

Jigsaw Puzzle Pieces

The Quest for Better Local Journalism



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January 2026

The mission

How can a local media – be it a newspaper or a broadcaster – get closer to its audience? How can it play a larger role in the community? How can it support the initiatives local entrepreneurs take to develop the area? And could constructive journalism be (at least a part of) the answer?

Those are the questions I hoped to answer during my five months fellowship at Constructive Institute in Aarhus from September 2025 to January 2026.

The background

To be more specific I focus on Stubbekøbing – a small town on the Island of Falster about 120 kilometers south of Copenhagen. Stubbekøbing used to be its own municipality with a city hall, a city council with a mayor, a police station and courthouse and a main street with an okay selection of shops. The local newspaper, Lolland-Falsters Folketidende, even had its own office right next to the city hall and the church.

But in 2007 a reform ended the life of Stubbekøbing Municipality. Stubbekøbing became part of a much larger municipality, the police station and courthouse was closed, and the newspaper closed its office. Like in so many other small towns in Denmark shops closed as well, and it is fair to say, Stubbekøbing was in a decline.

That has been the status for more than a decade, but in recent years something positive has happened: New initiatives have popped up.

A group of cultural entrepreneurs have bought an old silo on the harbor and launched a plan to rebuild it as an observation tower. A local businessman has bought an old factory nearby and is about to transform it to a cultural meeting place where local artists can have galleries, and concerts can be held. A musical festival inspired by Woodstock has been established and is growing year after year. A repair café has opened in the old town hall. People have started meeting once a month eating together. And more than a hundred locals have joined forces and opened a little store on the main square selling local groceries. Together with a few others I have founded Litteraturselskabet Stubbekøbing arranging meetings with authors who tell about their books. And lots of other things are happening in Stubbekøbing.

So, things are changing for the better, but it is also a struggle, and new ideas are often met with a pinch of skepticism in the local Facebook-groups: “That will never work”. “We have tried that before”. “Why haven’t you thought about ...?” ... And as a journalist at the local newspaper I felt that we – the newspaper – should contribute more to the positive development. That we often end up just reporting on some of the activities but not being part of it. Not playing a part that matters. Not really helping them.

Hence my mission.

A box with pieces from a jigsaw puzzle

Not really knowing much about constructive journalism or how to find the answers to my questions, I found comfort in the welcome speech I and my fellow fellows got at the Constructive Institute. Here we were told to push our projects to the back of our minds and instead engulf us in the process of being a fellow.

So, I did.

And now, having loved the process thoroughly, I can push it no longer. As my fellowship is coming to an end, it is time to try answering the questions. And I have the feeling that the process – the fellowship – has given me a large box filled with pieces from a jigsaw puzzle. If I piece them together, I hope a motive – answers – will appear.

So come along and join the quest I was on gathering the pieces.

News avoidance

First up a few words about why there is a need for a change in journalism and media.

The latest of the Reuters Institute's annual report on the news media, "Digital News Report 2025", tells it clearly. In January and February 2025, the institute asked 97,000 respondents on six continents via online questionnaires about their views on media and journalism, and several results are discouraging:

One in four (26 per cent) of those questioned in Denmark answered yes that they often or sometimes avoid news. "There are multiple, overwhelming, horrific situations left, right and centre. It's too much" and "When there isn't much of an update of what can be done to solve a negative issue, but it is coming up over and over, it can have a negative impact on mental health", read some of the reasons.

And while "social media"* and artificial intelligence are gaining ground, traditional media such as newspapers, magazines, news websites and television are losing influence. The trend applies above all in the USA, South America, Africa and parts of Asia, but also to a certain extent in Europe.

From the Danish part of the survey, the question "Which, if any, of the following have you used in the last week as a source of news?" shows that the trend is pronounced when looking at the period 2013-2025. Newspapers and other print media have fallen 35 percentage points, television has fallen 24 percentage points and online news sites 15 percentage points.

Especially young people (18-24 years) indicate the platforms as their primary source of news (this applies to 36 percent of those surveyed), but the more traditional news media are not completely without influence - 39 percent of young people thus indicate online news sites as their primary source of news.

* As the journalist Kurt Strand says: "social media" are neither social nor media, so he prefers calling them platforms.

Focus on negativity

Traditionally journalists focus on the negative. “It’s not news when airplanes take off and land as supposed, but when one crashes, it is big news”, we say to each other. And as one of the founding fathers of journalism, Paul Julius Reuter, in 1883 told his reporters: “Please cover the following ...

... fires, explosions, floods, inundations, railway accidents, destructive storms, earthquakes, shipwrecks attended with loss of life, accidents to war vessels and to mail steamers, street riots of a grave character, disturbances arising from strikes, duels between and suicides of persons of note, social or political, and murders of a sensational or atrocious character.”

But the negative focus impacts the audience and results – to some extent – in news avoidance, as the research from Reuters Institute points out. And it is no surprise. It is simply logic. That’s what I learned from Hans Henrik Knoop who gave us a lecture on positive psychology.

He told us that it is human nature to focus more on threats than on positive things. It is therefore no wonder we click and read the negative stories. But: That which we pay attention grows. So, it affects our view of the world in a skewed way.

And that has dire consequences. Some argue that we lose the ability to imagine a positive future and thus the belief that we can shape the future. Instead we see a dystopia with no hope.



But it is when all seems hopeless that we need hope – and that insight is the first puzzle piece: Journalists should **remember to spread hope**. And as Hans Henrik Knoop pointed out, the following three statements are all true: The world is terrible. The world is better than it was. The world can become even better.

It is all a matter of perspective. But what stories do we journalists tell?

Reporting on the positive development in the world can be difficult for journalists, as the Swedish academic Hans Rosling has also pointed out, because often the bad things – wars, earthquakes, floods, pandemics etcetera – happens here and now, while the positive developments are more often happening slowly and therefore goes unnoticed. So, it requires thought and dedication to look for those stories.

It is, however, important to stress that the need for stories that tell about positive developments does not mean that the journalist should be uncritical. A meeting with a professor talking about biomedicine showed why.



He **wants media to be critical** – to report about the good and the bad without sugarcoating problems. But as he is a fan of a local football club, he notices how the local newspaper writes about it with so much respect, always making positive stories and never being critical. That makes him wonder if stories about other subjects that he knows less about are equally uncritical.

A third person we met, the mayor of Aarhus Municipality, Anders Winnerskjold, put it in another way. It is important, he said, that journalists ask themselves: What does this story contribute to?

Need for resonance

One day we learned about the sociologist Hartmut Rosa. He points out that our modern societies are formed by a constant acceleration always pressing for “More!”, “Faster!”, “Better!”, which is reflected in our language with things like “fast food”, “power nap”, “speed dating” and “multitasking”. One might add that it is also very much a characteristic of most journalism.

But when the world is reduced to an object for optimization and performance that leads to alienation and a lost ability to experience the world, Rosa argues. And again: It is fair to argue that media plays a large role in that.



What is needed to counter it, Rosa says, is not “efficiency” but time and attention, **creating the possibility of “resonance”** - a dynamic, two-way relationship where we are touched by the world and respond to it, establishing a mutual connection rather than alienation, moving beyond mere control or consumption to experience ourselves and the world as mutually responsive entities.

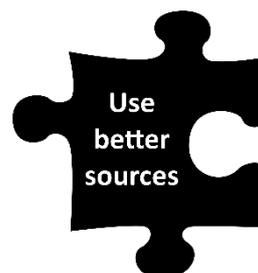
Increase trust

In the Reuters Institute survey that I mentioned earlier, one of the conclusions was that respondents are concerned that the media has bias and hidden agendas. The survey therefore asked what the media can do to increase trust.



The Reuters Institute found a number of consistent responses – or in other words; a treasure trove of pieces to the puzzle:

- **Impartiality:** Leave personal feelings and opinions at the door; don’t push agendas or narratives; avoid loaded or sensationalist language.
- **Accuracy:** Ensure information is accurate; focus on the facts; don’t speculate or publish hearsay; verify/fact-check *before* publishing; fact-check false claims.
- **Transparency:** More evidence for claims; disclose sources; be open about corrections; disclose biases, funding and other conflicts of interest; clear labelling of news vs opinion.
- Better original journalism: **Provide more depth** and detail; **do more investigative reporting**; **hold power to account**; **use better sources** (including experts, eyewitnesses, no social media reporting, etc.); **follow up on stories.**



Stay in touch

Adding to that, Nic Newmann, who is in charge of the research from Reuters Institute, advised media to care more about building relationships than on reach.

... Which reminds of a puzzle-piece we got when visiting the concert hall Musikhuset Aarhus. One concerning building relations to the audience/customers. Manager Jan Christensen told us how Musikhuset builds relations by sending customized e-mails.



Before a concert, the guests receive information about the facilities and how to order drinks for the pause, after the concert they get an e-mail asking for feedback, which is used to optimize the running of the house, and later, customers might get e-mails saying “Since you went to that concert: Have you seen, that we now has this concert coming up which might interest you?”.

That is an effective way of **staying in touch with the customers**, catering to their needs and showing they care, and at the same time increasing sales and running a better business. Maybe media houses could learn something ...

Don't write ghost articles

One mantra repeated by several speakers during the fellowship is the need for **fewer but better stories**. Backing it up is research done by Ole Fehling and Michael Sengl from the Drive Initiative that works with 30 regional publishers from Germany, Austria and Switzerland, analyzing the stories on the publishers' more than 50 regional news portals.



Tracking around 9000 articles per day they conclude that around 80 percent of the published stories are “ghost articles”, that generate less cumulative reading time than it takes to create them. In the other end of the spectrum 5 percent of the published articles amount for 50 percent of the reading time on the portals.

Being a media house covering a whole range of large and smaller towns, fewer stories will have consequences for the different areas. Ole Fehling and Michael Sengl put it bluntly: As resources are better invested elsewhere “fewer stories set in small towns are preferable” – adding that some of the less important stories can be done using AI.

But they stress that that prioritization does not disqualify stories from smaller areas – they just need to be told in a way that generates relevance beyond the local area.

On that ground they argue that journalists should **work with user needs** – the fact that the audience want more than just plain news catering the need to be updated. They are looking for context, explanation, inspiration, emotions and entertainment.



But a BBC case study showed that 70 percent of stories are “update me”-stories, but they only bring 7 percent of the page views. In other words, the newsroom was producing content the audience did not need in such large quantities.

The results from the Drive Initiative shows similar results: Especially articles that inspire are popular – but only very few articles cater to that need. The good news is that that can be changed. The best media houses in the Drive

Initiative have managed to reduce the amount of ghost articles from 80 percent to 20 percent – improving the quality of the content and increasing the reader engagement, selling more subscriptions on the way.

Giving an example of how to work with user needs, Ole Fehling and Michael Sengl talked about a story from Aachener Zeitung from Aachen in Germany near the border to Belgium. The story was about a large road – the A544 – that was going to be blocked for a period while an old bridge needed to be demolished. That story spawned several different angles:

First a basic “update me”-news-story: “Sprengtermin für A544-Brücke steht fest” (The demolition date for the A544 bridge has been set). And then a number of follow ups catering different user needs: “A544 wird erst nach Berufsverkehr gesperrt” (A544 is closed after rush hour) – “help me”. “240 Sprengladungen sollen A544-Brücke zu Fall bringen” (240 explosive charges are intended to bring down the A544 bridge) – “Educate me”, “Der Mann, der den Weg auf die A544 versperrt” (The man blocking the way onto the A544) – “Give me perspective”, “72-jähriger Sprengmeister schreibt in Aachen Geschichte” (72-year-old demolition expert makes history in Aachen) - “Inspire me” and “Die Brücke ist pünktlich gesprengt worden” (The bridge was blown up on time) – “Divert me”.

However, it is worth noting, that Ole Fehling and Michael Sengl have noticed, that especially in local reporting, “Help me“-articles often perform poorly. This is mostly due to reporting on local events, which do not engage the audience particularly well.

Boots on the ground

Viting Amedia – one of Norway’s largest media companies, publishing more than 100 local, regional and national newspapers in Norway, Sweden and Denmark – manager Anders Opdahl talked about a clear company mission.



“We must **be present with boots on the ground**”, he said, stressing the need for local journalists to meet their sources face to face and make stories with fresh photos. The reason being that the readers want to see and read about people they know from their local area – and they want faces on the stories, not just boring stock photos.

Owning more than a hundred newspapers Amedia focusses heavily on having one computer system with one type of platform and a central collection of all data about all published stories. An integral part of the business model is also offering a total national subscription giving access to all stories published by all the Amedia-newspapers.



That subscription makes it easy for the readers to **stay updated on the geographical areas of interest**, which is typically the places the readers live and has lived, where his/her family lives, where he/she works, where he/she has a summerhouse ... etcetera, as there can be many areas of interest.

Amedia has decided on a simple model of distributing the income from these total subscriptions: The media selling the subscription gets all the money.

And that model adds positively to the economy, often increasing the revenue of a given newspaper by 10 percent or more.

Having one platform and a combined subscription is fine, but one thing is not being centralized by Amedia: Every newspaper has its own editor with the power to prioritize and edit, and the content of each newspaper is unique. The philosophy being that the local editors know best when it comes to being in touch with the local communities' needs and wishes.

Constructive journalism

And then of course we have some really important pieces. The ones you put in the corners as you lay the frame of the puzzle: The main ingredients in constructive journalism, often referred to as the three pillars:



1. **Focus on solutions.** Which is about not only focusing on the problems but also look for possible solutions.

2. **Cover nuances.** Which is to strive for the best obtainable version of the truth, and to see the world with both eyes.



3. **Promote democratic conversation.** Which is to engage and facilitate debate and including people in the community.



Together they make journalism that is critical, based on facts, nuanced, inspiring, helping spread solutions, giving hope and empowering the readers/listeners/viewers.

In very short, constructive journalism can be done in seven steps: 1. Uncover the problem. 2. Ask: So what now? 3. Research on possible solutions to the problem. 4. Do journalism about possible solutions. 5. Ask critical questions and ask for documentation. 6. Can the solutions be scaled? 7. Go back to the people who are responsible.

During the fellowship I got to hear and see how some of the best media and journalists do constructive journalism. That is what the next part of the hunt for puzzle pieces is about.

Facts and trust

Based in Nykøbing Mors "Kun Mors" (and the newly added addition "Kun Thy") is a local online news outlet started in 2020. In 2025 it has around 3000 subscribers and focuses on doing original stories – not wasting time referring press releases found elsewhere.

The strategy is to publish just a relatively small number of stories every day, around five.



"People are already being bombarded with news, so we **focus on publishing unique stories**", editor Katrine Hedegaard said.

She added that "Kun Mors" priorities to publish stories about the good the things that happen in the area.

"I meet on job every day to promote the positive sides of Mors. It is the best place to live", she said.

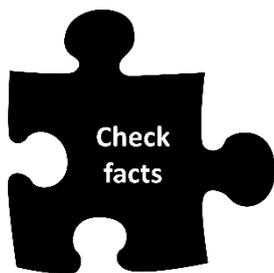


That is not to say, they don't write critical stories, because they do. They just **think about the balance**, taking care not to leave the readers with an impression of being a negative media.

To be in sync with the readers, Kun Mors has done a survey a couple of times asking the readers what they would like to read more about. Those answers are valued and listened to, she assures. But in the day-to-day operation, she insists that the journalists should not bother studying the statistics telling

how many readers the individual stories have.

"That would just stress us", she said adding that they must have the confidence to believe they pick the right subjects – and as the number of subscribers is steadily increasing, she believes that yes, they are on the right track.



A key value is to be trustworthy. So, **checking facts** is more important than publishing quickly. And the factchecking even applies to letters to the editor – either Katrine Hedegaard fact-checks the letters herself, or she asks the readers writing them to provide documentation for any claims.

"One of the big challenges of our time is that people invent their own facts. But we need to be trustworthy and distinguish us from Facebook", Katrine Hedegaard explained.

Another key value is to be constructive. By being that Kun Mors doesn't just want to shape *what* people are talking about locally but also *how* they talk about it.

"We want people to talk to each other in a respectful way and on a basis of facts", she explained.

The road to a solution

Visiting Midtjyllands Avis news editor Brian Holst – a former fellow at Constructive Institute – told us how they have been working using constructive journalism to make a better newspaper. The foundation for that work is a toolbox with a whole bunch of different formats for stories told with a

constructive twist. Formats that serve different purposes – showing nuances, introducing new sources, focusing on solutions, increasing credibility, etcetera, etcetera.

Here are some examples:

- “Sådan skal det gøres” (That’s how it should be done): A format for stories that tells about role models, promoting them for solving a relevant problem. Promoting solutions.
- “Spørg læserne” (Ask the readers): Asking the readers for their solutions to relevant problems. Engages the readers and promotes solutions.



- “Læserne får svar” (The readers get answers): A format where readers ask questions about things they want the newspaper to investigate. **Engages the readers.**
- “Vejen mod en løsning” (The road to a solution): Inviting a panel of experts to a public meeting focusing on solutions to a relevant problem. Focuses on solutions.
- “Sådan har vi gjort” (This is how we did it): Explaining why a given story is written and what choices were made. Builds trust and credibility.
- “Avisen giver overblik” (The newspaper provides an overview): Asking a number of questions that the journalist answers herself can be a useful way to sum up a complicated story that has been running for a longer time. Takes the reader by the hand.

Midtjyllands Avis has numerous other formats, but one of the most interesting cases revolved around a series the newspaper did about the local traffic. Weeks in advance of doing the first story the newspaper announced the series and asked the readers to contribute with questions or tips for stories. That resulted in more than 200 responses and made it easy for the journalist to pick stories that the readers found interesting and relevant. And the series resonated so well with the local community, that it spawned a large number of new subscriptions.

Listen to connect

At TV2 Kosmopol in Copenhagen journalist Nanna Holst talked about the local tv-stations effort to **listen to the viewers**. If you listen, you connect. And if the journalists do that, the viewers are more inclined to watch the programs and read the stories on the website, she believes.



On a daily basis she works with collecting and handling questions from the viewers responding to the tag line “Spørg os” (Ask us).

“You ask and we investigate. Tell us what you miss an answer to regarding life in the capital, so that we can do journalism that matters to you”, reads the opening text on the website of TV2 Kosmopol’s Ask us-section.

Every week, from all the incoming questions, she picks the three most interesting and presents them to the viewers that then gets to vote on what question they would prefer to see answered. The question that gets the most votes get to be answered, and the resulting stories are among the most popular, Nanna Holst told us.

And it’s not just her experience. In 2023 researchers Natalie Jomini Stroud and Emily Van Duyn from University of Texas published the study “Curbing the decline of local news by building relationships

with the audience” in which they examine the effect of a form of engaged journalism where newsrooms report on audience-submitted questions via the Harken platform. The results show that engaged journalism can not only strengthen the relationship between a newsroom and its community but can also provide much-needed revenue: Newsrooms that participated in the initiative saw an increase in new subscriptions.

The philosophy behind it is that if you think of your audience as more than passive receivers they become team members. And if you treat them as equal partners they can participate with their competencies. So, if you reach out and ask for help or other inputs you create cohesion and a “we”.

And the dialogue Nanna Holst has with the viewers holds value in itself as it creates relationships.

The joy of discussing

Visiting the national broadcaster NRK in Norway former news director Helje Solberg said that NRK set a goal in 2022 to be the most constructive broadcaster in Europe. That meant developing journalism with nuances, solutions and dialogue with the audience. The decision was taken after experiencing that a subsite – “Lyspunkt” (Bright spot) – on the main website publishing only constructive news became extremely popular, not only with the young audience NRK wanted to attract but pretty much with everyone.

The constructive journalism has since resulted in many stories and formats like explainer-videos, invitations to the audience to submit questions and a focus on giving readers the option to click on expanding boxes within stories to get further explanations. The constructive way of doing journalism also led to a change in the way debate programs are executed.

“Before we wanted debates to be as tough as possible with winners and losers. Now we want to focus more on debates where the participants listen to each other and have more of the nuances you don’t get in classic “debate-fights”. So we strive to avoid negative behaviour, so personal attacks, talking over each other and using strawman arguments”, editor in chief Kathrine Hammerstad said.



If participants in debates do it anyway, they are corrected by the host, and if that does not help ultimately guests can be told to leave the studio – something that happens very rarely. Also, NRK hosts debates where politicians listen to the audience offering solutions to the problems being debated and answers questions from the audience.

“We want to have discussion-joy!” Kathrine Hammerstad said, adding that disagreement is both important and not dangerous – the **debate just has to**

be respectful, and the media has a responsibility in securing that.

We can be connectors for people

I called up Jacob Simas who is editor at Cityside – an online media with three websites covering some of the areas surrounding San Francisco: Berkleyside, The Oaklandside and Richmondside.

The three cities – Berkley, Oakland and Richmond – are incredibly diverse, Jacob Simas tells me. Some citizens are highly educated and seek the stories on their own.

“But there are a lot of communities in our cities that have real information needs who just frankly may not be prone to want to come and read our stuff. Maybe there are language barriers or cultural barriers. And so, a lot of my work is trying to get into those spaces where we can be in conversation with those communities to see: What do they need in terms of information? And how can we deliver that right and **build those relationships?**”, he told me.



Building those relations involves a lot of listening. Before the launch of the last of the three sites – Richmondside – Cityside invested a lot of time in listening to the community. They actually spend a year getting to know people and their needs before launching.

“As a new organization, we just felt it was totally incumbent upon us to get out and start having conversations before we did a thing. Let's just get out into the community, identify stakeholders and invite them to come out, have a drink, have a cup of coffee, have meetups and have these pretty informal presentations and conversations about who we are, what we're hoping to do and what people would like to see from us”, Jacob Simas said.

All that research and listening was distilled to a mission statement – the newsroom values. A core value being listening.

“I think that just established us from the get-go. It signaled to people that “Yes, we're new, but we're from here”. All our journalists are also residents, we are your neighbors and we spent a lot of time having conversations and listening to people's needs”, he added.

One of the learnings from the many meetings was that many people were tired of only hearing the bad news about their communities. News organizations come in and they only report when something bad is happening, people said. What they wanted instead were stories about people that make this place amazing.



So a core value is **highlighting progress** and not just problems. One way of doing that is by having first person storytelling series where community members are invited to just tell their own stories in their own voice. Sometimes those focus on people that are doing really impactful, important work.

Another way is to always **think about systems versus symptoms**. The best example of that, Jacob Simas finds, is crime reporting:



“Typically, traditional local newspapers have just reported crime. But we couldn't do it and we didn't really want to do it because we felt like we could be of more service if we just looked at crime and public safety as a systems issue. So, let's report about the Police Department accountability reporting. Let's report on violence prevention efforts and the organizations and people in our cities that are attacking the problem on the ground. What can we learn from them? Those are much more interesting and helpful ways to report on

public safety than “someone got stabbed on 23rd St. last night”. So, we are looking to do the sort of step back systems-pieces and the stories that can really humanize public safety issues in our cities.”

And at the same time, Cityside tell their readers why they are reporting like this – which helps building relationships to the audience. But it also involves a sacrifice as some readers would actually like to read the accounts of what happened last night. Cityside just made a choice to focus on the systems.

Another thing people wanted from a local media was something the local newspaper used to do before it closed years ago – accountability reporting on local government.

“And what we heard over and over from these people was that they really just wanted to get to know the city better. They wanted to get to know the neighborhoods and they wanted to find ways to connect with other people in their cities”, Jacob Simas referred.

Those inputs assured the editorial team that they needed to invest in arts and culture reporting. Specifically, they needed to do stories about the opportunities for people to enjoy the cities and get together with other residents. That involves reporting on culture and restaurants

“Honestly, our restaurant coverage is our most popular coverage, and we rely on that to bring people to our sites, and they consume the other stuff.”

But the Cityside-media does more than that.



“I think we live in an age where people feel more and more disconnected. And so, I think as local news organizations, it is good if **we can be connectors for people**, both by reporting about establishments, maybe what's hot, what's happening, and what people can do to get involved in their city but also showing up and creating events”, Jacob Simas says.

So, over the past few years the Cityside news sites have dedicated a lot of resources into producing over a dozen events every year.

The events are really popular, he adds. And some of them are quite easy to pull off – like announcing that the readers can come and meet the reporters at a local bar for a happy hour. That is popular because people like to know the faces behind the news.

Other events need more planning – like hosting meetings where 200 or 300 people show up to hear a conversation with the mayor about an important topic.

“One of our most popular events in Oakland is called Culture Makers, and it's a quarterly. We get together and we just have panel discussions with people in the city that are doing creative, interesting work. And then we pair that with performances by local artists. And people love it”, he said and pointed out that the events help Cityside connect in the community and stay visible.

And following up on the core value of listening Cityside worked with a community advisory board with 10 people from different districts in the city. The advisory board read the stories and gave feedback.

“I think there can be a lot of great value in assembling some sort of community advisory group. They can also help you build relationships with different segments of the community if you're smart about how you put that group together”, Jacob Simas said.

Stubbekøbing

Wanting yet more pieces, I went looking in Stubbekøbing speaking to some of the people who drives the positive development, I have registered in Stubbekøbing the last couple of years.

Some read the local newspaper, some don't. But they all have an opinion on the local development and of the role a local media should play.

Tell about success and the good life

First up, I met with Dorthe Holtse Jeppesen. She has been a member of the board in the association "Liv I Stubbekøbing" that works to develop Stubbekøbing. Amongst other things she took the initiative to manage an online calendar promoting all the local activities.

She was also a member of the parish counsel organizing events in the church. And on top of that she used to be one of the moderators of a Facebook-group called Stubbekøbing Avis – a role she quit as she got tired of the bad comments that kept coming.

"All those that sat out there and wrote "there never happens anything in Stubbekøbing" made me puke. Because it isn't true! But they just sat there spewing their bile instead of contributing", she said and mentioned that the calendar she put together could mention 30, 40 or even 50 things that happened during a month.

So, Stubbekøbing is brimming with activities, she feels, and she sees herself as an ambassador for Stubbekøbing striving to promote the good life that can be lived here. Storytelling is an important way of doing that.

"If we want to be known outside the borders of Stubbekøbing, you have to tell the good stories about the good life here", she said, and she sees that as a role for a local media.



What she wants is more constructive journalism focusing on solutions and **stories about initiatives that are a success** instead of a focus on drama and conflict. That – the solution-oriented stories and the stories about successes – is important if Stubbekøbing is to attract new inhabitants and new businesses, she believes.

Look for solutions

Next, I met Kathrine Buurman. For many years she was chairman in Stubbekøbing Badmintonklub – the local badminton club – that also started recurring activities like a big Halloween event in the local park. Today she is a member of the city council in the municipality.

The first thing she told me is that she has cut down on her reading of the local newspaper, because the journalism presented has become too confrontational.

"It has become more about pointing fingers than about objective journalism, where you look for solutions", she finds asking for another editorial line.

But she stresses that journalistic driven media play an important role in democracies.



“It is important that we have media that are based on truth and **aims to enlighten people** because knowledge is important”, she said pointing out that we live in a time where Facebook is filled with posts from “experts”, that aren’t real experts.

The media just has to be very aware of how it presents the news.

“If the journalism starts using clickbait, then the readers lose the trust in the media”, she finds.

Besides journalism focusing on finding solutions, she asks for more stories about the local cultural activities.

“The biggest secret we have is the many activities going on”, she said, adding that she would like to see more stories about the talented artists and traders building and creating good things.

Having been chairman at the badminton club her experience is that media coverage on the club was important for the volunteers in the club.

“It affects the confidence of the volunteers that somebody bothers to tell about the things we do”, she said adding that stories about the good activities can serve as an inspiration for others.

And promoting the positive is what she really wants from local media.

“The media has a responsibility to help promote Lolland-Falster in a better way than by always telling what is wrong”, she said.

Report on Utopia

I called Oliver Stilling. He is a journalist, who a few years ago bought a summerhouse outside of Stubbekøbing. He soon got involved in the creation of the foundation “4850 Stubbekøbing” that wants to make Stubbekøbing more attractive for new generations and people with new qualifications. “Stubbekøbing reaches out for more fantasy, future and substance. More innovation, more qualified art and gastronomy, investments, urban renewal and a creative reuse of abandoned places and buildings”, they wrote in a manifesto.

Their way of doing it is by transforming an old silo that used to store grain into an observation tower housing art and different kinds of cultural activities. A project they are currently fundraising for.

Oliver Stilling also took the initiative to hold “Folkets Folkemøde” – a one-day festival in Stubbekøbing with all kinds of talks and happenings. He tried to make some national newspapers interested in the festival but didn’t succeed. But the local newspaper, Lolland-Falsters Folketidende, did what he describes as “a perfect story” on the event. A story with the headline “Sådan skaber man en ny fortælling om Udkantsdanmark” (This is how you create a new story about outlying Denmark).



“There is **something inspiring and action-orientated** in that headline, and it is really not that difficult doing stories like that. It just requires a mindset that most journalists don’t have”, he said.

Olier Stilling thinks it is related to the fact that journalists typically report on initiatives and events but don’t create them.

“As a journalist, you don’t drive anything, you just wait for things to happen. You see it now with Trump: The media just reports anything he says instead of finding out what could be done to change it”, he noted.



But in his job as a journalist Oliver Stilling has tried to change that by doing journalism where he presented an idea and then worked to **make it happen**. And in a way, that is what the story on Folkets Folkemøde did. Because focusing on “how to create a new story” is in the essence reporting about a dream of a utopia, he notes.

And the idea with the “4850 Stubbekøbing”-foundation is also to inspire.

“We think of Stubbekøbing as a laboratory, because there are lots of other “Stubbekøbings” in other parts of Denmark being depopulated and risking extinction. So, if we can find a way, a method, a model to change that, and others could copy that, that would be great”, Oliver Stilling said.

And he stressed that having media reporting on the initiatives is important.

“If no one reports about the initiatives, then you miss the understanding that you can actually take part in creating something”, he explained.

Promote positive development

Next up I met Jan Yttesen, who has bought a building on the harbor right next to the silo “4850 Stubbekøbing” is working with. Here he invites local artists to work and have exhibitions.

That initiative has been well covered in the local newspaper, which he subscribes to. And he is thankful for that.

“It is really important. You can post on social media, but then it is only seen by the usual audience. And it is really important to reach a broader audience, because people need to come out and support the local initiatives”, he thinks and stressed the importance of having journalists fact check the news – to distinguish it from the posts on social media.

Asking about his broader view on and wishes for the newspaper he notes that it tends to write more negative stories than positive.



“What is the job of the newspaper? Is it to always focus on the negative or is it to focus on the positive?” he asked rhetorically adding that he would wish, the newspaper would help **promote the positive developments** to an audience outside of the local area to improve the image and attract more people.

He hopes that his project can contribute to a positive development in Stubbekøbing, and urban development is something he reads about with interest – also when it is stories about the development of other towns.

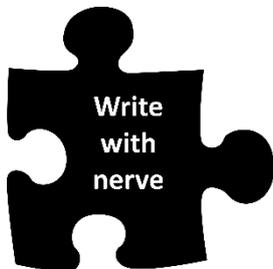
“I think there is a lot of inspiration to get, and I wish for more stories about the local life, so that the good ideas can be spread”, he said.

Report with a nerve

Finally, I met Marianne Thiim, the founder of “Det Grønne Fællesskab” (the Green Community) – an association that started out organizing vegetarian eat togethers and since spawned a number of other activities. Amongst them is a repair café and a kitchen garden group, and it also led to the opening of a store owned by hundreds of local citizens – a store selling locally produced groceries and other goods.

When Det Grønne Fællesskab was founded, the founders discussed what channels it should use for communication. Facebook ended up as the chosen channel – and not the local newspaper. The reason being in part that Marianne Thiim found the newspaper to be too boring.

“The whole concept of a newspaper is boring”, she said and referred to a story where she was one of the persons being portrayed.



“In the story, what we were doing was being reduced to just a boring little Maggi-cube. There was no nerve or energy in the reporting”, she said asking for journalism with **more of an edge**, a deeper understanding of the stories and a will to challenge the established.

So, Facebook was chosen as the platform – also because it is easy to use and everyone can chip in. But she admitted there is a paradox.

“I am no fan of Facebook. I would prefer not to use it. But I can’t avoid it now. I have to be there, because everything runs through it”, she said.

Time to lay the puzzle

With that I finished my hunt for puzzle pieces. Having 35 in the box it was time to lay the puzzle.

To recap the questions that have been guiding my treasure hunt:

How can a local media – be it a newspaper or a broadcaster – get closer to its audience? How can it play a larger role in the community? How can it support the initiatives local entrepreneurs take to develop the area? And could constructive journalism be (at least a part of) the answer?

Obviously, there is not one simple answer to those questions – except for a clear YES to the fourth and last of the questions. But my quest convinced me that each of the puzzle pieces does hold part of the answers to the three first. After all many of these ideas and strategies have been tested and proven successful and it is striking how well many of them fit with the wishes expressed by the representatives from Stubbekøbing. It works elsewhere and people want them here!

So, the answer must be to use some or all of the the pieces as inspiration for the journalism we do. And when I pieced them all together this is the motive I got:

