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RALF ANDERSSON
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Journalism at Ear Level

User engagement as driver of discovery, development and democratic dialogue

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1. Abstract

This report is the result of a fellowship project conducted between August 2025 and June 2026. The project originates from a fundamental interest in how journalism can be strengthened through closer relationships with the people it exists to serve.

The media industry is undergoing a period of profound transformation. Traditional business models are under pressure, trust in the media is challenged, and many citizens experience journalism as disconnected from their everyday lives. At the same time, AI, digitalisation and social media are placing new demands on the relevance of journalism and the societal role of news organisations.

Across Denmark and internationally, media organisations are therefore experimenting with new forms of user engagement, dialogue, and co-creation. The ambition is not only to build closer relationships with audiences but also to develop better journalism and discover new pathways to innovation and idea generation.

This fellowship project explores this potential. Through three concrete projects conducted at local and regional news outlets, I have examined how engaged journalism can function as a tool for generating new journalistic ideas, strengthening relationships with audiences, and contributing to a more vibrant democratic conversation and dialogue.

The report is based on three development projects carried out during 2025–2026: “Politicians Listen”, also known as “The Reversed Voter Meeting,” developed in connection with the 2025 local government elections; the campaign “Silkeborg’s New Faces” at Midtjyllands Avis; and the concept “Ask Stiften,” developed in collaboration with Aarhus Stiftstidende. In addition, the report draws on 20 qualitative interviews with journalists, media managers, and experts.

The findings demonstrate that user engagement can generate new journalistic ideas, strengthen relationships between

media organisations and audiences, and contribute to increased relevance and engagement. Last but not least, it can also produce measurable success on the financial bottom line through increased subscription sales. At the same time, however, the experiences point out significant organisational challenges, particularly related to time, resources, integration into daily newsroom operations, and a lack of understanding that meaningful user engagement requires a cultural shift and a different perception of what the journalistic role is and can be.

The report argues that engaged journalism should not be viewed as a separate project or experimental initiative, but rather as a central component of future journalistic practice and workflow. In particular, the report highlights the emergence of a new journalistic role in which journalists increasingly act as facilitators of dialogue, communities, and democratic conversation. This is especially important in an AI-driven era, where the need for genuine human proximity, visibility, and dialogue in journalism becomes critically important.

The report is intended for journalists, editors, educators, students, and researchers with an interest in journalistic innovation, constructive journalism, and the role of the media in democracy.

The experiences and findings collected in this report will be integrated directly into my teaching and professional work when I return as journalism lecture at the University of Southern Denmark and as Head of the Centre for Journalism during 2026–2027. They will also contribute to the broader research project on creativity and innovation in the media industry, in which I’m a partner in at the University of Southern Denmark, which will continue until 2028. Furthermore, I plan to develop a master’s-level course in constructive journalism within our journalism programmes in Odense, drawing extensively on the insights and inspiration generated through this fellowship project.

2. Introduction

2.1 A Media Industry Under Pressure

“Our business model has broken down. We can no longer rely on advertising revenue simply rolling in. Essentially, we have only one option: to be indispensable to our users. And that is extremely difficult if we are not in close contact with them. Otherwise, we do not know what concerns them, what questions they struggle with, or what their world looks like. And if we do not understand and know their world, we cannot expect them to pay for our media.”

This is how Tanja Nyrup, former Editor-in-Chief of Mandag Morgen, former fellow at the Constructive Institute, and project manager of the “reversed voter meeting” initiative, describes the situation.

Local and regional media are facing a structural crisis characterized by declining circulation, loss of readers to other digital platforms, financial pressure, and the resulting cost-cutting measures and downsizing. The following key figures illustrate some of the consequences of these developments in the media landscape:

Fewer Journalists

- One in three local journalists has disappeared over the past four years. In absolute numbers, approximately 250 employees have left local media organizations during this period, reducing the number of editorial staff in local media from 835 to just 587 by 2025. (<https://journalisten.dk/hver-tredje-lokale-journalist-og-fotograf-er-forsvundet-siden-sidste-kommunalvalg/>)
- In just five years, 70 local media outlets have closed. At the end of 2020, Denmark had 220 printed local newspapers. By the end of 2025, only 150 remained. This corresponds to an average of 14 local newspaper closures per year during this period. This is significantly higher than between 2002 and 2020, when 60 local media outlets closed over 18 years, averaging just over three closures annually. <https://journalisten.dk/historisk-stor-nedgang-vi-er-der-hvor-man-ikke-kommer-op-igen/>

Declining Advertising Market

- The market for print advertising is in free fall. In just three years, from 2021 to 2024, newspaper revenues from print advertising fell by more than DKK 450 million. Local weekly newspapers have been hit the hardest. (<https://mediawatch.dk/Medienyt/Aviser/article18017494.ece>)
- An increasing share of advertising revenue is ending up in the hands of the technology giants. Today, more than 75% of digital advertising revenue goes to Big Tech companies (approximately DKK 9 billion), while Danish journalistic media account for less than the remaining quarter (approximately DKK 3 billion). This share continues to shrink year by year. (<https://mediawatch.dk/Medienyt/Aviser/article18005418.ece>)

Rising News Avoidance

- According to the Reuters Digital News Report, 40% of the population globally state that they often or sometimes avoid news. This figure has increased from 27% in 2017. News avoidance is more prevalent among younger people than among older generations. Among those who avoid news, 39% cite the negative impact of news on their mood, 31% feel overwhelmed by the volume of news, and 30% believe that war and conflict receive excessive attention.

2.2 Why user engagement?

As the relationship between media organizations and their users becomes increasingly important, user-involving journalism has gained renewed relevance.

User involvement is not merely about comments on social media or letters to the editor. Rather, it involves actively incorporating users' experiences, questions, needs, and perspectives as an integral part of the journalistic process.

The underlying idea is simple: if journalism is to be perceived as relevant, it must be rooted in the questions and issues that matter to people in their everyday lives.

At the same time, international experiences suggest that user involvement can contribute to increased trust, stronger relationships, and greater user loyalty. However, user involvement can also serve as a source of innovation by opening the newsroom to perspectives and ideas that would otherwise never reach the journalistic agenda.

2.3 Purpose of the project and research question

In the midst of the media industry's crisis—and struggle for survival—user-involving journalism has proven capable of serving as an important tool and countermeasure. When applied consistently and effectively, user-involving journalism can mitigate several key elements of the media crisis by increasing trust, relevance, and engagement. It can reduce news avoidance and strengthen the relationship between media organizations and their users, which may ultimately improve both circulation figures and financial sustainability. At the same time, it provides access to new perspectives and fosters innovation.

It is important to recognize, however, that user involvement is neither a universal solution nor a quick fix. Rather, it represents an important strategic approach within an industry under pressure—one that, over time, may help reverse current trends.

The question, therefore, is how user involvement can be applied effectively in a Danish context, particularly within local and regional media. Special attention is given to idea development, innovation, and creativity within the journalistic workflow that generates new content and new ways of communicating it.

Accordingly, the research question and focus of this fellowship project are formulated as follows:

How can innovation tools for dialogue-based journalism be developed and tested in ways that make them useful for local media while also serving as inspiration for other media organizations and journalism education?

2.4 Structure of the Report

The report is divided into eleven chapters.

It begins by presenting the theoretical framework, focusing on user-involving journalism, the democratic public sphere, and constructive journalism. This is followed by a review of existing research and practical experiences within the field.

The empirical core of the report consists of three development projects carried out in Danish local and regional media organizations. Based on these cases, the report analyzes opportunities, barriers, and lessons learned across the projects.

Finally, the report discusses the journalist's emerging role as a facilitator, examines why user involvement has not become more widespread, and explores the role it may play as a genuine alternative to AI-driven journalism. The report concludes by synthesizing the experiences into a series of concrete recommendations for media organizations seeking to work more systematically with user involvement as a tool for innovation, idea development and as a crucial journalistic resource.

3. Theoretical framework

3.1 What Is user-involving journalism?

A beloved child has many names... journalism that involves users in various ways is described and defined quite differently across the field, so it may be useful to briefly explain and clarify the individual concepts:

User-involving journalism

Journalism in which audiences are actively involved in the process, for example through input, ideas, or feedback. The aim is to create content that is more relevant, engaging, and trustworthy, while also strengthening the relationship with users.

Dialogue-based journalism

Focuses on two-way communication between media organizations and users. Journalism is developed through conversation and ongoing dialogue rather than one-way dissemination.

Public-powered journalism

Journalism in which the audience serves as a central driving force in setting the agenda and contributing content. The media organization functions as a facilitator rather than the sole producer.

Citizen-driven journalism

News production in which citizens play an active role in identifying, documenting, and communicating stories. It often focuses on local issues or topics that might otherwise be overlooked.

Engagement-based journalism

Journalism that prioritizes building relationships and fostering audience involvement. Success is measured not only by clicks, but also by participation, dialogue, and loyalty.

Citizen journalism

When ordinary citizens independently produce and share news outside traditional media organizations. This often occurs through social media and can complement professional journalism.

Although there is considerable overlap among several of these concepts, this project will adopt the definition of the first concept: **user-involving journalism**.

The focus is therefore to understand citizens' perspectives, needs, and experiences, which can provide input and inspiration and thereby improve the selection of angles, sources, questions, follow-ups, and so forth throughout the entire journalistic process.

This involves, in the following order:

1. Listening actively
2. Creating genuine conversation and dialogue
3. Applying the insights actively and concretely in the journalistic content

3.2 Hartmut Rosa and Habermas: The democratic role of journalism

User-involving journalism is not only about improving journalism. It's also about the role of the media in democracy. In a democratic society, journalism has traditionally served a dual function. On the one hand, the media are expected to inform citizens and hold those in power accountable. On the other hand, they are expected to contribute to public discourse by creating spaces for debate, reflection, and the exchange of opinions. However, this role has been challenged by digitalization, social media, and an increasingly fragmented media landscape.

In the autumn of 2025, I attended a philosophy course on ethics as a student. It was a profoundly personal experience and a real eye-opener for me. Encountering a wide range of ethical issues and philosophers' interpretations of dilemmas and choices provided entirely new perspectives for me on topics such as the public sphere, the role and value of the media, dialogue, conscience, ethical obligations, and social responsibility. Here, I will mention only some of the most important contributions from the course to my fellowship project.

3.3 Jürgen Habermas and democratic conversation

The recently deceased German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas formulated a number of fundamental principles for public deliberation (the deliberative debate):

Everyone should be able to participate

All citizens should have the opportunity to make their voices heard.

Equality in dialogue

Participants should have an equal right to speak and be heard - no one should dominate the discussion.

Arguments rather than power

The strongest arguments should determine the outcome of a discussion - not status, wealth, or power.

Honesty and openness

Participants should be sincere and transparent about their views and intentions.

However, the crisis facing the media weakens the edited and informative public sphere, while social media fragment public debate and promote conflict, emotions, and misinformation. They create unequal conversations in which many people do not participate and where fake news undermines honesty and openness. Taken together, these developments challenge all four of Habermas's ideals for a well-functioning democratic dialogue.

From this perspective, user-involving journalism can be understood as an attempt to re-establish the connection between media and citizens by creating new arenas for dialogue and participation. When citizens are invited into journalism as active contributors, the possibility of fostering a more inclusive and democratic public sphere is strengthened.

3.4 Hartmut Rosa: The role of media in an accelerating society

Whereas Habermas focuses on the public sphere and democracy, the German sociologist Hartmut Rosa offers a perspective centered on relationships and meaning.

Hartmut Rosa's concepts of social acceleration, alienation, and resonance can be used to understand the role and value of media in modern society.

Acceleration

Rosa's starting point is that modern society as a whole is characterized by social acceleration. Technology develops rapidly, information flows intensify, and the pace of everyday life has increased significantly. Media, - particularly digital platforms, play a central role as drivers of this acceleration. They enable constant updates, rapid communication, and a continuous flow of information.

This development creates an implicit demand to constantly keep up and remain connected. As a result, our relationship

with the world becomes increasingly superficial and fragmented.

Alienation

According to Rosa, this condition leads to alienation. When we encounter the world through rapid news updates, social media, and endless scrolling, we risk losing a deeper connection to what we experience. The world becomes something we register and consume rather than something with which we engage in a meaningful relationship.

Social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram illustrate this phenomenon: relationships are quantified through likes and views, and experiences often become something to document rather than something to live. In this way, a form of "contact without genuine connection" emerges.

Resonance

As a counterconcept, Rosa introduces resonance, which refers to a living and reciprocal relationship between human beings and the world. Resonance occurs when we are touched by something and, at the same time, respond to it—emotionally, physically, or intellectually. According to Rosa, resonance is the foundation of a meaningful life.

Applied to the media, this means that their value lies not only in delivering information but also, and perhaps more importantly, in their ability to create such resonant relationships, both through form and content.

Media therefore possess a dual potential. On the one hand, they can reinforce acceleration and alienation through speed, superficiality, and an emphasis on capturing attention. On the other hand, they can create resonance if they succeed in engaging users in a deeper and more meaningful way. This is particularly true when media communicate powerful stories, create space for reflection, or facilitate genuine dialogue between people, whether between media organizations and users or among users themselves.

This perspective is especially relevant to journalism. Ideally, journalism should help us understand the world and foster connections between people and society. Yet under pressure from the logic of acceleration, such as breaking news cycles and click optimization, it risks reducing complex events to rapid, disconnected pieces of information. When this happens, the possibility for resonance is weakened.

Conversely, in-depth, explanatory, and human-centered stories, as well as dialogue-based and user-involving journalism and content, can strengthen our connection to the world and thereby counteract alienation.

Overall, Rosa's thinking suggests that the role of media today is deeply ambivalent. They are both central drivers of developments that may lead to further alienation and potential tools for creating meaning and connection. The value of media therefore depends not on the quantity of information they produce, but rather on their ability to create relationships in which the world is experienced as alive and responsive.

4. What do we already know?

4.1 User involvement – not a new idea

Although user involvement journalism has received renewed attention in recent years, the idea of involving citizens and users is far from new. For decades, media organizations have used opinion pieces, citizen panels, and audience surveys as ways of connecting with their audiences.

What is new is that user involvement can increasingly be regarded as an integrated part of the journalistic workflow rather than an activity taking place after publication. Instead of merely reacting to completed stories, users are invited into the process earlier and contribute to idea development, sources, framing, research, and prioritization. In other words, as explained by the media Zetland: the relationship with the audience shifts from a linear to a circular model.

This development is closely linked to the digital transformation of the media industry. Social media and digital platforms have made dialogue between media organizations and users easier than ever before. At the same time, the media crisis has created a need to develop new relationships with users and produce journalism that is perceived as more relevant and valuable.

As a result, many media organizations today actively seek to move from a logic based on one-way communication to relationships. The focus is no longer solely on telling stories to the audience, but also on developing journalism together with them.

4.2 International experiences

Over the past several years, several international media organizations have developed methods and formats in which user involvement plays a central role in journalism. Below are several successful examples that may serve as inspiration:

4.2.1 Guardian: Deaths Inside (Australia)

Goal To document the deaths of Indigenous Australians (aboriginal people) in police and prison custody and uncover the systemic problems behind these deaths. The project aimed to make otherwise inaccessible information understandable to the public.

Method Close collaboration with families and relatives, who contributed information, experiences, and permissions to use names and stories, ensuring that those affected became more than mere numbers in a database. Journalists at Guardian Australia reviewed more than 460 coronial reports, along with public documents, to build a comprehensive database.

Result The award-winning project created the most comprehensive database of deaths in custody in Australia and was quickly adopted by families, researchers, advocacy organizations, and lawyers. The database made it possible to identify patterns and systemic issues that had previously been difficult to document. It was acknowledged in the Australian Senate and contributed to a national debate on deaths in custody.

Link https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/series/deaths-in-side?utm_source=chatgpt.com

4.2.2 Cityside: From reader to participant (US)

Goal To serve as a voice for citizens in San Francisco through a new form of local journalism.

Method Listening sessions, events, and live debates centered around questions such as:

- What are the most important issues in the city?
- What is missing from local journalism?
- How would you like your city to be covered?

Result A sustainable and award-winning media outlet with more than 30,000 subscribers and 2.5 million annual visitors.

Link <https://citysidejournalism.org>

4.2.3 The Local: Reader insights (Europe)

Goal To understand the concerns and interests of the newspaper's expatriate audience in the respective European countries where it operates.

Method A recurring format called Reader insights, in which readers are asked about their experiences, perspectives, and opinions on selected topics.

Result More than 100 responses to individual questions, new stories and angles, and stronger media branding.

Link <https://www.thelocal.dk/tag/reader-insights>

4.2.4 Financial Times: The future of Britain (UK)

Goal To facilitate public debate about the post-Brexit future of Britain.

Method Reader essays, opinion pieces, Facebook Live sessions, physical debates, competitions, and other activities.

Result More than 800 essays submitted, an 80% increase in comments, more subscribers, and increased traffic.

Link <https://www.ft.com/the-future-of-britain-project>

4.2.5 Volkskrant: User panel (Holland)

Goal To create more dialogue, greater transparency, and new perspectives.

Method Twenty to thirty selected readers are invited approximately once a month to discuss a specific theme with journalists, either in person or via Zoom.

Result Increased trust and engagement, along with better stories and new angles.

Links

<https://dialogue-journalism.eu/input-panel/>

<https://www.volkskrant.nl/dossier/jongerenpanel/?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F>

4.2.6 WEST: Open editorial meetings (Holland)

Goal To test new ideas, gain new perspectives, and build trust.

Method Facebook Live broadcasts where all users could watch, ask questions, and participate in discussions during the Friday morning editorial meeting.

Result New story angles, demands for stronger journalistic argumentation, and a shift in journalistic attitude toward greater humility.

Link <https://dialogue-journalism.eu/open-editorial-meetings/>

What these examples have in common is that user involvement is not regarded as a goal in itself. The purpose is to create better journalism through a deeper understanding of users' experiences, needs, and perspectives.

4.3 Danish experiences

Denmark also offers examples of media organizations that work systematically with user involvement.

4.3.1 TV2 Kosmopol: Ask us

Goal To identify what the target audience considers most important at any given moment and to listen to the questions they are asking themselves.

Method A recurring format in which users can ask questions about anything. The editorial team provides answers, and

readers vote on the best question.

Result More than 14,000 questions submitted, and nearly 700,000 votes cast over the past five years.

Link <https://www.tv2kosmopol.dk/spoerg-os>

4.3.2 Zetland: Turn it off while you're ahead (Sluk mens legen er god)

Goal To focus on children's and young people's screen use. The campaign sought to investigate how smartphones affect children's well-being, social lives, and childhood experiences, while stimulating debate about when and how children should gain access to smartphones.

Method The media continuously invited listeners and readers to share experiences, concerns, and questions regarding children and smartphones. The contributions were actively incorporated into the journalistic process and served as perspectives in both podcast and the broader coverage.

Result Thousands of parents and young people participated in the debate through comments, messages, and events where they shared experiences and discussed the topic. The campaign generated more than 1,000 new subscribers for Zetland. The journalist behind the campaign Nanna Schelde later published the book *Generation Screen* (Generation skærm) on the subject.

Link <https://www.zetland.dk/historie/sOMAJx5K-ae6EwI5D-b826e>

4.3.3 Zetland: Your inner climate (Dit indre klima)

Goal To create a different kind of climate journalism, - viewed through the perspective of users.

Method Drawing on extensive input and inspiration from Zetland members, the goal was to write more personal and relatable articles about climate-related issues.

Result Ten climate stories, each based on a different emotional response to climate change, published simultaneously.

Link <https://www.zetland.dk/historie/sOPA3Q4b-a8yvV4M2-1b6a1>

At the regional level, several Danish media organizations have also experimented with reader panels, open editorial meetings, and dialogue-based events. These experiences indicate that users often contribute perspectives, issues, and ideas that would otherwise remain invisible within traditional journalistic processes.

At the same time, experience shows that user involvement rarely emerges on its own. The most successful media organizations work systematically with dialogue, relationships, and facilitation as an integrated part of journalistic practice.

4.4 Does it work?

The argument for user involvement journalism is that it can have a positive effect and impact on the media organization and journalism across a wide range of areas and parameters:

Relationships

- Increased trust among users
- Greater perceived relevance among users
- Stronger loyalty

Content

- New and unique ideas
- More and different angles
- More input and inspiration for the development plus further development of content

Financial Performance

- Lower churn rates and higher retention rates
- Improved conversion rates (subscription purchases)
- Longer and deeper reading times

However, media professionals are often skeptical and ask where the evidence for these claims comes from. Therefore, the following scientific studies provide documentation supporting the points above.

4.5 Study 1: User involvement at 20

Local News Organizations in US

Research paper Curbing the Decline of Local News by Building Relationships with the Audience (2023) (appendix 2)

The study examines whether participatory journalism can strengthen both the financial sustainability of local media and their relationship with audiences.

The research was conducted as an experiment involving 20 local news organizations in the United States. Over a six-month period, some media outlets implemented participatory journalism practices while others continued operating as usual.

User involvement consisted of allowing citizens to submit questions, which journalists then investigated and developed into stories. The purpose was to test whether this approach could improve both financial outcomes and audience perceptions of the media.

The results showed that media organizations using participatory journalism gained more new subscriptions than the control group. However, there was no measurable effect on subscription renewals or traffic metrics such as page views.

Audience evaluations of the participating media organizations became more positive. Users felt they had greater influence over journalism (efficacy). They also perceived the media as more responsive to citizens' questions and more engaged with the local community.

The study is based on social exchange theory, which suggests that relationships are strengthened through mutual value. When media organizations listen to citizens, citizens may "give back" through subscriptions and loyalty.

The study therefore demonstrates that the relationship between media organizations and audiences is both social and economic. User involvement can strengthen the connection between a media outlet and its local community. It may also help counter the economic crisis facing local journalism.

The conclusion is that participatory journalism is a promising strategy, though not a universal solution. It can improve trust, relationships, and, to some extent, revenue generation. The study also emphasizes that strong local media are essential to democracy.

The full research article is attached as an appendix.

4.6 Study 2: Participatory climate journalism in local Funen media

This research project from the Centre for Journalism at the University of Southern Denmark (SDU) examines the role of media in communicating climate change.

In 2023, three local and regional media organizations, Fyens Stiftstidende, Fyns Amts Avis, and TV2 Fyn, conducted the first of several experiments. Over a period of several weeks, the three media outlets collaborated on a major campaign focusing on climate challenges and what citizens themselves could do to reduce these problems.

The theme of the first campaign was food waste and what individuals could do about it. The campaign was titled "Funen Goes Cucumber!" (Fyn går agurk!).

The study suggests that traditional climate journalism often focuses on problems and catastrophes. While this has raised awareness, it can also create feelings of helplessness among citizens. Many Danes are concerned about climate change but do not alter their behavior. One explanation is that negative coverage can be demotivating.

The study forms part of an SDU research project on constructive climate journalism. The purpose is to test whether a more solutions-oriented approach can motivate citizens. The methodology combines focus groups and survey research.

Focus groups conducted before the experiment revealed that many participants were tired of one-sided catastrophe coverage. They perceived traditional climate news as repetitive and lacking hope. They requested more concrete solutions and actionable guidance, particularly information about what they could do in their everyday lives.



The quantitative results show that participatory and constructive journalism has an effect. Individuals exposed to solutions-oriented coverage feel less powerless. They experience greater agency, enthusiasm, motivation and understanding of their own opportunities for action.

At the same time, they are more willing to change their own behavior.

The study therefore concludes that user-focused constructive journalism can influence both attitudes and actions. A constructive approach can increase both motivation and engagement. Consequently, media organizations can play an important role in the green transition by employing constructive participatory journalism.

4.7 User involvement as an innovation tool

Across both research and practice a clear pattern emerges: user involvement creates the greatest value when it functions as a tool for editorial development.

When users' experiences, questions, and perspectives are incorporated early in the process, new journalistic opportunities emerge. User involvement thus becomes a way of challenging editorial habits and routines.

At the same time, the focus shifts from the question, "What do we want to tell?" to the question, "What do users need to know and understand?"

This perspective forms the foundation of the three development projects that constitute the empirical core of my report.

In the following chapters, I therefore examine how user involvement can function in practice as a driving force for innovation, idea development, and democratic dialogue in local and regional media.

5. Methodology and research design

5.1 The three Projects

The empirical foundation of this report consists of three independent projects, all carried out in collaboration with Danish local and regional media organizations.

Project 1 Politicians Listen – The Reverse Voter Meeting (Det omvendte vælgermøde)

The first project was conducted in connection with the 2025 municipal elections as part of the nationwide initiative Your Vote – Our Denmark (Dit Valg – Vores Danmark).

At the core of the project was the so-called reverse voter meeting, in which citizens, rather than politicians, set the agenda for the dialogue. Through facilitated workshops, participants developed visions, questions, and themes that politicians were subsequently required to listen and respond to.

The project was carried out in collaboration with Aarhus Stiftstidende, Midtjyllands Avis, and Lolland-Falsters Folketidende.

Project 2 Silkeborg's New Faces (Silkeborg's nye ansigter)

The second project was conducted in collaboration with Midtjyllands Avis as part of the newspaper's thematic campaign focusing on newcomers moving to Silkeborg Municipality.

The purpose was to investigate how user involvement could be applied as a tool for idea development in the planning and execution of a major journalistic campaign.

The project included interviews, workshops, idea-development processes, and the testing of new journalistic formats.

Project 3: Ask Stiften (Spørg Stiften)

The third project was carried out in collaboration with Aarhus Stiftstidende.

A new journalistic format was developed and tested in which users were invited to submit questions, topics, and issues that journalists subsequently investigated and transformed into journalistic stories.

The project was conducted as a five-week experiment and has since evolved into a permanent journalistic format at the newspaper.

Although the three projects differ in terms of objectives, methods, and organization, they all share a common characteristic: user involvement is employed as a starting point

for journalistic development and idea generation.

5.2 Data foundation

The analyses in this project are based on several different data sources. The primary source consists of qualitative interviews conducted with journalists, editors, project managers, and other key individuals involved in the three development projects.

A total of 20 qualitative interviews are included in the study. The interviews were conducted as semi-structured interviews focusing on experiences, assessments, lessons learned, and reflections concerning user involvement and journalistic innovation.

In addition, the study draws upon:

- Participant observation at workshops and events.
- Development workshops with journalists.
- Evaluation materials from the completed projects.
- Internal documents and concept descriptions.
- Relevant research literature and previous studies.

5.3 Analytical method

The analysis was conducted as a qualitative cross-case analysis of the three projects.

The purpose was to identify patterns, experiences, opportunities, and challenges across the individual cases.

The analysis focuses particularly on the following questions:

- How does user involvement contribute to journalistic idea development?
- Which forms of user involvement create the greatest value?
- What barriers and challenges do journalists and newsrooms experience?
- How does user involvement affect the relationship between media organizations and users?
- What new competencies are required when working with user involvement?

The analysis places emphasis on identifying both successes and challenges. The purpose is not to demonstrate that user involvement always works, but rather to examine the conditions under which user involvement can create value for journalism.

6. Project 1

Politicians listen

(Det omvendte vælgermøde)

6.1 Can you turn a voter meeting upside down?

In connection with the 2025 municipal elections, an experiment was conducted that in many ways challenged the traditional roles of democratic dialogue.

What would happen if politicians stopped talking, and started listening?

This question became the starting point for the project Politicians listen, which formed part of the large nationwide initiative Your Vote – Our Denmark. The aim was to create new forms of dialogue between citizens, politicians, and the media, while also investigating whether user involvement could function as a tool for developing more relevant and engaging journalism.

The initiative was a nationwide collaboration between media organizations, educational institutions, and civil society organizations, created, established, and coordinated by Constructive Institute. The background for the project was concern about declining voter turnout, weakened local journalism, and an increasingly polarized public debate, all of which could make it more difficult for voters to engage in democratic processes.

The project therefore sought to create a more constructive and informative election campaign. This was achieved through collaboration between media organizations on improved coverage of local politics, the use of data and opinion polls to illuminate citizens' views, and the involvement of 400 journalism students to strengthen local journalism. A wide range of events were also organized, including election festivals and meetings between citizens and politicians, where dialogue and mutual understanding were central. At the same time, emphasis was placed on communicating facts and solutions rather than conflict and polarization.

The significance of the project lay particularly in its contri-

bution to making the municipal election more tangible and relevant for many Danes. By creating better information and more constructive debate, the initiative sought to increase engagement and thereby voter turnout. Although difficult to measure precisely, the project aimed to strengthen local democracy by making more citizens aware of how their vote matters in their own municipality.

The project was built on a fundamental assumption: that many citizens experience traditional political debates as predictable and top-down. The same politicians often say the same things, while voters' own questions and experiences receive relatively small attention.

By reversing the roles, citizens would instead become the ones setting the agenda.

For the media organizations involved, the ambition was also to explore whether this form of dialogue could function as a journalistic idea-development tool and provide access to new stories, sources, angles, and perspectives.

6.2 The reverse voter meeting

The reverse voter meeting was an intensive process designed to ensure participatory journalism in the run-up to the municipal elections across three local media outlets. The purpose was to enhance the quality and relevance of democratic dialogue about important societal issues in collaboration with a broad cross-section of local citizens, and to do it so successfully that it would inspire other media organizations to adopt similar approaches.

The core of the project was to bring citizens' own visions and dreams of a good life into both the municipal election campaign and newspaper coverage by facilitating a more constructive and inclusive conversation between politicians, citizens, and the media than is typically found at traditional election meetings. (appendix 3)



The project was facilitated and led by Tanja Nyrup, an experienced facilitator of workshops and debates in many formats from her time as editor-in-chief of Mandag Morgen. Today she runs her own consultancy, FriFugl, where she focuses on democratic dialogue about a sustainable future, and she is a former fellow at Constructive Institute.

I personally participated in a workshop in the spring of 2025 where the format was further developed, and I also attended the reverse voter meeting in Aarhus. Furthermore, I took part in the three qualitative evaluation interviews conducted with the editors-in-chief of the three local and regional newspapers that hosted "Politicians Listen" events, and I interviewed Tanja Nyrup about the project as well.

6.3 Participants and process

The project was carried out in collaboration with Aarhus Stiftstidende, Midtjyllands Avis, and Lolland-Falsters Folketidende:

Lolland-Falsters Folketidende is a local daily newspaper headquartered in Nykøbing Falster, covering the municipalities of Guldborgsund and Lolland. The newspaper reaches approximately 46,000 weekly readers and more than 200,000 monthly digital users. Its daily print circulation is below 10,000 copies. The total editorial staff numbers between 25 and 30 employees. It's one of the few remaining independent local newspapers in Denmark.

Midtjyllands Avis is a local daily newspaper based in Silkeborg, covering primarily the Silkeborg area and parts of Central Jutland. Founded in 1857, it is now part of Mediehusene Midtjylland, which also includes Skive Folkeblad and Herning Folkeblad. The newspaper has 9,500 subscribers. Approximately half are digital-only subscribers, while the other half also receive the print edition. In 2025, the newspaper had 39,000 daily readers, an increase from 34,000 in 2024. Approximately 25 journalists are employed by the newspaper.

Aarhus Stiftstidende is one of Denmark's oldest daily newspapers (founded in 1794), based in Aarhus and covering Eastern Jutland. It is part of the JFM media group (Jysk Fynske Medier). Its coverage area includes Aarhus and surrounding municipalities such as Skanderborg, Odder, and Djursland. Approximately 25 journalists are employed by the newspaper. Circulation and subscription figures are not publicly disclosed.

Each event involved approximately 25–30 citizens, several local politicians, as well as journalists and editors from the participating media organizations.

Four weeks before the reverse voter meeting, Tanja Nyrup conducted a workshop with the journalists who were responsible for facilitating the event. During the workshop, she reviewed local demographics and groups that were underrepresented in the newspaper's coverage. Together, they developed a strategy for recruiting voters who, based on experience, are the most difficult to get to attend. This included, for example, contacting housing associations, youth clubs, sports clubs, socially disadvantaged groups, and others.

The media outlets that pursued this strategy achieved better results than those that did not follow up and instead ended up relying on the usual recruitment methods through newspaper advertisements.

The workshop day concluded with training for the journalists and editors who were to facilitate the thematic discussion groups at the election meeting.

The program lasted approximately three hours and was divided into several phases:

- 'How worried are you about the future' - floor exercise
- Welcome (editor-in-chief) and introductory pep talk (Tanja)
- The future machine: Imagine life in municipality X in 2037 (three election cycles from now) in a reality where we made all the right choices (in your opinion)
- Individual reflection exercise: Finish the sentence 'What if...' on as many small notes as you can.
- Place your notes on theme boards
- Choose a theme, read the notes and share your dreams and thoughts.
- Facilitated group conversation1: Themed roundtable talks to prioritize the ideas on the theme boards. Politicians listen and ask curious questions.
- Plenary session: Politicians are given the floor. Rapid interviews with politicians: "What have you heard?"
- Facilitated group conversation2: Themed roundtable talks to concretize the ideas to policy/interventions.
- Blind Voting : Politicians produce posters describing the future the promise to work for & Voters vote for a vision (without knowing which politician is behind)
- Revelation of who is behind which vision. Voting results and a short q&a with politicians about their visions.
- Informal conversation, coffee, and cake.

The format differed significantly from traditional voter meetings. Instead of politicians presenting their visions and policy priorities, citizens were invited to formulate their own dreams and wishes for the future of their local community.

These reflections formed the basis for group discussions in which participants jointly developed themes, questions, and issues. The politicians' primary role was to listen. Only later in the process were they given the opportunity to respond to the perspectives raised by citizens.

In this way, the balance of power within the political conversation was temporarily shifted. The focus moved away from political messages and toward citizens' experiences, hopes, and concerns.

The following day, an extended editorial meeting lasting approximately two hours was held based on the workshop with readers. The objective was to translate user involvement into concrete journalism by developing new formats inspired by the idea-development tools and generating relevant journalism rooted in citizens' engagement and dialogue with politicians. The process involved identifying new story angles, prioritizing opportunities, and developing new newspaper formats.

Hans ansigt hænger over hele byen - men han vil ikke være politiker



Mikke Bondegaard Jensen fra Idestrup har takket ja til et projekt, der vender op og ned på den traditionelle forståelse af valgplakater

6.4 The reverse election poster

Based on the reverse voter meeting, an entirely new concept was also created: the reverse election poster.

The reverse election poster is a format that turns traditional political communication upside down. Instead of politicians formulating messages and promises on the poster, citizens themselves express their wishes, needs, and dreams for the future as if they were creating their own campaign poster.

The purpose is to give space to more voices and create a more listening- and dialogue-oriented approach to politics,

shifting the focus from what is being promised to what people actually want.

The three media organizations independently produced a number of these reverse election posters based on the workshops. Featuring voters' viewpoints and opinions, the posters were displayed locally alongside traditional political campaign posters, thereby contributing to public debate, attracting attention, and promoting both the media organizations and their election coverage.

Borgerne får ordet:

Nu lancerer vi vælgerplakaten

Hvad er vigtigere end at lytte til de lokale borgerne til et kommunalvalg? På Folketidende mener vi, at det må være noget af det absolut vigtigste, derfor lancerer vi vælgerplakaten.



6.5 When the future is difficult to imagine

One of the distinctive elements of the workshop was The Future Machine, during which participants stood in a circle with their eyes closed for 10–15 minutes and imagined what their own lives and their municipality would look like twelve years into the future (three election cycles).

Tanja Nyrup explains that the exercise is not about predicting the most likely future but rather about actively exploring how the world could look and which directions we would like to move toward.

“The exercise is important because people find it difficult to imagine change and often either cling to the status quo or imagine negative (dystopian) futures. By training the ability to think about alternative and positive futures, we can avoid negative expectations becoming self-fulfilling prophecies,” explains Tanja Nyrup.

In other words, the future exercise can:

- Open up new perspectives and possibilities instead of focusing on fixed assumptions.
- Make it easier to act in the present by providing direction for decision-making.

- Create a foundation for political and societal discussions about the future people want.
- Encourage people to actively work toward more desirable forms of development.

This is particularly important at a time when fear of the future is widespread.

A new report from the Copenhagen Institute for Futures Studies, Future Barometer 2025, based on research conducted in collaboration with Epinion, shows that only slightly less than a quarter of Danes believe that future generations will have a better life than their own. One-third believe that future generations will experience a life that is worse, or much worse than their own. (<https://www.cifs.dk/da/fremtidsbarometer-2025>)

The report attributes this to concerns about the climate crisis, the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, democratic decline, artificial intelligence, and other factors.

“Our society is filled with apocalyptic statements that the climate crisis will soon overwhelm us and that we should hide in our basements from the Russians,” says a Professor of Aesthetics and Culture at Aarhus University (Weekendavisen, 14 November 2025).

This can have significant consequences for how people act and make decisions.

“We know that animals become more short-sighted in their behavior when they find themselves in an uncertain environment. The same applies to human beings,” says Carl-Johan Dalgaard, chairman of the Danish Economic Council and Professor of Economics at the University of Copenhagen (Weekendavisen, 14 November 2025).

For example, people save more and invest less, despite generally having more money than ever before.

Fear of the future can also manifest itself in other ways, explains Peter Luca Versteegen, a researcher in political psychology at the University of Vienna:

- **Sociological** More young people choose not to have children or pursue higher education because of concerns about the future.
- **Technological** More people opt out of digital technologies in favor of more analogue lifestyles.
- **Political** A clear wave of political nostalgia is sweeping across Europe and the United States, particularly on the political right, based on the belief that things were better in the past than in an uncertain present and future, as reflected in slogans such as:
 - Let’s Take Back Control (Boris Johnson’s Brexit campaign)
 - Deutschland. Aber normal. (the right-wing populist AfD’s view that things were more normal and better in the past)
 - Make America Great Again (Trump’s campaign slogan)
 - Bring Denmark Back (Danmark tilbage) the Danish People’s Party’s (Dansk Folkeparti) campaign slogan for the 2026 parliamentary election

Tanja Nyrup explains that she is highly inspired by British author, educator, and activist Rob Hopkins, founder of the Transition Movement, which works with local solutions to climate and societal challenges. (<https://www.robhopkins.net>)

His idea of a hopeful perspective on the future is that we must actively train our ability to imagine positive and desirable futures rather than focusing solely on crises and disasters. He argues that our imagination is crucial because the futures we can envision are the futures we begin working toward.

In other words, a hopeful vision of the future is not naïve optimism but a deliberate tool for creating action, engagement, and new solutions.

6.6 What did the media learn?

Shortly after the municipal election (18 November), an eval-

uation was conducted in early December 2025 through qualitative interviews with the three editors-in-chief who had organized and facilitated the reverse voter meetings:

- Jan Schouby, Editor-in-Chief, Aarhus Stiftstidende
- Ole Sloth, Editor-in-Chief, Lolland-Falsters Folketidende
- Hans Krabbe, Editor-in-Chief, Midtjyllands Avis

Overall assessment

Across the three editors-in-chief, a common picture emerges: the reverse voter meeting was both an innovative and valuable experiment that successfully placed citizens’ voices at the center of the conversation. At the same time, it’s a format that requires significant resources and further development.

Overall, the editors assessed the format as successful because it broke with the traditional logic of election meetings. By reversing the roles and allowing citizens to set the agenda, entirely new and more concrete perspectives on local issues emerged.

Several editors noted that the conversations became more grounded and surprising. Topics such as well-being, for example, occupied a larger role than expected. Participants also felt that they were taken seriously, and many citizens were highly engaged and courageous in their dialogue with politicians.

Strengths of the format

The greatest strength of the format was the user involvement itself.

All three editors pointed out that they gained access to new voices, perspectives, and sources that they would not normally encounter. This generated not only journalistic ideas but also stronger relationships with readers and users, as well as a sense that the newspaper serves as an active participant and voice within the local community.

Several editors also emphasized the format’s symbolic value. It demonstrated that media organizations listen to citizens and seek dialogue rather than one-way communication.

Furthermore, the reverse voter meeting helped differentiate the participating media organizations from their competitors. The format was perceived as original and unlike anything else available elsewhere, leaving a strong positive impression on many participants.

Internally, it also served as a catalyst within newsrooms by strengthening the focus on community building and audience engagement as central components of journalistic strategy.



Challenges of the format

That said, the evaluations also identified several challenges. A recurring observation was that the format is resource intensive. Recruiting a sufficiently broad and diverse group of participants proved to be difficult and time-consuming. Several editors stressed that recruitment must begin much earlier if the goal is to be achieved.

There was also a tendency for participants to resemble “the usual suspects,” which weakened the ambition of genuine representation and could potentially create opportunities for lobbyists if not carefully managed.

Facilitation was identified as another critical factor. The role of host requires skills that journalists do not necessarily possess by default. Some found it difficult to manage politicians or create a balanced dialogue. In some cases, the final stage, where politicians were asked to respond, was perceived as less successful and somewhat unresolved.

Challenges were also identified in translating the discussions into journalism. Although the meetings generated numerous ideas and perspectives, not all newsrooms succeeded in transforming them into concrete stories, often due to the time pressures of the election campaign.

Some experienced limited editorial output or found that the resulting stories were overshadowed by other election cov-

erage. However, certain formats such as personal profiles and portraits of participants proved highly effective with readers. The same was particularly true of the reverse election poster.

Politicians' experience of the format

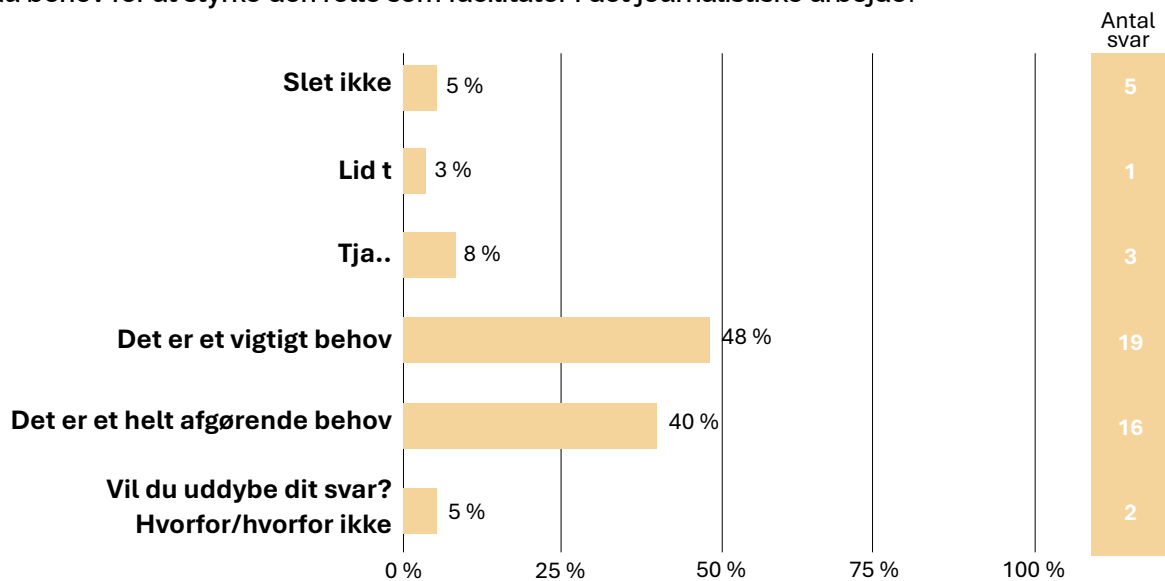
According to the evaluations provided by the three editors-in-chief, politicians' experiences of the reverse voter meeting were more mixed and nuanced than those of citizens and media professionals, though still predominantly positive.

Several editors noted that politicians generally responded well to the format despite its challenge to their traditional role.

At Midtjyllands Avis, reactions were described as clearly positive, and some politicians who did not participate later expressed a wish that they had done so.

At Lolland-Falsters Folketidende, it was emphasized that politicians were pushed out of their comfort zones. They were accustomed to traditional voter meetings where they themselves set the agenda, but in this format, they were required to listen to citizens instead. Although unfamiliar, this shift was considered both positive and meaningful.

Dit valg. Vores Danmark-projektet handlede også om, at medierne fik rollen som facilitator i at engagere borgerne i den demokratiske samtale. I hvilket omfang ser du behov for at styrke den rolle som facilitator i det journalistiske arbejde?



The evaluation from Aarhus Stiftstidende provided the most nuanced picture. Approximately one-third of politicians were critical, one-third were neutral, and one-third were very positive. This suggests that the format appeals particularly to politicians who are open to dialogue, while others perceive it as unfamiliar or less relevant.

A central observation is that the format changes the balance of power. When citizens set the agenda, politicians lose some of the control they normally possess in political debates. This can create uncertainty, but it can also foster greater proximity and more authentic dialogue.

Several editors highlighted that the format worked well for politicians precisely because it enabled them to engage more closely with citizens' concrete concerns through attentive listening.

There were, however, challenges. Some politicians dominated discussions or struggled to adapt to their new role, placing considerable demands on facilitators. Furthermore, the final stage of the event—where politicians responded to citizens' contributions—was sometimes perceived as less successful and somewhat unfinished.

Overall, the evaluation shows that politicians were both challenged and inspired by the reverse voter meeting. The format was generally received positively but requires adaptation and clear facilitation to function optimally, particularly because it breaks with traditional political rules and expectations associated with election meetings.

6.7 Strengthening the facilitator Role

In an evaluation questionnaire that the Constructive Institute subsequently distributed to the parties and participants

involved in the “Your Choice. Our Denmark” project including journalists, editors, politicians, municipal officials and others, one of the questions concerned the extent to which respondents saw a need for the media to strengthen its role as a facilitator in engaging citizens in democratic dialogue as part of journalistic practice. In response, 88% stated that this was an important or critically important need.

6.8 Interim conclusion

Looking ahead, the editors-in-chief see considerable potential in the format. It's regarded as a strong method for building relationships, developing new journalistic formats, and strengthening the media's relevance in the local community. Several mention the potential to repeat or scale the concept, for example, by holding more meetings or by using the participants as reader panels. At the same time, they emphasize the need for better planning, clearer prioritization, and more systematic follow-up if the potential is to be fully realized.

Overall, the editors-in-chief assess the reverse election meeting as a successful and inspiring innovation tool and as a method for obtaining input, inspiration, and ideas for new and different content through dialogue and user involvement. This has both strengthened the relationship with readers and opened new journalistic opportunities. However, it's also a format that places high demands on time, organization, and competencies—and requires further development to become an integrated and sustainable part of editorial work.

The question, however, is whether user involvement can also create value outside major democratic events. This is examined in the next chapter through the collaboration with Midtjyllands Avis and the campaign Silkeborg's New Faces.

7. Project 2

Silkeborg's new faces

(Silkeborgs nye ansigter)

7.1 Background

Twice a year, Midtjyllands Avis runs a major journalistic campaign focusing on a topic of particular interest to the citizens of Silkeborg and the newspaper's audience. In spring 2026, the theme was the new residents moving to the city.

By agreement with the newspaper's management, I linked my fellowship project to the campaign with the aim of working more systematically with user-involving journalism throughout the process.

Silkeborg is one of the fastest-growing cities in Denmark, with a growth rate that is twice the national average. It's currently the country's eighth-largest city and is planned to become the sixth largest by 2034. Many people who work in Aarhus and the surrounding area choose to settle in Silkeborg because housing prices are significantly lower, while the city also offers abundant nature, opportunities for outdoor recreation, family-friendly surroundings, and a reasonably good infrastructure.

The target audience for the campaign was people aged 30–50, with a particular focus on young families with children. The theme was also linked to a parallel marketing campaign aimed at attracting this demographic as new readers and users of the newspaper.

The campaign consisted of a series of portraits and articles in which the newspaper told personal stories about new residents in both the city and the municipality. Through these stories, readers gained insight into why people choose to settle in Silkeborg, how they experience the city, what they appreciate, what they may be missing, and how they adapt to their new lives.

New residents play an important role in the municipality's development, and by putting faces to them, the campaign helped highlight what makes the area attractive. At the same time, the series supported a narrative of Silkeborg as an open, welcoming, and vibrant city characterized by strong communities, development, and growth.

🏠 SILKEBORG SILKEBORGS NYE ANSIGTER

Midtjyllands Avis mødte Silkeborgs nye ansigter i nybyggerområde: Vi har også brug for dine input

Midtjyllands Avis lader op til et stort tema om Silkeborg Kommunes mange, nye tilflyttere. Kenneth Husum har været på reportage for at hente inspiration til temaet. Nederst i artiklen kan du skrive om dine tanker og dine ideer til avisens tema

7.2 Midtjyllands Avis as a laboratory

In recent years, Midtjyllands Avis has been among the Danish local media outlets that have worked most systematically with constructive journalism.

Under the leadership of, among others, editorial director Brian Holst, the newspaper has developed the editorial concept KLIO: Critical, Solution-Oriented, Involving, and Follow-Up Journalism (Kritisk, Løsningsorienteret, Inddragende og Opfølgende).

The underlying ambition is to create journalism that not only describes problems but also helps users understand issues, identify solutions, navigate society, and engage with their communities.

Based on the KLIO concept, the newspaper has developed a toolbox of journalistic formats designed to be integrated into daily coverage and visual presentation across both digital and print platforms. These formats include:

- The newspaper gives you an overview
- The newspaper gives you answers / readers get answers
- The newspaper seeks answers
- How it should be done
- How we produced the story
- The road towards a solution
- What others are doing
- The newspaper gives you an overview
- Etc.

Constructive journalism was therefore already an integrated part of the newspaper's culture when my fellowship project became linked to the campaign. This made Midtjyllands Avis a particularly interesting case.

If participatory journalism were to function as a tool for idea development, there should be favorable conditions for testing it precisely in this environment.

7.3 What do the journalists say?

As part of the project, I conducted qualitative interviews with four journalists, that were part of the campaign.

The interviews revealed strong support for both constructive and user involvement journalism:



- The interviews showed a clear and broad consensus that constructive journalism is deeply embedded in the editorial DNA, although it's applied consciously to varying degrees in idea development and editorial processes. In some cases, the constructive format (the so-called "blue dots") is not decided until a story is close to completion, and it becomes clear where it fits within one of the concepts.
- Several journalists mentioned the constructive formats ("the blue dots") and KPIs as fixed tools in the idea-development process. Constructive tags and journalistic approaches are frequently—but not always—used both during the idea phase and after publication.
- A constructive approach increases job satisfaction and encourages more nuanced journalism. Quite simply, it makes coming to work more enjoyable!
- Dialogue-based journalism is regarded as a strong tool for idea generation. Today, however, it's primarily used in connection with larger themes and projects and only rarely in day-to-day news production. There is potential for a more structured application, including within everyday journalism.
- When dialogue-based journalism is used, it's perceived as powerful and motivating for both journalists and users. However, it requires conscious prioritization as well as managerial and organizational support.

7.4 Idea Development for the editorial team

As part of the campaign planning process, I facilitated a half-day workshop on user involvement journalism for the newspaper's editorial staff in March.

The workshop began with a one-hour presentation and introduction for all 25 journalists, followed by a three-hour innovation seminar for the four designated journalists being part of the the campaign.

The idea-development process was based on the Google Sprint model, also known as Design Sprint, a structured method developed by Google Ventures for rapidly solving complex problems and testing ideas. The process helps teams move from ideas to concrete products within a short period of time.



More specifically, the workshop consisted of a series of idea-generation rounds in which participants worked in pairs to develop proposals and formats for participatory journalism related to the upcoming campaign about new residents. The most promising ideas were then selected and tested the following week with a group of citizens at a dedicated user panel meeting.

The process can be illustrated by the following model:



Participants came up with several concrete ideas and participatory journalistic formats for the campaign:

Idea 1: Picnic/barbecue and street parties in newly developed residential areas

Facilitate events for new residents where participants sit together with people they have not met before. Conversation cards would be provided to attendees. Journalists would collect ideas and produce feature reports from the events.

Idea 2: User panel

Participants from the “Silkeborg Calling” group (an already established citizen group) would serve as a permanent user panel. The panel could be used to test ideas, generate new perspectives, and regularly function as a sounding board for inspiration, story ideas, angles, and editorial input.

Idea 3: Stroller baby walk

A guided walking tour for families with babies, including stops at relevant locations around the city. The event would conclude at the newspaper office, where participants and journalists would gather and compile ideas and inputs for potential stories.

Idea 4: Pop-up editorial unit

A cargo bike would be used bringing journalists into newly developed neighborhoods, where they could talk about the campaign, distribute newspapers, gather ideas and inspiration, and offer free portrait photographs in exchange for valuable editorial input.

Idea 5: Instagram profile takeover by newcomers

Users and newcomers would take over the newspaper’s Instagram account for a few days or a week at a time, producing content they found interesting and relevant. For example, they could create voting battles around questions such as: “What are the best and most important places for a newcomer to know in Silkeborg?”

Idea 6: Online quiz – what kind of Silkeborg resident are you?

Do you know the different Silkeborg personality types—and which one are you? The concept could also be developed into a physical event at the newspaper.

User panel

I succeeded in identifying and assembling a group of seven citizens and users for a meeting the week following the innovation workshop. During the meeting, journalists presented the various proposals, after which participants discussed the ideas extensively, commenting on them and contributing additional input.

The user panel was deliberately composed as a diverse group representing different backgrounds, ages, genders, and experiences. What they shared was that they were all highly engaged local citizens with extensive networks and a strong interest in the local community—whether through school boards, the music scene, politics, or other civic activities (Appendix 5).

Based on the comments and input from the user panel, it was possible to further refine and strengthen the various ideas for the continued development of the campaign.

7.5 AI as creative partner

A distinctive element of the project was the use of AI as support for idea development.

During the workshop involving the four journalists, participants were given access to an AI tool based on Notebook LM, which I had previously supplied with material relating to user involvement, innovation, creativity, and the campaign theme.

AI was therefore not used to write journalism or produce finished solutions. Instead, the tool functioned as a creative sparring partner throughout the ideation process. Journalists used the system to challenge their own assumptions, gain new perspectives, and generate alternative ideas.

The project therefore illustrates how AI can potentially support creative processes without necessarily replacing human judgement or journalistic expertise.

7.6 What worked

The campaign lasted for approximately four weeks from the end of April. Throughout the period, articles on the topic ap-



Ungt par ikke i tvivl: Her skaber vi en verden fuld af liv

peared almost daily, and all articles were collected in the newspaper's digital edition under the heading "Silkeborg's New Faces."

The overall assessment was that the campaign addressed a highly relevant topic and that many of the articles achieved solid readership figures. From a journalistic perspective, the theme performed well. In particular, the many down-to-earth and personal stories and profiles where journalists had gone out and met people in person, proved successful and attracted substantial readership.

In this way, the newspaper clearly and visibly placed journalistic focus on the issue, which readers and users responded to positively.

All interviewees highlighted the initial user panel as the most successful component of the project and, in reality, the only genuinely participatory activity. The meeting provided the newsroom with new perspectives on newcomers' experiences and challenges, generated story ideas, and gave journalists valuable insights into the target audience.

The outcome included both fully developed story ideas and inspiration for new angles and approaches. Out of the approximately 40 articles produced during the campaign, 8 were directly based on ideas and input from this single meeting, equivalent to 20 percent of all campaign content!

These articles also introduced more young people and younger case subjects into the newspaper, which was one of the campaign's stated objectives.

At the same time, the panel demonstrated that citizens are willing to engage when they are invited into the journalistic process.

Subscription conversion: Overall, the campaign articles appear to have generated six subscription purchases directly. During the same period, the newspaper's sales department sold a total of 37 subscriptions. Both figures are considered satisfactory and are roughly in line with average performance.

7.7 When reality hit the newsroom

Many promising ideas emerged during the workshop. However, once the campaign began, a classic challenge arose: everyday newsroom realities.

Because of time pressure, limited resources, and competing editorial priorities, most of the developed formats were never implemented.

The idea of a pop-up newsroom using a cargo bike ultimately became a reporting trip by car, during which one journalist visited a newly developed residential area. This resulted in several relevant and worthwhile stories, but the participatory element was limited.

Likewise, plans for the other three journalists to visit additional neighborhoods were abandoned. According to the duty editor responsible for coverage during the particular days, who had not been involved in planning the campaign, the reason was a lack of time and resources.

The idea of allowing users to take over the newspaper's Instagram account was also abandoned. I had developed a complete Instagram Takeover concept with detailed objectives, division of responsibilities, expectation management, implementation plans, and procedures for user involvement of the account. (Appendix 4) However, the project ultimately fell between several organizational responsibilities and chairs, and no one assumed ownership of implementation.

None of the remaining ideas were carried out. In addition, some of the selected journalists were assigned to other editorial units during the campaign period, while one journalist was on holiday for a substantial time of the campaign.

7.8 What did we learn?

News editor Brian Holst agrees with the journalists' assessment of the campaign and process: the campaign contained a great deal of strong traditional journalism, but the participatory element was only partially successful.

According to Brian Holst, the key lessons for future work with this type of journalism are as follows:

- **Start planning earlier**
User involvement activities should be planned at least several months before the campaign begins.
- **Management must clearly prioritize efforts**
User involvement only succeeds when management actively allocates time and resources to it.
- **Define roles and responsibilities from the outset**
It must be clear who is responsible for user activities, events, social media, and follow-up work.
- **User panels create significant value**
Face-to-face meetings with users generate perspectives

and stories that the newsroom would not discover on its own.

- **Meet users in person**
Outreach activities in local communities create stronger relationships than digital posts alone and result in better stories in both form and content.
- **The journalistic role must expand**
Journalists must be able to facilitate, network, listen to, and engage with users, not just produce content.
- **Support journalists with practical tools**
Templates, guides, and clearly defined workflows make it easier to work systematically with user involvement.
- **Collaborate across departments**
Marketing, sales, and editorial teams should work together on events, promotion, and user activities.
- **View user involvement as a cultural change**
Making user involvement a natural part of journalism requires persistence, shared understanding, and ongoing management attention.

7.9 Partial conclusion

There were many good intentions, ideas, and reflections behind the campaign Silkeborg's New Faces.

However, the greatest challenge is rarely generating ideas. More often, the greatest challenge is creating the organizational conditions that make it possible to work systematically with those ideas and bring them to life.

User involvement therefore becomes not only a question of methods and tools, but also a question of leadership, organizational culture, and priorities.

This issue becomes even more evident in the report's third case study, where user involvement was not merely developed as an idea but was actually implemented as a permanent journalistic format.

That is the story of Ask Stiften.

8. Project 3

Ask Stiften (Spørg Stiften)

8.1 Background

In the spring of 2026, it became possible to establish a collaboration with Aarhus Stiftstidende to experiment with new formats of user involvement journalism, with the aim of generating more and different ideas, angles and stories for the daily newspaper.

Journalist Christian Olesen became the driving force behind the project. He was relieved of his regular duties and was therefore able to focus exclusively on the project for approximately five weeks during April and May.

Christian had been a fellow at Constructive Institute in the spring of 2025, and the conclusion of his fellowship project was that Aarhus Stiftstidende faced a fundamental challenge: the newspaper had lost touch with a large segment of Aarhus residents. Although the newspaper's financial situation was OK, readership was declining, particularly among younger audiences, and many citizens no longer perceived the newspaper as relevant or relatable. At the same time, Stiften lacked a clear identity it was unclear what the newspaper stood for compared to other media outlets.

One significant reason for this situation was developments within the media industry. Competition for attention had led to sharper, more conflict-oriented journalism driven by data and clicks. As a result, stories often became negative or sen-

sationalized, which might generate debate but could also contribute to news fatigue and alienate readers. At the same time, editorial resources had been reduced, and journalists were under increasing pressure to produce more content at a faster pace.

The result was a newspaper that still produced critical journalism but not really reflected or engaged the city's citizens to the same extent.

The proposed solution was to rebuild the relationship with Aarhus residents through a clearer editorial direction and closer contact with users. Stiften needed to define a distinct editorial profile and create a stronger identity that readers could identify with. Journalism should increasingly take its starting point in citizens themselves through physical presence, active involvement, and dialogue.

In addition, the project proposed working more systematically with themes and editorial projects and strengthening journalists' personal communication and visibility.

Overall, the ambition was to make Stiften a newspaper created together with Aarhus residents, not merely about them, to regain relevance in a city undergoing constant development and change. This was the conclusion of Christian Olesen's fellowship project in the spring of 2025.

Du spørger, vi undersøger

Århus Stiftstidende eksisterer kun på grund af vores læsere.
Uden dig har vi ingen værdi.

Derfor vil vi rigtig gerne høre fra dig. Her kan du skrive, **hvad du undrer dig over**. Eller komme med et tip, som vi bør undersøge.

Vi kalder det **Spørg Stiften**. Og det er min opgave at finde svar på jeres mest interessante spørgsmål. Så spørg løs.



Christian Olesen,
Journalist
chole@stiften.dk

Spørg Stiften



8.2 A simple question

Some of the most interesting journalistic innovations emerge from simple questions. One such question arose during the collaboration with Aarhus Stiftstidende:

What would happen if users themselves decided which questions journalists should investigate?

This question became the foundation for the development of the Ask Stiften concept.

The idea was simple: users would be invited to submit questions, curiosities, and issues from their everyday lives. Journalists would then select relevant questions and investigate them journalistically.

At the end of April, Aarhus Stiftstidende launched Ask Stiften. As mentioned, the format is based on the idea that readers' curiosity and local concerns can serve as an important starting point for journalism. Topics can range from urban development, traffic, and municipal decisions to local stories, regulations, or phenomena that citizens want explained and better understood. The idea was inspired by the Ask Us format at TV2 Kosmopol.

From the outset, Christian set himself the goal that for the following month he would only produce stories based on ideas originating from users and readers.

The success quickly proved overwhelming.

Input, ideas, tips, and suggestions for "curiosity stories" poured in to such an extent that Christian ended up with far more promising journalistic ideas than he could possibly produce and write.

8.3 What came out of it?

The project proved highly significant both in terms of idea generation and the production of better and different stories, as well as creating a closer relationship with readers:

- New perspectives and stories

The project provided access to stories and issues that would not necessarily have been discovered while sitting behind a desk in the newsroom. Christian mentions questions concerning night buses, running routes, public transportation, concert facilities, and other local conditions in Aarhus. Many of these topics lie outside journalists' own everyday experiences but turn out to be highly relevant to many city residents. The project therefore shifts idea generation from being primarily an internal editorial process to becoming a collaborative process between journalists and citizens. Users effectively function as an additional network of "sensors" across the city, helping the newsroom identify relevant issues and stories.

- **Greater relevance**

When stories originate from specific reader questions, Christian feels that the journalism gains a special form of legitimacy.

The journalist can document that the issue genuinely matters to citizens, strengthening the rationale for investigating it further with responsible authorities and decision-makers.

- **Closer relationships with readers**

The project has created more direct contact between the journalist and users. Christian explains that people increasingly contact him directly with ideas and questions. He experiences that users feel heard and taken seriously when the newspaper investigates their concerns. This strengthens the relationship between the media outlet and its audience.

- **Better idea innovation**

Citizens' input functions as a continuous source of new ideas. At the very beginning of the project, as a form of pre-launch promotion, Christian walked along Aarhus' main pedestrian street carrying a hat from which passers-by could draw topics and explain what they were curious about. He was surprised by the quality of the ideas and perspectives that emerged, several of which later developed into strong journalistic stories. Idea development, therefore, does not necessarily have to take place internally within the newsroom.

Link to video from Christian's idea-development walk down the pedestrian street: <https://www.instagram.com/p/DXb2O6ZFeQh/>

Editor-in-chief Jan Schouby is also enthusiastic about the Ask Stiften concept, and it has therefore been decided that the format will continue beyond the project period, with Christian Olesen serving as its permanent reporter.

Schouby highlights three key benefits:

1. A shorter distance between reader and journalist.
2. More and different story ideas.
3. More eyes and ears in the local community.

He views the project as a response to a challenge that is becoming increasingly important for local media: building relationships with users at a time when subscriptions are crucial to financial sustainability.

If people are to pay for journalism, they must feel that the newspaper is interested in their everyday lives and takes their questions, experiences, and concerns seriously.

Jan Schouby also explains that idea development is one of the weaker stages of the newspaper's editorial process. The project therefore helps the newsroom:

- discover stories they otherwise would not have found,
- rediscover topics they had forgotten or ignored,
- identify new angles on existing issues,
- identify issues that genuinely matter to citizens.

8.4 Reddit as a new fishing pond

Another way of generating ideas is through the platform Reddit. Christian Olesen actively uses Reddit as a channel for involving readers in journalism. During the coverage of the NorthSide Music Festival, he published a post asking openly: "What are you curious about regarding the NorthSide Festival?"

The purpose was to gain insight into the questions, concerns, and issues that mattered to festivalgoers and readers. The Reddit post became a major success. It generated more than 170 comments containing concrete tips, questions, and observations from users and provided numerous new angles and story ideas.

The Reddit thread led to several journalistic stories about the festival, including stories about volunteers working conditions, difficult transportation routes to the festival grounds, waste sorting, accessibility for people with disabilities, and other issues.

Christian highlights that Reddit gave him:

- Direct access to users' concerns and interests.
- A better understanding of what genuinely matters to them.
- Help identifying stories within a specific topic that have broad relevance.
- A more precise direction for journalistic research.

He also emphasizes that when several users mention the same issue or question, it serves as an indicator that there may be a relevant story behind it.

Six or seven people independently pointing to the same issue would be enough to justify further investigation.

En læser undrer sig: Hvorfor kan man ikke låne brætspil på biblioteket?

I mange kommuner kan du låne brætspil på biblioteket, men ikke i Aarhus. Stiften har spurgt kulturrådmanden, om det bør laves om.



8.5 Changes to the journalistic role

The project also changes the journalist's role from primarily being a communicator to also being an active facilitator and relationship builder. Christian describes how he has become much more active during the campaign, more visible to readers, and more engaged in dialogue on social media and other platforms.

He feels that he increasingly functions as a representative, or "agent" for readers when asking questions of authorities, politicians, and organizations. The journalist therefore becomes not only the person who finds and communicates stories but also the go to person who facilitates, organizes, and transforms citizens' questions and curiosities into journalism. This gives journalism a different form of legitimacy because the questions originate from the concrete needs and interests of citizens.

Link to Journalisten article about the project of producing articles based entirely on readers' ideas:

<https://journalisten.dk/christian-har-kun-lavet-laesernes-ideer-i-en-maaned-og-saerligt-en-ting-har-overrasket-ham/>

Jan Schouby likewise believes that future journalists must increasingly step forward as individuals and build relationships with audiences. He argues that journalists can no longer simply write stories and allow them to speak for themselves. They must be visible, communicate with readers, and use themselves much more actively in their work. This is not equally easy or natural for everyone, but he considers it necessary.

The project supports this development because Christian Olesen has become a recognizable face for readers. People contact him directly, he is much more present on social media, and he is easier to reach and engage with. Jan Schouby stresses that this does not mean less critical journalism. On the contrary, he believes that relationships and critical journalism can coexist. However, he sees it as essential that journalists make more active use of their personal voice and visibility if local media are to maintain relevance and contact with their audiences.

Særlige busser vokser i popularitet: Politikere overvejer ekstra afgang

Siden 2022 er passagertallet vokset med 14 procent i Aarhus' natbusser. Særligt én buslinje er populær. Men hvorfor går der ikke flere natbusser? Det spørger nogle af Stiftens læsere om. Vi har fundet svaret.



8.6 The hard facts on the bottom line

It has become clear that stories produced as part of Ask Stiften perform very well and significantly above average on several key metrics. The stories are not necessarily read more than average, but they perform strongly on several other important indicators: (appendix 6+8)

- **Conversion:** More than every second article generates a subscription sale. Several articles generate two or three subscription sales each. This is significantly above average.
- **Interaction:** The articles generate higher levels of interaction than average. They are shared, liked, and commented more frequently than typical articles. As a result of this, they also enjoy a longer lifespan on social media platforms.

8.7 Partial conclusion

Ask Stiften demonstrates that user involvement does not necessarily require large investments or extensive development projects. Sometimes it is enough simply to ask a question and be willing to listen to the answer. The project demonstrates how users' own questions can function as an effective editorial idea-development tool while simultaneously strengthening the relationship between a media outlet and its audience.

At the same time, the case illustrates one of the report's most important insights: user involvement creates the greatest value when it becomes a natural part of the journalistic workflow rather than a separate project.

Based on the qualitative interviews and my own observations from the project, the following recommendations can be made for media organizations seeking to develop and integrate a format such as Ask Stiften:

- **Make participation easy and specific**
Users engage more readily when they are asked open but focused questions, such as: "What are you curious about regarding X?" rather than being given broad invitations to submit tips. This generates more relevant input and new perspectives.
- **Use input as a starting point—not for finished stories**
Users' questions must be qualified journalistically. Repeated concerns or multiple independent inquiries can signal the presence of a story worth investigating.
- **Let the same journalist serve as the public face**
Relationships develop most effectively when users know who they are writing to. The format functions not merely as a mailbox but as a personal connection between journalist and citizen.

- **Respond to all inquiries, even those that do not become stories**

Users should feel seen and taken seriously. This increases the likelihood that they will contribute again in the future.

- **Accept that the stories are often smaller, but valuable**

Many stories are “curiosity stories” or everyday problems that rarely bring down ministers or win major journalism awards. Nevertheless, they matter to many people and generate engagement.

- **Pay attention to perspectives you would otherwise overlook**

Input often comes from groups and topics that do not naturally exist within journalists’ own networks or daily lives. This broadens the journalistic agenda.

- **Use the format strategically to strengthen audience relationships**

The format can reinforce the media outlet’s role as “the citizens’ newspaper” by demonstrating that journalism takes its starting point in the questions and problems that matter to readers.

This concludes the series of projects and provides the foundation for the report’s cross-case analysis. In the next chapter, I bring together the experiences from all three cases to identify the patterns, opportunities, and barriers that characterize participatory journalism as a tool for innovation and idea development.

Tusindvis af cyklister bryder loven samme sted: Nu kan løsning være på vej

Hver eneste dag bryder masser af cyklister loven ved en af byens største kulturinstitutioner. Politiet møder ofte op med bødeblokken, men lige lidt hjælper det. Nu spørger flere læsere, hvorfor stedet er så dårligt designet.



9. Analysis and conclusion

9.1 What do the three projects teach us?

The three development projects differ in several ways. The Politicians Listen focused on democratic dialogue and citizen involvement in connection with an election. Silkeborg's New Faces explored audience engagement as a tool for editorial idea development, while Ask Stiften tested audience engagement as a permanent journalistic format.

Despite these differences, several common patterns emerge across the projects.

First and foremost, all three cases demonstrate that audience engagement can create value for journalism—not only as a way of strengthening relationships with users, but also as a method for developing new stories, new perspectives, and new journalistic working methods.

At the same time, the projects show that audience engagement is not a universal solution. The method only creates value when it's targeted, organized, and embedded in the newsroom's daily work.

The central question, therefore, is not whether audience engagement works, but under what conditions it works.

9.2 More relevant journalism

A recurring finding concerns relevance.

Many editorial decisions are based on journalistic experience, news values, and professional judgement. These remain essential tools. However, the project also shows that there is often a gap between what journalists consider important and what users perceive as relevant.

When users are actively invited into the idea-development process, that gap is reduced.

Several of the participating journalists describe how audience engagement challenged their own assumptions about what people cared about. The result was often stories that were more concrete, down-to-earth, and closely connected to everyday life.

This does not mean that journalism should be governed solely by audience preferences. Rather, the findings suggest that journalism becomes stronger when editorial and profes-

sional judgements are supplemented by insights into users' perspectives.

9.3 Relationships as a journalistic resource

Another key finding concerns relationships. Traditionally, journalism has focused primarily on content production. Relationships with users have often been regarded as a result of journalism rather than a part of it.

This project points towards a different understanding. Here, relationships become a journalistic resource and reservoir. When citizens feel that their questions, experiences, and perspectives are taken seriously, trust in the media outlet is strengthened. At the same time, a mutual understanding develops, making it easier for media organizations to identify relevant stories and issues. Thus, relationships are not merely an outcome of journalism. They become a prerequisite for good journalism.

9.4 What stands in the way?

Although the potential is considerable, the project also demonstrates that audience engagement faces several barriers.

The most common challenges are time and resources. Audience engagement often requires activities that fall outside traditional news production:

- Facilitation
- Relationship building
- Follow-up
- Evaluation

These activities can be difficult to prioritize in a busy newsroom environment. Furthermore, the project shows that mindset and organizational culture play a decisive role. If audience engagement is viewed as an additional project alongside journalism, it's often deprioritized.

If, on the other hand, it's integrated as a natural part of the workflow, it's likely that it will become sustainable. This is precisely why Ask Stiften appears to have been more successful as a permanent format than several of the more short-term resource-intensive initiatives.

9.5 The journalist's new role as facilitator

One of the most significant lessons from this fellowship project is that audience-engaged journalism requires not only new formats and working methods—it also requires a new understanding of the journalist's role.

Traditionally, the journalist has been the person who observes, investigates, selects, and communicates. However, as the relationship between media organizations and users becomes increasingly important, there is a growing need for a role in which journalists function more as facilitators of conversations, communities, and democratic dialogue.

This perspective is evident across all three projects. In The Reverse Election Meeting, the journalist's primary task was not to ask questions of politicians, but to create the conditions in which citizens could formulate their own questions, visions, and concerns. Similarly, Ask Stiften was not about which stories the newsroom considered most important, but about listening to what users were curious about and allowing their questions to set the agenda for journalism. The experiences from Midtjyllands Avis likewise showed that the most valuable input often emerged when journalists actively sought dialogue with users and created space for conversation rather than merely collecting quotations.

The facilitator role also places new demands on journalists' competencies. In addition to traditional journalistic skills, the ability to listen actively, build trust, lead dialogues, and translate user input into journalistic ideas is becoming increasingly important. Journalists must be able to bring together people with different perspectives, ensure that multiple voices are heard, and create the conditions for constructive conversations.

This requires relational skills, process understanding, and a certain degree of humility regarding the influence that users' questions and experiences may have on the journalistic process.

At the same time, facilitation is not the same as activism or advocacy. The journalist's task remains to be critical, neutral, independent, and editorially responsible. However, the role is expanded with a new dimension: creating the conditions in which citizens, experts, politicians, and other stakeholders can meet in informed and constructive dialogue.

The journalist therefore becomes no less of a journalist, but more of a bridge-builder.

In a time, characterized by polarization and increasing distance between media organizations and citizens, this facili-

tator role may prove to be one of journalism's most important future competencies. Not as a replacement for traditional journalism, but as a necessary complement that strengthens relationships with users, improves idea development, and contributes to a more vibrant democratic public sphere.

9.6 Overall conclusion

The media industry is operating in a period characterized by economic pressure, declining trust, news avoidance, and increasing competition for users' attention. At the same time, many citizens are demanding journalism that is more relevant, more relatable, and more dialogue-based.

Audience engagement can be an important part of the response to these challenges—not as a universal solution, but as a strategic tool for strengthening the value of journalism and its societal relevance.

The three projects demonstrate in different ways that audience engagement can:

- Generate new journalistic ideas and angles.
- Provide access to voices and perspectives that the newsroom would otherwise not encounter.
- Strengthen the relationship between media organizations and users.
- Support the development of new formats and working methods.
- Increase users' sense of relevance and engagement.
- Strengthen the media's role as a facilitator of democratic dialogue.

The Reverse Election Meeting and Ask Stiften show that when journalism is based on citizens' questions, experiences, and concerns, it often produces content that is more engaging, original, and meaningful than traditional editorial processes. At the same time, the experiences show that audience engagement creates value not only for audiences, but also for journalists themselves through increased job satisfaction, more ideas, and a stronger sense of journalistic relevance.

However, the report also demonstrates that audience-engaged journalism does not happen automatically. It requires time, prioritization, organizational support, facilitation skills, and a culture in which the newsroom is willing to listen and be influenced by users' input.

The greatest barriers are not a lack of willingness, but rather a lack of resources and time in an already busy editorial environment.

10. Perspectives

10.1 Why doesn't engaged journalism play a larger role?

Ten years ago, former editor-in-chief of *Fyens Stiftstidende* and media sociologist Søren Schultz Jørgensen published the critically acclaimed book *The Journalistic Connection* (*Den journalistiske forbindelse*). The book is precisely about how journalism in the digital age must build stronger relationships with its audience.

It argues that journalism is no longer solely about producing and distributing content, but also about creating connections between media organizations, citizens, and society. It identifies dialogue, audience engagement, and communities as central journalistic values. Journalists should listen more closely to citizens' needs and perspectives to maintain relevance, trust, and legitimacy in an era of increasing competition for attention.

The book was very well received within the Danish media industry and was seen as an important contribution to the discussion of how journalism should renew itself. As a result, many media organizations began testing, experimenting with, and implementing various forms of audience-engaged journalism in newsrooms across the country.

Today, however, only a limited number of traditional media organizations work systematically with audience engagement as a natural part of their journalistic workflow. This is despite the fact that most editors-in-chief and media executives would agree that audience engagement is not merely a good idea, but ultimately a necessity for the long-term survival of the media.

The relationship with users and citizens is the only thing left when advertising revenue disappears. And if that relationship does not function—if users do not feel seen, heard, and included—why should they pay for a product that feels irrelevant to them?

So why does audience engagement not play a larger role in Danish media today?

I put this question to one of the book's two authors, Søren Schultz Jørgensen.

10.2 The paradox – and the explanations

Søren Schultz Jørgensen himself points to the paradox: most media professionals acknowledge that audience engagement strengthens the relevance of journalism, leads to better stories, and creates stronger relationships with users. Nevertheless, the method remains marginal across large parts of the media industry, except for a number of newer, digital-native media organizations.

According to Schultz Jørgensen, the explanation lies in a combination of the culture of mass media, resource constraints, data-driven management, a lack of leadership prioritization, project-based organization, and journalism education programs that remain heavily influenced by mass-communication thinking:

- **The culture of mass media clashes with the logic of audience engagement**

According to Schultz Jørgensen, journalism has historically developed as a form of mass communication. Media organizations are customized to thinking in terms of large audiences and communicating with many people simultaneously. Audience engagement, by contrast, is based on direct interaction with specific individuals and smaller communities. The problem is that the effects of audience engagement often appear limited and difficult to measure in the short term. When a journalist spends time speaking or making an event with 10, 20, or 50 users, it can seem like a significant investment of resources relative to the immediately visible return. As a result, the method is often perceived as expensive and time-consuming.

- **Data-driven journalism has captured attention**

With the rise of digitalization, data analytics, and KPI-driven management, contact with users has become more indirect. Today, media organizations receive enormous amounts of user data about clicks, reading time, conversions, and subscription behavior. Paradoxically, this data could serve as a starting point for greater audience engagement. In practice, however, it has of-

ten become an alternative to direct contact with users. Instead of talking with people, organizations analyze data about people. The result is that the relationship becomes more technical and less personal.

- **Resource pressure and efficiency demands**

Many journalists and editors work under constant pressure, with fewer resources, larger geographic coverage areas, and an increasing number of responsibilities. As a result, audience engagement is often perceived as just another task on top of everything else. Even when managers and journalists are, in principle, supportive of the idea, it is therefore frequently deprioritized in day-to-day practice.

- **Audience engagement becomes projects—not integrated daily operations**

Schultz Jørgensen points out that audience engagement is often implemented as a separate project or experiment. When the project ends, the organization returns to its normal routines. As a result, audience engagement is not integrated into the newsroom’s daily workflows or journalistic DNA. What is lacking are organizational structures that make the method a permanent component of journalism rather than a temporary experiment.

- **Lack of leadership prioritization**

One of Schultz Jørgensen’s central arguments is that change in journalism requires leadership support. If editors-in-chief and media executives focus primarily on KPIs, traffic figures, and financial performance, audience engagement will struggle to gain traction from the outset. He argues that editorial and journalistic development must be championed by leadership and incorporated as a strategic priority if audience engagement is to become a natural part of journalism.

- **Journalism education: still shaped by mass-media thinking**

Schultz Jørgensen also points to journalism education as part of the explanation. Journalists are still primarily trained to communicate with large groups and the public as a mass audience. If audience-engaged journalism is to become a normal way of working, it must be integrated far more thoroughly into the fundamental professional understanding and methodological training provided by journalism education programs.

10.3 Dialogue-based journalism – a crucial alternative to AI

Although audience-engaged journalism has gained only limited traction within the toolkits and workflows of traditional media organizations in Denmark, dialogue-based journalism may become an increasingly important response to the growing influence of AI in the media landscape. In the future, it may acquire a decisive and entirely new strategic significance in an AI-driven world, where human relationships

become one of journalism’s most important competitive advantages. This is the view of Christina Blaagaard, the newly appointed News Director of Jysk Fynske Medier.

Blaagaard argues that media organizations are increasingly operating in an external reality characterized by AI-generated texts, automated response functions, and algorithmically produced content. At the same time, she observes growing distrust among users regarding who or what is actually behind the content they encounter in general. For that reason, she believes it’s essential to preserve visible human beings within journalism. Her central point is clear: when users engage in dialogue with a media organization, they must feel that they are communicating with a person, not a machine.

She describes the development as a shift from one-way communication to dialogue-based communication. Users are becoming accustomed to interacting with digital assistants and AI agents, and therefore they increasingly expect dialogue rather than the traditional one-way delivery of content. For precisely this reason, she sees significant potential in journalistic formats where dialogue is human and editorially facilitated.

As AI becomes the dominant intermediary of information, the strength of media organizations will be their ability to offer the opposite: trustworthy people who listen, respond, and engage with citizens’ questions. Blaagaard sees a growing need for “credible, respectful, curated, and facilitated dialogue,” in which users feel seen and heard.

Christina Blaagaard also links this development to the changing role of the journalist. As AI becomes capable of producing ever greater amounts of content, the value of journalists will become less closely tied to the production of text itself and more closely tied to their ability to meet people, ask the right questions, and build relationships. According to Blaagaard, journalists need to “get out from behind their desks,” talk to real people, and understand their needs. That is precisely what AI cannot replace.

Authenticity will become crucial. Blaagaard argues that journalists must become more visible as individuals and be willing to stand publicly behind their journalism. In a future where much content may be generated or assisted by AI, it becomes increasingly important for users to know who they are speaking with and who is responsible for the journalism they consume. The personal relationship between journalist and citizen thus becomes not merely a supplement to journalism, but a fundamental value in itself.

Overall, Christina Blaagaard argues that audience-engaged journalism is not simply a method for finding stories. In an AI-driven media environment, it may become a way of demonstrating what artificial intelligence cannot provide: presence, accountability, human judgement, and genuine relationships between media organizations and citizens.

For this reason, Blaagaard sees dialogue-based journalism as an important response both to AI’s growing influence and to the challenges of trust that the rise of AI is likely to create.

11. Reflections and recommendations

11.1 Final reflection

The findings of this report suggest that audience-engaged journalism may play an even more important role in the media industry in the years ahead.

At a time when artificial intelligence is making the production of information and content increasingly easier, cheaper, and faster, human relationships, trust, dialogue, and local connectedness are becoming some of journalism's most important competitive advantages. It's precisely here that audience-engaged journalism demonstrates its greatest strength.

Viewed through Habermas's perspective, audience engagement can help revitalize democratic dialogue by creating more spaces in which citizens feel heard and taken seriously.

Viewed through Hartmut Rosa's concept of resonance, dialogue-based journalism can foster the kind of meaningful relationships between people and society that many feel are lacking in an accelerated digital public sphere.

Going forward, audience engagement should therefore not be regarded as a separate project or a temporary experiment, but as an integrated part of journalism's development. Media organizations that systematically listen to their users and transform this knowledge into journalism—not merely on the basis of data, but above all through genuine human contact, dialogue, and curiosity, will be better positioned in the competition for attention, trust, and subscribers.

Audience-engaged journalism should be viewed simultaneously as a journalistic tool, an innovation method, and a democratic practice that can help strengthen the relevance of the media today.

11.2 Recommendations

Finally, based on the work carried out in this fellowship project, I have compiled a number of recommendations for those who wish to work with audience-engaged journalism as a tool for idea development, innovation and relationship-building

1. Start by listening—not by producing

The best ideas often emerge when the newsroom first explores what users are actually concerned about, rather than starting from its own assumptions.

2. Make audience engagement a permanent part of the workflow

Audience input should not be reserved for major projects. Small, ongoing listening processes can be integrated into everyday journalism.

3. Prioritize resources and time

Audience engagement requires preparation, facilitation, and follow-up. If sufficient time is not allocated, the results are often limited.

4. Ensure diversity among participants

Avoid hearing only from the most engaged and resourceful citizens. Work actively with representation and recruitment.

5. Develop journalists' facilitation skills

The journalist of the future must be able not only to interview and write, but also to facilitate dialogues, workshops, and communities.

6. Be open to the unexpected

Audience engagement only works if the newsroom is willing to change course when users' input points in a different direction from the original plan.

7. Build long-term relationships rather than one-off campaigns

User panels, reader networks, and ongoing dialogue forums create greater value over time than isolated events.

8. Make the impact of users' contributions visible

Clearly demonstrate how users' questions, ideas, or experiences have been translated into concrete journalism. Respond to all inquiries. This strengthens their motivation to participate again.

9. Combine physical and digital formats

The strongest results often emerge when workshops, events, and face-to-face meetings are combined with digital platforms where the dialogue can continue.

10. Secure leadership support

Successful audience engagement requires time, patience, and therefore clear prioritization. It represents a cultural change and a new mindset that can only be achieved through persistence and sustained focus from leadership.

The most important insight from my fellowship project may be that audience-engaged journalism is not primarily about getting users to contribute to journalism. Rather, it's about improving journalism by systematically understanding and involving the people it is intended to serve.

When media organizations succeed in doing this, audience engagement becomes more than simply a method for idea development, it becomes a tool for strengthening journalism's relevance, capacity for innovation, and democratic significance.

Ralf Andersson, June 2026

