, Nørgaard says. As a rule of thumb, a full-time reporter produces eight articles per week. Three to four of these should be more substantial stories with multiple sources, while the rest can be smaller single-source pieces. But just as there is still a difference in the price of a print subscription (8,000 DKK per year for *Jydske Vestkysten*, 6,000 DKK for *Horsens Folkeblad*), output also varies from newsroom to newsroom, depending on size.

*“Some newsrooms produce three articles a day, while others produce eight. The most important thing is that we’re busy with the right things,”* Nørgaard says.

The total goal is to publish 315 articles per day across all titles. Low production must be addressed - especially if performance, measured by reading time and sale, is also weak. *“I have an example from a newsroom where one employee produced three times as much as the colleague next to her - and had far more readers and conversions. With fewer staff, we can’t afford to have someone who doesn’t perform. We need to address it, and if we can’t lift that person, we have to make a replacement so the rest don’t sink. That’s our duty as management - but the staff on the floor care about it too,”* Nørgaard says.

The intervention team doesn’t just monitor whether the types of stories fall within the strategic targets. Headlines, subheads, and captions are also frequent discussion points - as is framing, especially on stories about complex or unglamorous topics, Nørgaard says.

*“Only the article text is behind the paywall now. The headline and subhead must answer the question every reader asks himself: Why should I read this story?”*

Overall, the newsrooms work in a highly methodical way to ensure that strategy is carried out in practice. Nørgaard calls it an ongoing process. Eight times a year, JFM hosts an “editor school” on Teams, where new insights and larger initiatives - such as local elections and campaigns - are discussed with editors.

Knowledge-sharing at editor level is crucial, Nørgaard stresses.

*“A lot gets lost if we only say it to the editor-in-chiefs.”*

It has been a long time since talking about sales stopped being a taboo at JFM, and the efforts to increase revenue continue. In the back of the engine room, experiments are underway with

AI and clever ways to gain new subscribers. At the moment, data specialists are working on an experiment to train AI to determine whether a potential article should be open or closed on an individual user level.

*“We call it the dynamic paywall. We can track our users through login or IP-based user numbers. If it’s their first visit, it’s unlikely we’ll sell them a subscription. But if the system sees they’ve visited several times recently, it will eventually start showing them a paywall — even if the newsroom published the article as open. And we’ve already seen cases where articles that were open by default triggered a sale when we closed them to non-paying readers. That’s why we’re currently testing with 50 percent going through the paywall and the remaining 50 percent closed.”*

## A battle with the gut-feeling

Peter Orry is one of the key figures who has led the development of a new way of doing journalism in Denmark - for better and for worse. He has spent his entire journalistic career at *JydskeVestkysten*, now JFM. For the past eight years, he served as editor-in-chief for all of JFM’s publications. After the cross-alliance with Berlingske Media in 2024, however, management decided to hand the editor-in-chief title back to the individual newsrooms - effectively bringing Orry’s role as “the whip” (his own words) to an end.

Peter Orry spent more than 30 years at *JydskeVestkysten* - from 1985 to 2000 as a reporter and editor, and then as editorial editor-in-chief, CEO, and finally editor-in-chief from 2010.

For many years, the newsroom simply kept doing things the way they always had, says Orry. Even as subscribers were leaving in droves. After the 2015 merge, however, everything changed. Targets were introduced, one round of cuts followed another, and Jesper Rosener - the JFM CEO leading the new strategy - publicly criticised journalists in *Journalisten* for lacking motivation when strategies failed and the bottom line turned blood-red. Comments like that are frowned upon in Danish newsrooms - and in relations between management and staff anywhere - and the confrontational tone was tough on everyone, Orry admits. Still, he chose to stay loyal to the organisation and the mission, and he implemented the data-driven model in all its detail, in close collaboration with Jesper Nørgaard.

Now that the dust has settled, he can see that things are finally beginning to move in the right direction - both in digital development and in sales across the JFM group.

*“I’m more optimistic now than I was three years ago. We’ve been through some bloody tough rounds. We’ve become significantly fewer journalists. What makes me optimistic is the growth of 40 percent four years in a row in the number of digital subscribers. It gives me some confidence that we’re maybe starting to crack the digital code.”*

Clickbait is not a term that appeals to Orry.

Even though JFM is completely open about working strategically to sell its journalism, Orry is no fan of yellow breaking banners or tabloid-style headlines.

*“It’s not about chasing cheap clicks - it’s about cultivating long-term relationships with people who eventually end up becoming customers,” he says.*

*“We’ve tried to break with the old gut-feeling trauma. But to me, clickbait is a headline that promises something the article doesn’t deliver. That is, of course, strictly forbidden here. What is an obligation is to write appealing headlines that make people want to read on.”*

In an age of data dashboards and performance metrics, Peter Orry maintains that strong critical journalism still earns the greatest recognition in the newsrooms. And it can very well be constructive.

*“In my view, critical journalism is the most constructive journalism there is,” he says. “It brings problems to light - and then the responsible people usually fix them.”*

Orry is also in favour of reader involvement - when it makes sense.

He brings up an example from 2025, when the newsroom at *Dagbladet Ringkøbing-Skjern* held a large public meeting in the town hall, triggered by critical reporting. A reporter had produced 30-40 articles about absurd property valuations, *“and in the end I think the Valuation Agency got so fed up that they reached out to the editor-in-chief in Ringkøbing and said: ‘Why don’t we organise a public meeting about this up at your place?’”*

After the meeting, people could speak directly with caseworkers from the Valuation Agency (Vurderingsstyrelsen) and have their cases reviewed. The event was a resounding success and, in Orry’s view, embodied all the elements that make for good, classic journalism. This is precisely where data monitoring proves its worth, he says. The numbers show that users are not only interested in crime stories and shops opening or closing. They also care about local governance, school wellbeing, and sloppy casework in both municipal and state systems.

Readers want to get to the bottom of things - that is beyond doubt, according to the data. And having this evidence has strengthened the journalism, Orry argues, because it provides validation instead of relying solely on an editor’s intuition.

*“In the past we didn’t have databases that could show us what people wanted. We mindlessly published everything that came through the door. Nothing was too small for the paper, as we used to say. Today we know there are plenty of things that are too small to go in the paper. So I actually think our journalism is better now.”*

JFM does not spend time developing new forms of journalism.

*“No new genres, no. We try out new things sometimes, but we always return to classic journalism: being critical of power and remembering that you do it on behalf of the people you serve. I still believe that will be the way forward - even 30 years from now.”*

# The Bumblebee That Managed to Fly

**Kristoffer Gravgaard is, so far, perhaps the only editor-in-chief who has succeeded in halting the decline of a long-established local newspaper - and there are several reasons for that. Geography is one of them, says the editor-in-chief, who hares the considerations behind rounds of layoffs, cost-cutting and closures.**

When Gravgaard took over as editor-in-chief of *Bornholms Tidende* in September 2021, the paper had 5,820 subscribers in total. Four years later, that number is almost identical - a fact that the editor-in-chief, who has since also taken on the role of CEO, is not entirely satisfied with.

Even so, Gravgaard, who came from a position as development director at Ritzau, is among the very few newspaper leaders in Denmark who have managed to halt the decline in subscriptions at a local daily.

Here, the soon-to-be 50-year-old RUC graduate explains what he has done to reverse the decline, and why there is still room for improvement at the only remaining daily newspaper on Bornholm – which also happens to be the workplace of the author of this report. Anette Vestergaard was the staff representative on the board when Kristoffer Gravgaard was hired, giving her a close view of the events during the years the editor-in-chief now refers to.

***When you started in 2021, you had a strategic goal of bringing Tidende up to 9,000 subscribers. Knowing what you know today, how do you feel about the fact that the number is still at a standstill?***

*“I forgive us for not doing better, because there are so many good reasons. But fundamentally, we should have grown a little. The problem is that we haven’t grown digitally at the same pace as we’ve declined in print.”*

***You could also turn it around and ask: Why haven’t we declined?***

*“We’ve sold a lot of digital subscriptions. Today we have 2,840 digital subscribers. When I started, we had 700. So that is where we’ve grown quite substantially - and that’s our stroke of genius. At the same time, we’ve been able to price our subscriptions relatively high*

*compared to what it costs to produce journalism. We earn the same on our combo and e-paper subscriptions as we do on the print edition. We don't earn quite as much on the basic digital subscriptions, but still a decent amount. That means we've largely been able to maintain our revenue."*

***When you started, we had the e-paper and the basic digital subscription. What have you added since?***

*"The combo subscription. And the first month free. And then we gradually raised the paywall. First, we put the death notices behind the paywall - which, of course, were our most-read content. Then we raised the paywall so the intro and subhead were no longer visible. Since New Year we've lifted the subhead back above the paywall, and we're already seeing good results from that in the form of increased subscription sales."*

***It surprised everyone that hiding the intro from non-subscribers actually had a positive effect?***

*"Yes, our subscriber numbers grew as we raised the paywall. When non-subscribers could no longer get what they were used to, they had to pay to get what they wanted."*

***How much of the editorial content is behind the paywall today?***

*"Around 81–82 percent, compared with 40 percent three years ago."*

***Was it an advantage to close off access in stages?***

*"I think it's an advantage to do it gradually. If you shut everything overnight, you flush all your non-paying readers out at once. It needs to be a small change that slowly makes access harder - so they don't disappear, but instead gradually find it attractive to pay."*

***In your view, what is the reason we haven't reached the 9,000 subscribers you envisioned four years ago?***

*"We had 14,000 subscribers in 2012, so 9,000 shouldn't have been unrealistic. But we can see now that it is. We estimate there are around 20,000 households (10,000 working households), so we simply can't get beyond that. Only TV2 Bornholm can. The question is how many people cheat and share logins, how many pass the paper over the hedge to a neighbour, and how many live without it and would never buy us. And then there's the challenge that many people on Bornholm are not very well-off financially."*

***Are there other reasons why we're not growing?***

*"You can't get around the journalism. I'm not saying what we produce isn't good enough - but if we were skilled enough to make something the whole island couldn't live without, then*

*everyone would subscribe. It's extremely difficult, but that is ideally what we should be doing.*

*Then there's the growing competition from the internet and from TV2 Bornholm. And then there are the things outside our control. What really limited our sales was the war in Ukraine and the subsequent energy crisis. That was followed by energy-saving mode - everyone going around unplugging everything to make it through the winter. For too many people, it was obvious to cut a couple of hundred kroner a month from the household budget. And it's hard to win them back. Once you fall out of the habit, it's hard to get back in.*

*But I do think we've found the recipe for running a daily newspaper with a healthy economy at our current size. I'm a bit proud of that. We're more than 100 employees, including delivery staff. That's a size where others feel they have to shut down if they shrink that far. It's pretty impressive that 12 reporters can produce a daily newspaper. And publish it with nearly 6,000 subscribers."*

***What is the reason we can continue publishing in print?***

*"The three main reasons are that we cut enough costs in the savings round, closed the weekly paper, and began focusing on reading time - and thereby on value for the reader."*

***We're not the only local newspaper in Denmark fighting to survive. What are the others doing wrong?***

*"Theoretically, it's that they're not cutting enough. They often do cut - but not enough. The challenge is that you shouldn't do it in small bites, just enough to get you through to the next round. You have to take a proper chunk so you can have some breathing space and not have to do it again right away - and so you have the freedom to make some strategic moves afterwards."*

***So why doesn't that happen?***

*"I think it's because there are kind and capable union representatives who convince management not to fire people when cuts are needed. And then we also have an island advantage that others don't. Local newspapers are local identity. And an island has a much stronger identity than a suburb or a mainland municipality. The boundary is crystal clear: either you live on Bornholm or you don't. If you live on Bornholm, you are naturally part of Tidende's target group. And you have a built-in sense of ownership of your island and community - much stronger than if you live in Slagelse. Sjællandske Medier have huge challenges with their brand. They cover Zealand - but no one feels like a Zealander. You might feel like someone from Kalundborg, but you don't feel like a 'Zealander'.*

*In that way, we're privileged to have a strong local identity. Folketidende has that too, but they cover two islands. On Funen we've seen the Ærø newsroom close. If we're the*

*bumblebee that decides whether you can fly or not, then the critical threshold is probably 5-6,000 subscribers - and you can't realistically reach that if only 8,000 people live there, as they do on Årø, with 4,000 households.*

*But there's also room for improvement here at Tidende. We need to be more relevant to younger residents. We have a big gap. Many of our paying readers are mature. They've always been mature, and they always will be - but they mustn't be too mature. We need to grow more in the 40-60 segment by producing more relevant content for them. They're not nearly as interested in names-and-events content."*

***Do we have a major advantage because of the infrastructure we have? One municipality, a harbour, a hospital, an airport, a military base. There's a lot to write about?***

*"You have something to write about in every community - I'm sure they do in Grindsted as well. I would actually say the opposite: if a community is too small, you become afraid to write critically. Then you get back-slapping journalism, because you meet the same people in the local supermarket and might have to do a story with them again tomorrow. In that case, it feels more comfortable to write a 'hooray-you-opened-a-shop' story than a 'hey-you-took-money-from-the-till' story. That can make the journalism a bit dull. But luckily, we mix it well here, and there are lots of good stories about shop openings. It's the mix that makes people read the paper."*

***Can you talk a bit about your first years as editor-in-chief and later CEO at Tidende?***

*"When I started in September 2021, our equity was just over seven million kroner, with an expected deficit of 4.8 million. The deficit ended up being 2.2. So we dropped to an equity of five million. Now it's ten - with a goal of reaching twenty. In 2025, it looks like we'll deliver a profit well above the record in 2024. The finance people on the board say we're very solid, but in my view we're still too vulnerable."*

***Have you ever doubted whether it was possible to save the newspaper?***

*"I've believed in it all along. I believed we could do it from the start - but it has ended up being with fewer subscribers. That's because operations have improved. Distribution and sales have been optimised, and we've removed a whole lot of positions and products that didn't add value to the journalism. So things have calmed down. We now have more journalists than we had after the round of layoffs in 2021."*

***So what now?***

*"Where we have the greatest potential is in increasing the number of subscriptions. It really surprises me that we're not selling more, because we've never done more to sell subscriptions than we do now. We produce a good newspaper, and we've buried the old story that we're stupid, thin and about to close. We have stability and a fairly good working*

*environment. So it's very strange that we're not selling more subscriptions. We're growing in new digital subscriptions, but we're declining just as fast in print. But it is a huge success that we're growing digitally - and that we can retain those subscribers. We can do that because we produce good journalism. We just need to get better at reaching more people. I expect we'll reach 6,500 within a couple of years.*

*Finally, we have optimisation potential in distribution. The route network we have today isn't dynamic - meaning it isn't designed around what we're actually delivering. That needs to be optimised, especially after we took over mail delivery from PostNord."*

### ***What does that mean for Tidende?***

*"The PostNord task will boost us over the next two years, and hopefully we can use that to further strengthen the digital subscription business. With Amedia's acquisition of Berlingske - and thereby 25 percent of Bornholms Tidende - the future looks brighter. Amedia has exchanged shares with JFM, which means they are now co-owners of Berlingske and Bornholms Tidende. This opens the door to the brilliant product +Alt, which has proven successful in both Norway and Sweden. Once it succeeds in being launched in Denmark, we can probably look forward to growth in subscription revenue as well."*

## **Conclusion: What Can We Learn From the Four Cases?**

We have now heard five leaders from local media share their experiences from an industry under severe economic pressure. Throughout their stories, one senses the uncertainty that hits leadership when strategies fail. Kevin Walsh from *Nordjyske* is the clearest example - both because he says it outright, "*we don't know what to do,*" and because he was fired shortly after the interview. He is the fourth editor-in-chief at *Nordjyske* to be replaced since 2019 (one of the four passed away).

Another conclusion is that local media have acted too slowly. As Walsh also puts it: "*We just let it run, and then we keep getting a little smaller.*"

And that, if one listens to Kristoffer Gravgaard, has been a mistake. Based on his experience at *Bornholms Tidende*, his advice is: "*You have to take a proper chunk, so you get stability - so you don't have to do it again right away, and you have the freedom to act afterwards.*"

As the story of JFM and Amedia shows, the Jutland-based media group has been successful in terms of consolidation. Acquisitions are with very few exceptions the most common solution to the financial challenges facing the Danish press, because they create economies of scale.

When it comes to content, production has become more methodical, as Jesper Nørgaard from JFM explains. Gut feeling has been replaced by data that shows what people actually read - and as journalists have gradually accepted the new rules of the game, this has likely made the business model more sustainable.

At the same time, the term “*print newspaper*” continues to haunt internal discussions. After three years at *Lolland-Falsters Folketidende*, Ole Sloth is still struggling to establish a digital subscription product that he believes maintains a sufficiently high level of quality to justify charging for it. Until that happens, the printed paper remains the economic engine of the media house. At *Nordjyske*, the decision to close the print edition in 2027 was meant to resolve the long-standing tension between print and digital. The question, however, is whether the new editor-in-chief will stick to this strategy. Stefan Buur Hansen, who took over on 28 January 2026, has already stated that he wants to return to classic postcode journalism - the hyper-local coverage Kevin Walsh wanted to move away from.

What happens next? The large local media houses will likely continue to cut until the finances align. What else can they do? They can allow themselves to be acquired, as Jesper Nørgaard suggests - but for some, that is the last resort. *Midtjyske Medier* is not interested in being bought, and neither is *Lolland-Falsters Folketidende*. But that may change.

Will Denmark see *news deserts*? Possibly. There are rumours that Skanderborg - one of Denmark’s fastest-growing market towns with 20,000 inhabitants - has become a news desert, though this is unconfirmed. It would be worthwhile to examine the level of coverage in Denmark compared with other Western countries. My theory is that, despite the many rounds of cuts, we are still better covered than, for example, the United States.

It is in this context interesting to observe what happens when a local newsroom shuts down. On Mors - an island in the Limfjord with just under 20,000 inhabitants - *Nordjyske* closed the local newspaper *Morsø Folkeblad* in 2019 after six years of declining revenue. The following year, a journalist from *Morsø Folkeblad*, David Højmark, launched the digital news outlet *KunMors*. Today, the outlet has far more than the 2,100 subscribers mentioned on their homepage, and opened a satellite operation in the neighbouring municipality one year ago.

The newspapers as we know them are undeniably under pressure. But Danes still want to know what is happening in their neighbourhoods and on the levels of authorities and politics. That means there is still demand for the mandate journalists hold, but which we often forget: access. A journalist’s most valuable tool is access - through freedom-of-information requests and other back-channels, but also through the authority and standing that journalism still carries in society.

Journalism, as Peter Orry so aptly puts it, is “*where you are critical of power and remember that you are doing it on behalf of the people you serve.*”

We must also remember that journalism is a profession rooted in facts - and facts only. Kevin Walsh speaks of quality over quantity, and JFM recently announced in a press release that it has established a partnership with *Gravercenteret* - an independent investigative unit under the Danish School of Media and Journalism (DMJX) - in which 12 journalists and an editor will participate in a year-long programme focusing on investigative reporting.

This is where Denmark's second-largest media house has chosen to invest its energy, while letting others handle the softer, more sensational stories. And perhaps this is the pattern we will see in the future: that the media with the strongest resources will carry the heavy, society-critical agendas, while local outlets take on similar issues - just at a smaller scale. Alongside them, an undergrowth of independent digital outlets will emerge, or continue to emerge, in places where traditional media no longer reach.

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