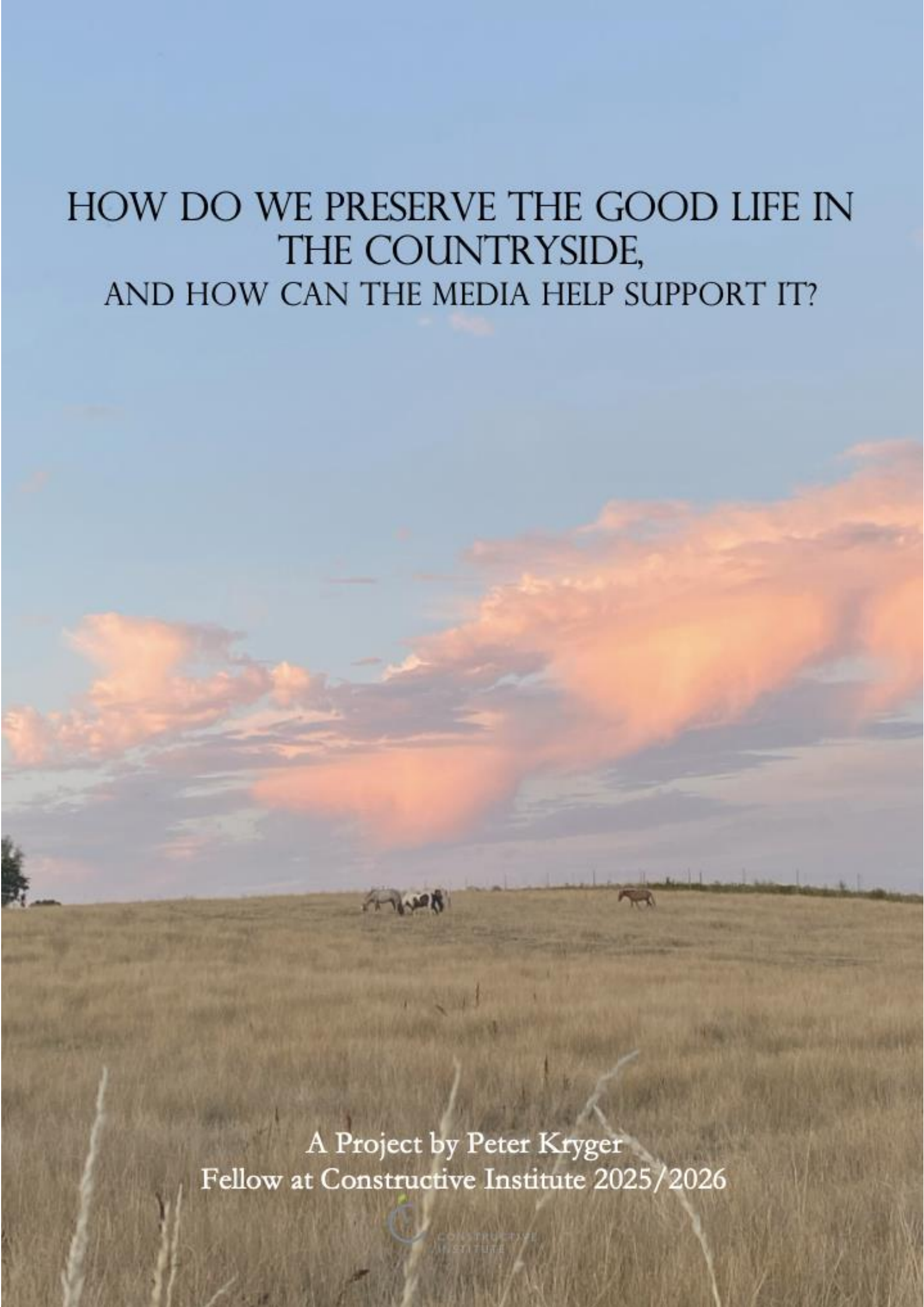




HOW DO WE PRESERVE THE GOOD LIFE IN THE COUNTRYSIDE, AND HOW CAN THE MEDIA HELP SUPPORT IT?

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1. Introduction

As a journalist at TV2 East, I drove about 20 years ago to southwestern Lolland, where nature is great, but there is little faith in development. This was prior to the municipal reform in 2007 and Rudbjerg, then Denmark's smallest municipality with its 3,000 inhabitants, was to be merged with six others to form Lolland municipality. There was a lot to be excited about, but especially the schools highlighted the mayor as something special and well-functioning in his municipality.

Today, there is no longer any primary school in the former Rudbjerg municipality. Vestenskov school closed in 2010 and Dannelunde school in 2020. Declining numbers of children and emigration may be part of the explanation, but the development is thought-provoking.

In recent years, interest in geographical inequality and the urban-rural divide has grown in political research. Nevertheless, the issue takes up surprisingly little central political space. Even if the development challenges cohesion and has clear democratic consequences.

Concepts such as 'The Rotten Banana' and 'outskirts of Denmark' cover areas where public services are disappearing, young people are moving away, and a larger part of the population is older, sicker and less educated. The development is not only about the economy, but also about the feeling of being left behind and overlooked by those in power in the big cities. The American researcher Katherine Cramer describes this feeling as rural consciousness.

But there is also another story about life in the countryside. For example, how do you explain the paradox that people in rural areas in the Western world feel more satisfied with life than those who live in the cities, when the migration pattern points in the opposite direction?

As a journalist in a rural area, I am increasingly interested in the problem and with this report I examine how decline, community and local journalism are connected by asking the following questions:

1.1 Problem statement

How do you ensure the framework for community, quality of life and cohesion in rural areas when they are challenged by urbanization and decline? And how can local journalism support a positive development in these areas when the media themselves are under financial pressure?

1.2 Method

The report begins with a theoretical part on urbanization, centralization and the political and democratic problems that come with it.

Next, I visit places and people who are trying to reverse the trend. Practical experiences I link to relevant research.

The first stop is a local community in East Falster, where 11 small villages joined forces to save the local school that was threatened after the municipal reform. They not only avoided the school closure but also found a community which has since helped reverse the trend.

Then the trip goes to Tuse Næs, where the municipal reform became a starting point for development, because Holbæk Municipality approached the process differently than many others. The 'Holbæk model' gave support to a thriving community and projects, which now means 27 new sustainable houses and with them new children for the local primary school.

In the section on the role of local journalism, I describe why local media is important and why they are under pressure at the same time. Subscribers and ads disappear, journalists are fired, and local newsrooms close. News deserts are a democratic threat, but there is also hope.

In Kjellerup, a local editor uses constructive journalism to remind politicians in Silkeborg of the municipality's peripheral areas, and on Mors, a hyperlocal media has found a sustainable business model where everyone else gave up.

The report is based on interviews with volunteers, journalists and researchers, as well as articles, reports and books. Theoretically, it draws on research into geographical inequality, the rural-urban divide, and voter behavior.

In the conclusion, I summarize and give suggestions on how the media and journalists can cover the rural-urban issue better and more nuanced for the benefit of our democracy and cohesion.

Enjoy

Peter Kryger, June 2026

2. The Rural Exodus and its political consequences

2.1 Rural areas become depopulated

In the past, villages were closely tied to the daily life of agriculture, but today they often function as residential areas for commuters, which weakens everyday local life. This development is not new, but it has become more pronounced. In addition to the movement from peripheral municipalities towards the largest cities, there is also a process of “double urbanization”; an internal centralization within individual municipalities, where residents move from villages to the area’s main towns.

The population in rural areas is also ageing, and fewer children are being born. In addition, young people in their twenties in particular leave these areas for education and work, and because women especially tend to move away, some peripheral areas have only around one third women left in this age group.

When the number of children falls, the basis for schools, leisure activities and associational life is weakened. This can trigger a negative spiral, because even though Denmark has a general political ambition of equal access to public services, that ambition is difficult to maintain in rural areas when people, jobs and capital are increasingly concentrated in the large cities.

The problems facing rural areas are therefore not only about out-migration, but about a broader social, economic and demographic transition that challenges everyday life, community and local development (Laursen, et al., 2015).

2.2 The Municipal Reform streamlined and centralized

In 2007, 14 counties became 5 regions, and 271 municipalities were merged into 98. The population of the municipalities rose to an average of around 55,000 inhabitants, while the number of politicians on municipal councils fell from around 4,600 to approximately 2,500.

The reform therefore created larger municipalities and fewer local politicians, which increased the distance between decision makers and small local communities (Thuesen, et al., 2022, 6).

One of the aims of the Municipal Reform was to achieve service related and economic scalation, but political centralization also took place, and many local areas have since experienced a decline in municipal services.

Part of this development is due to demographics and fewer children (Ibid. 79), but in a 2022 survey, 84 percent of local councils and residents’ associations answered that they had experienced service reductions since the Municipal Reform.

By contrast, 46 percent of the associations report poorer public transport, while around 20 percent have lost their library. Town halls, kindergartens, youth clubs, senior centers and nursing homes have also

been closed, while one in four associations say they have lost their school, which is perhaps the most important public institution for maintaining an attractive local community (Ibid., 80-82).

Meeting places in rural areas are more than merely practical service functions. They also provide the setting for social life in rural areas, where relationships, attachment and trust are formed, and they are therefore crucial to whether people stay or feel encouraged to move in. When meeting places close or are gathered elsewhere, not only practical services are weakened, but also the conditions for the very community life of the village (Laursen et al., 2015).

2.3 The distortion of house prices

While rural areas lose services and meeting places, cities find it easier to retain functions because of in-migration and size. At the same time, the gap in housing wealth between urban and rural areas is growing.

The liberalization of the mortgage credit sector from the early 1990s made housing a stronger investment object. The possibility of refinancing loans and new loan types with short-term interest rates or without repayments (Noe et al., 2020, 7) stimulated economic growth but also created a significant transfer of capital from rural areas to cities (Ibid., 117-118).

Until 1993, house prices moved in step across the country. After that, prices rose sharply, especially in the major cities, while rural areas fell behind. The financial crisis reinforced the difference because the most expensive areas recovered first (Ibid., 9).

At the same time, there is an uneven distribution of mortgage credit loans. The sixth of parishes with the most expensive homes receive a disproportionately large share of the loans and the most attractive loan types, while buyers in the cheapest rural areas face stricter requirements. This makes it harder to buy, sell and invest in areas that are already under pressure. In some places, properties cannot be mortgaged at all, despite buyers having sound finances (Ibid., 22-24).

This means that the housing market in growth areas becomes important to protect from a macroeconomic perspective in times of crisis, while it is of no macroeconomic importance in peripheral areas (Ibid., 18).

Finally, the report points out that out migration, service reductions and the financialization driven distortion of the housing market are mutually reinforcing. This is why isolated measures such as relocating state jobs, demolishing empty homes or providing loan guarantees do not help (Ibid., 23 and 118). If development in rural areas is to be changed, the importance of housing as an income generator must be reduced (Ibid., 8).

Egon Noe, who is behind the report, is head of the Centre for Rural Research at the University of Southern Denmark. The institute is in Esbjerg, and when Egon Noe got the job in 2016 and moved towards the city, he himself was affected by the problem.

Together with his wife, he wanted to live on Fanø, a short ferry ride from Esbjerg, but the local bank branches were reluctant to offer loans if they were to build there. If they instead moved to Hjerting, which is Esbjerg's equivalent of Strandvejen, they would, by contrast, be allowed to borrow twice as much to build. The difference was not due to their personal finances, but solely to the bank's assessment of the area's future value.

In this way, the system indirectly determines where people can live, says Egon Noe, who together with his wife ended up settling on Fanø, but, as he puts it with a little smile, it happened "at the expense of our children's inheritance" (Noe, 2026).

The example is a good illustration of the negative spiral in which rural areas are trapped: When areas are valued lower, less is invested, and it becomes harder to attract resourceful families. As a result, certain population groups concentrate in certain places, and the social mix in villages and rural areas gradually disappears.

Egon Noe calls the development an "economic segregation machine", where capital is drawn from the periphery towards the center and helps local resources disappear. If housing policy is not changed, he fears that the feeling of being passed over will have political consequences, as seen with Trump, Brexit and the Yellow Vests, and he points to a tax on increases in property values (Ibid.).

2.4 Inequality in house prices benefits the right wing

A 2022 study supports Egon Noe's point. The distortion of house prices has precisely the political consequence that voters move towards the far right. When house prices in a Danish area increase by DKK 10,000 per square meter, support for Dansk Folkeparti falls by around three percentage points. The researchers also examine the difference between the 10 percent of areas with the highest growth (boom areas) and the places with the 10 percent lowest growth (left-behind areas). In the left-behind areas, real house prices fell by 15 percent from 1998 to 2015, while they rose by 100 percent in the boom areas.

The pattern is also found in the other Nordic countries, particularly Sweden and Finland, where there is a clear negative correlation between lower house prices and higher support for Sverigedemokraterna and Sannfinländarna, respectively. The effect is weaker in Norway, where Fremskrittspartiet has been in government and is therefore a part of the political establishment.

For most people, their home is their largest economic asset, so when prices fall, homeowners feel poorer and lose trust in the political system. At the same time, people feel locked and cannot afford to sell and move to pursue opportunities in the expensive areas. This increases frustration over geographical inequality.

For example, if someone bought a house in central Copenhagen in 1998, it could be sold in 2015 with a gain of around DKK 3 million. A comparable homeowner in Næstved would, over the same period, have earned only around DKK 18,000. According to the researchers, this enormous difference in wealth development creates fertile ground for populism (Ansell et al, 2022).

2.5 Economic inequality can lead to polarization and democratic erosion

A 2025 study links economic inequality with democratic decline and shows a connection even in old Western democracies. Democratic backsliding has occurred in 24 countries since the turn of the millennium, where democratically elected leaders in countries such as Mexico, the United States and South Africa have questioned democratic institutions and appropriated more power for themselves. They exploit the fact that groups in society who do not experience economic progress can more easily be mobilized against elites. The geographical imbalance in housing wealth therefore also becomes a democratic issue (Rau and Stokes, 2025).

2.6 Rural consciousness and a new political divide

Declining public services and the feeling of being left behind increase support for the populist far right. At the same time, the divide between rural and urban areas has emerged as an entirely new political divide. In her 2016 study in the United States, Katherine Cramer shows that rural voters may vote against their own interests out of frustration with the elite, and she introduces “rural consciousness” as an entirely new concept.

Over several years, Katherine Cramer studied 39 small, informal groups in Wisconsin that met in their spare time over needlework or a cup of coffee. In other words, places where everyday conversation takes place, and she shows how people in rural areas feel they do not receive their deserved share of services and resources but are instead overlooked and ridiculed by the elite in the large cities.

Katherine Cramer introduces the concept of “rural consciousness” and shows how many rural voters interpret politics through a sense of place-based identity, economic injustice and cultural distance from cities. This explains why some voters even support politicians who do not benefit their local communities, if those politicians acknowledge their anger at the system (Cramer, 2016).

2.7 Yellow Denmark

The 2015 election sent tremors through political Denmark, making researchers and political experts sit up and take notice. Dansk Folkeparti received 21.1 percent of the votes and was particularly strong in rural areas. This was interpreted as a revolt from the periphery. Rural consciousness had come to Denmark, and the ‘Danish Election Study’ was expanded with four new questions inspired by Katherine Cramer’s research (Hansen & Stubager, 2024).

At the following election in 2019, it was therefore possible to identify a Danish group of voters with rural consciousness, typically older men with short education and living outside the largest cities. But it was not until the 2022 election that Danmarks Demokraterne managed to mobilize this discontent. With her thunder against “the Copenhagen salons”, Inger Støjberg and her newly founded party completely overtook Dansk Folkeparti and conquered the role as representative of dissatisfied rural voters (Hansen and Stubager, 2024).

Recent studies show that centralization and deteriorations in public services move voters away from the established parties and towards the far right.

2.8 Voters moves to the right when services deteriorate

A 2024 Italian study looks specifically at a 2010 reform in which Silvio Berlusconi's government forced the smallest municipalities in Italy to increase cooperation on services. 65 percent of Italian municipalities were affected, and 200 were merged. The reform led to a decline in access to public services, which in turn increased the votes for the far rights in the affected municipalities.

The researchers conservatively estimated that a one-standard-deviation decline in public services increases voter support for the far right by 2 to 5 percentage points (Cremaschi et al., 2024).

Another study shows that population decline increases support for the populist radical right. The report focuses particularly on Sweden and shows that votes leave Socialdemokraterna in particular.

More specifically, the right-wing party Sverigedemokraterna share of the vote increases by around 0.5 percentage points when 100 people move out of a municipality. This is a substantively large effect, the authors emphasize, and it shows that Socialdemokraterna are the biggest losers, declining by around 0.7 percentage points every time 100 people move out of an area (Dancygier et al., 2025).

3. Falsters Hjerter, a village cluster against school closures

3.1 Threatened with school closure

Kirsten Høegh-Andersen interrupts the interview to pick up the 'Pride Wall' elsewhere in the house. The man-tall and meter-wide cardboard disc stands against the wall and is filled with large and small quotes from people in the area. Among other things, it says: "I am particularly proud that we are developing the area together" and, "I am particularly proud of all the beautiful and varied nature we have easy access to".

Kirsten Høegh-Andersen herself is also proud. Proud of the 'Falsters Hjerter Association', which she and others have created in the small local community on East Falster. A community consisting of 11 villages, where the pride wall is the foundation. It all started when the local primary school was threatened with closure in the wake of the municipal reform in 2007.

When Kirsten Høegh-Andersen moved to Nørre Ørlev, the village was located in the municipality of Stubbekøbing. This changed with the municipal reform in 2007, when six municipalities on Falster and Lolland were merged into Guldborgsund municipality with approximately 60,000 inhabitants, and 29 politicians instead of 96 to govern the area:

"Previously, we were peripheral to Stubbekøbing municipality. Now we risked becoming the periphery of Guldborgsund municipality, i.e. the periphery of the periphery" (Høegh-Andersen, 2026), says Kirsten Høegh-Andersen.

When school closures came on the agenda in the new municipality in 2011, Møllebakkeskolen in Horreby was appointed. Kirsten Høegh-Andersen had two children at the school, where she was chairman of the parents' board and quickly agreed with others to protest. Because it wasn't just about the school, it was about the survival of the entire area, she says:

"They think about economies of scale, but if you want to attract newcomers to an area, there must be a school. The school is a breeding ground for sports clubs, and there is a life around such a school. If you close a school in a rural area, it closes the entire area" (Ibid.).

With protests and arguments, the residents succeeded in preventing the school closure, but the residents feared that it would not be long before it was once again at risk, if they did not draw more attention to themselves in the new large municipality:

"It was clear that the narrative of our area would be lost if we didn't do something. The decision-makers now came from other places, and they really had no idea what kind of area this was and did not know what cohesion here is" (Ibid.), says Kirsten Høegh-Andersen.

And there was cause for concern in East Falster, because the local school is more likely to close if the politicians do not live nearby. This is shown by a Finnish study from 2023.

3.2 Local politicians secure their own schools

The Finnish study 'Love Thy (Elected) Neighbor? Residential Segregation, Political Representation, and Local Public Goods' is exciting because the political structure in Finland is very similar to that in Denmark. Finland has also experienced an exodus from the countryside to the cities, with the result that many primary schools have closed.

The study demonstrates the direct correlation between where politicians live in the municipality and what this means for their decisions.

First, local politicians live in the more prosperous areas of the municipality. They then investigated whether the skewed representation means an uneven distribution of public services by focusing on school closures.

They used data from three municipal council periods from 2005 to 2017. During that period, about a third, or 250–300, of the Finnish primary schools closed. Using coordinate information for all schools and candidates, the researchers found that it has a direct bearing whether a politician lives close to a school that is threatened with closure or not.

And the effect is significant: In fact, the probability of school closures during the election period is halved from about 20% to 10% when a candidate who lives close to the school is randomly elected instead of a candidate from the same party who lives close to another school.

The study also shows that the more affluent citizens move away when the local school closes. The result is a self-reinforcing effect, because the area then becomes even poorer. Thus, the likelihood of politicians living there is less, which in turn leads to an increased likelihood of further service degradation in the area (Harjunen et al., 2023).

3.3 The village cluster is formed

The Finnish study underlines exactly what Kirsten Høegh-Andersen feared. So, when the immediate danger of school closure passed, the residents of Falster went ahead and formed an association for the 11 small villages that make up Møllebakkeskolen's school district. The Pride Wall was written, Falsters Hjerter was born, and together the residents decided on 20 concrete projects they wanted to put into practice. While the board of the association, headed by Kirsten Høegh-Andersen, coordinated, applied for funds and had contact with the municipality, coordinators in the individual villages were responsible for the practical work with the projects.

Today, eight projects have been realized, 4 projects were not possible, 5 were incorporated into the 8, and three are still being worked on. They range from playgrounds and fitness areas, shelters and the beautification of villages and flower beds to welcome people at the village-entrances. In addition, 'Traces in the Landscape' bind all the villages together in a trail system of 3, 5 and 21 kilometers marked with poles, maps and signs.

The residents also collect garbage, there is a communal clean-up, communal dining and village-”rundbold” and then they celebrate Falsters Hjerte Day, Shrovetide and Christmas events. In this way, an important community has grown out of the association, and it is also the unity that many of the quotes on the Pride Wall revolve around. Kirsten Høegh-Andersen emphasizes the same when she explains why she spends one day a week on the volunteer work in Falsters Hjerte:

"It's the cover for it all. The thing about doing projects, and you can say that "There is something in the landscape, and there is something else"... In reality, it's about tying things together in a community" (Høegh-Andersen, 2026), she says, and nods in recognition to some of the Pride Wall's other quotes, which revolve around proximity to nature:

"It is so privileged to have this whole Falster east coast and the forest area at Corselitze, where you can just walk and not meet very many people" (Ibid.).

In this way, both she and the Pride Wall set the stage for the strange phenomenon ‘The rural happiness paradox’, which is about people in the countryside being more satisfied with life and existence than those who live in the cities.

3.4 The rural happiness paradox

When Jens Fyhn Lykke Sørensen from the Centre for Rural Research at the University of Southern Denmark's department in Esbjerg years ago chose to replace his rental property in the center of Esbjerg with an owner-occupied home, he settled in Hjerting just outside the city. It was a deliberate choice to be close to the sea and have a view of fields. A nature he enjoys and uses on his walks and runs, he says:

"Many experiments have been carried out that show nature's beneficial effects on both physical and mental well-being. You know it from yourself, when you go for a walk in nature, you become completely relaxed, unlike in the city, if there is a lot of noise" (Sørensen, 22 January 2026). And in fact, the proximity to nature makes him happier than those who live in Esbjerg, 10 km away, at least if you are to believe his own research.

In recent decades, there has been a growing research interest in the concept of 'self-reported, subjective well-being' (SWB), which covers a measure of perceived satisfaction in life. It is not about income, housing or health, but more about satisfaction with life, and how much you experience joy, peace and meaning, rather than stress, sadness or loneliness.

While people in the larger cities in developing countries experience greater satisfaction with life than those in rural areas, the opposite is true in industrialized countries such as Denmark. A paradox, because the resourceful move from the countryside to the big city, leaving the socio-economically weakest behind.

Jens Fyhn Lykke Sørensen has long researched in the rural happiness paradox and in 2026 he published the article 'Why are City Residents Less Happy than the Rest of the Population in Developed Countries?' in which he tries to find an explanation.

The article compares residents in Denmark's five largest cities with residents in the rest of the country and shows that city dwellers are generally less satisfied with life in the city, which is repeated across age, education and employment.

At the same time, the analysis shows that as much as 94% of the perceived feeling of happiness can be explained by the difference between living in the city and in the countryside. It is first and foremost about access to nature, which explains up to 37 percent of the difference, and the feeling of connection with others, which explains 22 percent. 59 percent of the difference is thus explained by access to nature and communities. In addition, a lower proportion of pensioners in the big cities explains 14 percent, while a higher proportion of non-Danish-born residents in the cities explains 9 percent. Overall, the happiness paradox is about the living conditions that characterize everyday life in large cities.

Jens Fyhn Lykke Sørensen's research is based on figures from 2012, but foreign research also shows a better experience of life in the countryside than in the big cities in the industrialized countries. A survey across EU countries shows that a lack of close communities in big cities explains part of the difference in life satisfaction. In Finland, research shows that the difference between urban and rural areas is much smaller when mental health is considered, such as anxiety, depression and loneliness. In 16 European capitals, a study found that the lower life satisfaction of city dwellers does not disappear, even when social contact and fear of crime are corrected. A picture that is repeated in the United States, where research shows that people in cities still report lower satisfaction than people in rural areas, even when crime, poverty and weak social contact are considered.

Overall, research shows that the difference between rural and urban areas is particularly related to social relations and access to nature (Sørensen, 2026, 1-20).

3.5 Nature improves well-being and quality of life

In fact, access to nature has a healing effect on health and well-being is supported by the fact that nature therapy is prescribed in our neighboring countries. Overall, there is no shortage of studies showing that time spent in nature reduces stress and the feeling of burnout. An article in Samvirke from 2024 goes in-depth with the latest research, and to the magazine, Dorthe Varning Poulsen, who researches the connection between nature and people's physical, mental and social health at the University of Copenhagen, says:

"We know from large epidemiological studies that just living close to green areas and being exposed to nature provides better health and the prospect of a longer life. Conversely, growing up in an urban environment can increase our risk of developing mental disorders such as stress, anxiety and depression, and lifestyle diseases such as obesity and type 2 diabetes".

Dorthe Varning Poulsen herself conducts research in a therapy garden in Hørsholm, and her results show the same as many other scientific studies, namely that nature has a positive effect on both stress hormones and the immune system, but also on psychological parameters such as well-being and quality of life:

"Nature therapy thus affects both our hormone system and our immune system in a positive direction and can lower our blood pressure and cortisol levels, so we experience less stress and feel more calm, security and joy", explains Dorthe Varning Poulsen (Jessen, 2024).

3.6 House prices hold up in Falsters Hjerte

The goal of Falsters Hjerte was to preserve the school but also to make the area an attractive place to live and settle, and Kirsten Høegh-Andersen is pleased with the development:

"We can see that houses are being sold, and I have heard of more people moving here also from Copenhagen, because it is an active area" (Høegh-Andersen, 2026).

This feeling is confirmed by two local real estate agents. Lasse Øster Dalsgaard has been a real estate agent for 30 years, and of the 170 homes he sells a year, 15-20 are in Falsters Hjerte:

"If people come to me from the area and want to sell their house, I'm not sorry to have to do it. Of course, the price still must be right, because it doesn't increase 20% like in Copenhagen, but it's negotiable" (Dalsgaard, 2025).

Lasse Øster Dalsgaard emphasizes the special community and the many initiatives in the area, but also emphasizes the importance of the school:

"Young people don't move to a village if there isn't a school, so schools are invaluable in my world. Whenever school closures are being considered, it may well be a sensible business in relation to running the school, but in terms of society, it is a challenge because you change who lives in the area. It goes from being families with children to being depopulated, and then the grocery store cannot survive, etc., so everything moves with the school" (Dalsgaard, 2025).

An assessment his competitor and colleague, Brian Jacobsen from Nybolig, agrees with:

"There is no doubt that local communities such as Falsters Hjerte and Horreby are insanely dependent on there being a primary school for people to want to live there" (Jacobsen, 2025).

He is also sure associations and communities such as Falsters Hjerte makes the area attractive:

"I don't have statistics and data that show whether homes sell faster, or are more expensive in an area with active communities, rather than places without, but it sells, no doubt about it" (Ibid.).

3.7 Villages are stronger when they join forces

Quite unintentionally, the residents of Falsters Hjerter formed what is today called a village cluster. A phenomenon that grew after the municipal reform as more rural areas felt squeezed in the new large municipalities. The villages were stronger in union, and in 2015 Realdania set out to investigate the phenomenon.

The report focuses on four cases, where Falsters Hjerter is one and concludes that a village cluster is a collaboration between several villages that are close to each other and feel they belong together. They often have a common history, identity or everyday life and choose to work together on development in the area. The idea is villages should not only manage individually, but use each other's strengths, experiences and resources to strengthen both the individual village and the area (Laursen, et al., 2015, 1-76).

Lea Holst Laursen is one of the researchers behind the report and research what places mean for one's identity and what spaces do for communities. It can be both association houses and urban spaces but also paths or a bench in the landscape.

She says, there were many spaces for communities in the countryside in the old days solely because of agriculture and the necessity of working together. The entire cooperative idea is based on a community, for example the dairy or shared freezer facility. These spaces are no longer necessary, and Lea Holst Laursen is worried about what will happen in the small communities if schools and grocers also close:

"If you lose some of these meeting places, it becomes extremely vulnerable. Because where are you then going to meet, talk and have your activities?" (Laursen, 2026).

Therefore, it is important to continuously develop and recreate spaces for community, and if an individual village cannot do so on its own, village clusters may be a possible solution. Politicians may also take several villages acting together more seriously than a single village acting alone. A collaboration can also reduce competition between the villages, so instead of fighting each other, the villages can start to see the area, where they have different strengths and functions that together benefit the entire area. And that is exactly what they do in Falsters Hjerter, and Lea Holst Laursen is impressed by the volunteer effort:

"We should count ourselves lucky that we have these enthusiasts and really appreciate the huge work these people do for their local area. Otherwise, I think it looked much, much worse" (Ibid).

3.8 The Rural Award for Falsters Hjerter

In 2014, Kirsten Høegh-Andersen received the Rural District Award for her work as chairman of the board of the Falsters Hjerter, and 14 years after the association was formed, she is still the chairman:

"Now my children don't go to that school anymore, so in principle I don't need to care. But it does matter that it is a vibrant, rural area, and I still live here" (Høegh-Andersen, 2026), she says.

There is still something to fight for. Three times Møllebakkeskolen has been threatened with closure, but all three times the residents have averted it. Kirsten Høegh-Andersen sees it as a kind of deal they have with the politicians:

"We deliver something out here in terms of rural development, but in return they leave our school alone" (Ibid.), she says and elaborates:

"We deliver commitment and responsibility to take care of the area and ensure that something happens out here. We make it a vibrant rural area which can attract newcomers, and they know very well in the municipality that if they close the school, we will stop. I have told them so, because then we can't take it anymore" (Ibid.).

3.9 The important local councils

In 2022, Annette Aagaard Thuesen mapped the Danish local councils and associations and shows that the further out in the countryside you go, the more the local area struggles to be heard at the town hall. She explains this with the 'nonendogenous obviousness', i.e. an expectation that citizens in rural areas can handle things themselves (Thuesen et al., 2022, 1-120).

The report is based on a questionnaire survey among 900 different associations, and the further away from the center city you get, the more widespread they are. Only one in ten associations is less than five kilometers from the municipality's town hall.

The associations work with the close community in the form of summer parties and other joint activities, they deal with the environment and traffic and with more strategic issues such as the retention of schools, kindergartens and the business community. Especially the associations furthest away from the town hall work with the strategic activities. It is therefore furthest out in the countryside that they are fighting to preserve public services such as schools.

The report also shows that the associations often experience that the municipality does not involve them in decisions that are important for their area, and many experience a lack of information from and interaction with the municipality.

On the other hand, the fighting spirit is great. 61 percent answer that deterioration in service makes them fight even more for their local area, and again, the associations furthest away from the city hall must fight the most.

Community associations are important but vulnerable. They are often carried by a few volunteers, so it is remarkable that 90 percent of the associations are satisfied with the results they achieve. This applies to associations that the local areas themselves have established, rather than those formed by the municipality (Ibid.).

Today, Falsters Hjerter has largely completed the projects they set out to do and are in the process of "reinventing themselves". Kirsten Høegh-Andersen believes it will be more community-oriented initiatives and finally explains why the association is called Falsters Hjerter:

"If you look at a map of Falster, the area is right where the heart is" (Høegh-Andersen, 2026).

From Falster, where the municipal reform became a threat to a small local community, to another place where the municipal reform boosted a positive development.

4. Tuse Næs, volunteering and communities

4.1 Huset på Næsset

Anita Nielsen is 57, she is a theatre person, and she has lived in many places during her life. So, when she moved to Tuse Næs 25 years ago, her acquaintances asked what on earth she was going to do there, because “it was pure inbreeding, and she would never get to know anyone”.

Anita Nielsen herself thought it was a wonderful place close to nature, Holbæk and the freeway to Copenhagen. After a week, she noticed a large, empty building with huge, arched windows and thought: “What a theatre hall that could become”. Shortly after she learned local people wanted to turn the building into a cultural center, and she went along to the founding meeting:

“I remember my ex-husband saying,” don’t get yourself mixed up in anything”. and I said,” I won’t, I just want to offer some theatre teaching” (Nielsen, 2026).

When she came home, she was on the board, and shortly after she was chairman, with big dreams for the empty building from 1911, which had previously served as a freezer house, power station and car scrapyard. Now it was to become a meeting place for those who wanted art, theatre, lectures and culture.

While the building still stank of diesel, they began holding events to see whether the idea could work. At the same time, they applied for permits and funding from the municipality and foundations. They obtained a loan of DKK 350,000 from Jyske Bank for the building, because residents provided guarantees using their own homes as security. The foundations were also generous and pledged DKK 7 million, but Holbæk Municipality refused to support the project with a one-off grant of DKK 1.2 million. As a result, the foundation funding could not be released, and the project came to a standstill.

However, with the municipal reform in 2007, the new merged municipal council paid particular attention to the rural districts and released the municipal funding, which in turn unlocked the many foundation grants. Huset på Næsset opened its doors in 2009 after eight years of struggle, and today Anita Nielsen laughs loudly at the many hours of voluntary work and says, “it is completely insane”. But the reward is equally great, even on evenings when she is tired and does not really feel like tending the bar:

“Then you simply come home incredibly happy, because you experience the very reason why we wanted to create such a place in the first place. And what is that? Community, joy, and exciting concerts, lectures and performances” (Ibid.).

The house hosts Friday cafés, music, theatre, art exhibitions, communal singing and shared meals, but another important initiative also grew out of the community: An annual mini festival in Anita Nielsen’s own garden. Spirefestival offers music, theatre, literature, art and, over time, 500 participants from near and far. Anita Nielsen has fallen head over heels for Næsset:

“Yes, I will never leave Tuse Næs. A lot is happening here, and there are many really, wonderful people living here. I certainly don’t think I was short of friendships when I moved to Næsset, but I have formed friendships... I mean, deep, strong friendships” (Ibid.).

At the same time, the communities she is part of are leading to a new one on its way. One of those all-rural areas long for.

4.2 The sustainable Community, Fællesmark

Laura Ræbild Juel is sitting in the brand new, disability-friendly shelter, equipped with a lift and composting toilet, in the middle of the six hectare plot that she and others have bought for their future co-housing community. They call the place ‘Fællesmark’, and soon it will be home to 27 individual houses, built according to green building principles and situated around four small lakes. Although it is six years since the idea first emerged, it is only now that the first houses are beginning to take shape, and the shelter site is the only fully completed construction, established with funding from a supportive foundation. The same is true of a bathing jetty by the new pond, while a common house worth around DKK 1 million, donated by Realdania, is being built from recycled materials. Fællesmark has also won a prize of DKK 100,000 for its project.

The fact, that Laura Ræbild Juel is now chair of an association dedicated to moving to Tuse Næs, was not exactly written in the stars 15 years ago. Back then, she was 18 and could not get away quickly enough from Tuse Næs, where she grew up. First, she moved to Roskilde, and later Copenhagen, to find the opportunities, she missed on Næsset:

“I have always liked Tuse Næs, but there were so many limitations when you were young... There were some great sports communities, and you could play football, badminton and go riding, but there was nothing for those of us who were not particularly good at throwing or catching a ball. I missed a kind of community that could offer something else, something a little more alternative” (Juel, 2026).

She found that community in Huset på Næsset, with its Friday cafés and emerging music scene, which attracted young people who perhaps did not quite fit into the traditional sports communities. And in the end, it was Anita Nielsen’s work with Huset på Næsset and Spirefestival that made Laura Ræbild Juel return home. Throughout all her years in Copenhagen, she volunteered at Spirefestival every summer, and every year it was a highlight:

“It gives you good energy and some incredible communities, and then it gives you this enormous... I don’t know what you call that feeling... an enormous rush of joy when it succeeds. It was one of the best moments of the year, and for me it created joy in life, at a very basic level” (Ibid.).

A rush of joy she shares with Anna Weber Henriksen, another volunteer who also grew up on Tuse Næs and who also moved to Copenhagen in search of more opportunities. But at Spirefestival six years ago, they talked about how “it was absurd” that they only had that strong experience of community for two weeks a year. By chance, they were standing looking out over a six-hectare area that the municipality had put up for sale, and Laura Ræbild Juel recalls what they thought at the time:

“What if we create a co-housing community? And we thought, we can do that, and then we made an offer for the plot, and fortunately we had no idea what it would require” (Ibid.).

4.3 Openness led to local support

Together with four others, they began working on the dream of creating a community based on the premises of nature and biodiversity. A green project that might perhaps have seemed unfamiliar and frightening to some of the permanent residents, but they feel welcome, and Laura Ræbild Juel believes it is because she and Anna are originally from the area, and because they invited the local community in from the very beginning:

“When we made an offer for the plot, we invited people to a public meeting to tell them about the project. In addition, we showed up at all sorts of events where people could come and ask us questions. We invited people to open-field events many times, where the locals, both those who thought it was incredibly exciting and those who were a little skeptical, could ask questions and voice their concerns” (Ibid.).

Laura Ræbild Juel even senses that Fællesmark has become the municipality’s “little green heart”. A sustainable source of pride that the municipality uses to promote itself. However, there is no financial support, so they had to raise all the money themselves, and this was where they truly felt the local backing. The plot costed DKK 750,000. Money, they did not have, but local residents found the project so exciting that one person gave them DKK 200,000, and three others lent them the same amount without interest. Even though none of them wanted to live in Fællesmark themselves.

In this way, the plot and an archaeological preliminary survey were secured, but that did not mean things became easy afterwards, Laura Ræbild Juel explains:

“How do you buy a plot of land? Who do you call? How do you make an offer for it? Then a local plan, a municipal plan and a comprehensive plan had to be drawn up. There was the archaeological preliminary survey, lawyers were needed, and then a TDC cable had to be moved at a cost of DKK 150,000. All this technical work, applications and processes and so on, which we had never dealt with before” (Ibid.).

They also came close to giving up when they had to raise 8-10 million for site preparation, because all the banks said no when not a single building plot had been sold. In the end, they found a philanthropic investor, and today the area has been prepared for construction and 16 of the 27 plots have been sold.

Fourteen of the new families come from places other than Tuse Næs, and 10 of the newcomers are children who will attend the local school.

Laura Ræbild Juel herself has the drawings ready for her family’s house. She thought she would miss Copenhagen, but she does not:

“It was very much a worry that I would no longer have all the opportunities right there in my backyard, or in my courtyard. But now I have a forest, and now I have a beach, and now I also have two children, so in that sense it is a different life too” (Ibid.).

4.4 More young people want to live in the countryside

In fact, Laura Ræbild Juel and the others who are now moving to Tuse Næs are not alone in wanting to move to the countryside, recent research shows.

In 2023, the BUILD Institute at Aalborg University (AAU) examined Danes’ moving patterns and housing preferences, and the study shows that young people do not necessarily prefer to live in Copenhagen, and that many families with children move away from the major cities, not only because of high house prices.

Using figures from Statistics of Denmark, the researchers examined the moving patterns of the 900,000 Danes who move within the country each year. In 2008, the financial crisis led to population decline, business closures and homes that were difficult to sell in rural and peripheral municipalities, while the major cities of Copenhagen and Aarhus experienced significant growth. But the trend reversed in 2012-2013, and in 2020 and 2021 there was a marked net migration gain in intermediate municipalities and, to some extent, also in rural municipalities. Correspondingly, there was a marked net migration loss in urban municipalities, especially Copenhagen, because more people moved away.

The result therefore challenges the myth of a one-way flow of citizens moving to the big city. Instead, migration patterns in Denmark are far more complex. Urbanization exists, but it is not clear-cut, and the reasons have to do with family, housing, nature, peace and quiet, and everyday life, and not only a lack of opportunities (Nørgaard et al., 2023).

4.5 Holbæk’s green lung

In 2019, the residents of Tuse Næs prepared a development plan in cooperation with the municipality. ‘Tuse Næs: From Decline to Development’ highlights the peninsula’s many qualities and initiatives. They call themselves the municipality’s cultural mecca, emphasize the peninsula’s natural assets and describe Tuse Næs as “Holbæk’s lung and the citizens’ recreational area” (Lundstrøm and Wallin 2019).

Alice Faber is the driving force behind the idea of the green lung. She has applied to foundations and secured millions in funding, enabling them, among other things, to build ‘Naturrummet’, where she welcomes visitors with brochures and soft drinks. Originally, she is “from many places”, but she moved to Tuse Næs in 1975 and has seen the area change in a positive direction:

“I think a lot has been added. I mean, Huset på Næsset wasn’t there when I moved here... and we have two community halls that now call themselves cultural centers, and now Fællesmark is coming, and they are very active in the area in many ways. Much more is happening on Tuse Næs” (Faber, 2026).

She herself helped create 'Turlandet Tuse Næs' in 2015 with the aim of spreading awareness of the area's nature. Today she is chairman and are used to work with projects and served as director in several municipalities in her worklife. That knowledge of "the system" is valuable. In 2022 alone, they received almost DKK 3 million from foundations, including funding for Naturrummet, where we are sitting. The association also publishes tour leaflets with cycling- and walking routes, lends out bicycles free of charge, has established an "apple scrumping route" with newly planted apple trees along the road, organizes excursions and guided tours, maintains the paths on Næsset, and helps organize the annual apple festival, which now attracts several thousand visitors.

4.6 Volunteering benefits the quality of life

Huset på Næsset, Naturrummet, the shelter site, the bathing jetty and the paths through the landscape are all "spaces" where people can meet, which, as we have heard earlier, increases joy in life in rural areas. But creating them also generates joy in life.

Studies show that very few of those who put thousands of unpaid working hours into voluntary work are professionals in project management or have any other relevant training (Jørgensen and Tietjen, 2023). They must learn along the way, just as Laura Ræbild Juel and the others from Fællesmark have done. But there is value in coming together to create a shared space (Ibid.). Laura Ræbild Juel recognizes this. Together with the other five board members, she has spent the equivalent of two full-time working years on the project:

"That energy that is created when each person brings what they have and creates something together... For five or six years, we have met once a week on the board, and the others are now my close friends" (Juel, 2026).

Voluntary work also leads to a higher quality of life in the places where it takes place, and that is primarily in rural areas. This is the point made by Gert Tinggaard Svendsen and Gunnar Lind Haase Svendsen in a 2016-article. Their study shows that 66 percent of people in areas with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants are members of at least one local association. The same is true of only 42 percent in cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants. The same pattern applies to voluntary work: 46 percent of people in rural areas have carried out voluntary work within the past year, compared with only 29 percent in the largest cities.

Trust plays a central role in explaining this. Not generalized social trust in people as such; that is equally strong in cities and in rural areas. Rather, it is specific trust, for example, trust in one's neighbor, that is higher in rural areas than in cities. In the smallest areas, 90 percent trust their neighbors, compared with 81 percent in the largest cities. In the smallest areas, 47 percent also feel a strong sense of solidarity with others in the local area, compared with only 19 percent in the largest cities.

Svendsen and Svendsen draw on two recognized scholars, Robert D. Putnam and Mancur Olson, to explain why social trust is important, and why people in rural areas do not simply leave the work to others.

Harvard professor Robert D. Putnam shows in his groundbreaking work that trust and shared norms are crucial to a well-functioning democracy and society. He is known for the book 'Bowling Alone', in which he argues that clubs and local communities are not simply pleasant leisure activities, but function as places where social capital is built, where people get to know one another and discover that others contribute and can be trusted.

In this way, voluntary associational life becomes a kind of training ground for democratic behavior. Less voluntary community therefore means less trust, less cooperation and a more fragile democracy.

The late American professor Mancur Olson is brought in to explain why more people participate voluntarily in rural areas and do not simply "free ride". The reason is that in rural areas, one cannot hide in the crowd and let others take the initiative. It is simply easier to be noticed, and therefore people participate. As a result, it is easier to find volunteers in rural areas.

Rural areas in Denmark therefore have a particular strength in their level of volunteerism, and the authors warn that the hollowing out of rural areas and migration from rural areas to cities weakens overall volunteerism and, with it, trust in society (Svendsen and Tinggaard, 2016).

4.7 The church and Huset på Næsset build bridges between people

On Tuse Næs, there is another voluntary community that particularly shows how bridges can be built and how better mutual understanding can be secured.

'Vesper og Viser' is a collaboration between the church and Huset på Næsset. On seven Friday nights during the winter season, people first meet for a church service in Udby Church, after which they walk over to Huset and continue the evening with song, and the priest himself even joins in on bass.

None of the almost 100 participants are forced to go along to either one place or the other, but virtually everyone goes to both. In this way, moments are created where people from different circles meet and talk to one another, and the church is happy to take part in that, says parish priest Mikkel Vale:

"In a way it's our reason for existing to spend time on people and communities where there is room for everyone" (Vale, 2026).

After the Municipality Reform, the church is one of the last public bastions in many rural areas, and in some respects, it is therefore often the most resourceful part of the local environment, both in terms of finances and staff. For that reason, the church can play an important role in supporting community life in rural areas (Randløv et al., 2018).

In addition to Vesper and Viser, Mikkel Vale and the parish councils on Tuse Næs also organize communal meals, take part in the apple festival and contribute to Shrovetide, Midsummer Eve and at Christmastime. All of this is done in collaboration with other volunteers on Tuse Næs, and Mikkel Vale has no difficulty defending the use of both time and money on the events:

“I would rather spend money on red wine and food than on expensive lecturers. No one raises an eyebrow when you pay DKK 16,000 for an impressive classical concert. Then people think it is something very fine, but I think it is twice as important that people can get some food, sit and talk together and enjoy themselves” (Vale, 2026), says the priest, who over the years has experienced how the communities strengthen cohesion on the peninsula:

“I am so moved when I see the friendships that arise in these communities. People sign up as volunteers and get stuck in here and help put up a stall there, or whatever it may be. And then some enormously good companionships emerge, where people care for one another. I think there are even a couple of people who have become romantically involved” (Ibid.).

This very idea of bringing people together, especially those who disagree, fits well with Mikkel Vale’s faith and work, and he describes Christianity as “a lifelong exercise in being together with people you disagree with”.

Anita Nielsen thinks the same about her work at Huset på Næsset:

“One of my favorite memories was at a Billy Cross concert, where people simply could not be chased home, and the last people to leave arm in arm were a die-hard conventional farmer and an environmental activist who was completely opposed to pig farms” (Nielsen, 2026), she says, and continues:

“We have such a divided society, and it is so easy to say that the others are stupid. And with. Huset we what people to meet across divides... Just look around in the world! For God’s sake, how important it is that we become better at talking to one another” (Ibid.).

And if one looks around the world, she is right. Two American studies show both how Americans increasingly lack understanding of one another, and what a solution might be.

4.8 Affective polarization in the United States

A 2023 study shows that political conversation has changed in the United States and that polarization has increased. The researchers demonstrate this by asking voters how cold or warm their feelings are towards their own party and the opposing party, respectively, on a scale from 1 to 100.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the temperature difference was 25 degrees. Today, it is up to 50 degrees, and this is not due to warmer feelings towards one’s own party, but rather colder feelings towards the opponent. In the 1970s, feelings towards the other party stood at 48 degrees. Today, that figure is all the way down to 20 degrees.

The study points to social group identity as a particularly important cause, that is, a need to belong to a group with which one identifies. As a result, people distance themselves from one another and dehumanize their opponents. Although political participation is a good thing, the researchers point out

that participation in the United States has gradually become destructive for democracy, and some would rather vote for their own candidate, even if that person behaves undemocratically, than vote for an opponent (Druckman et al., 2023).

Another study, however, points to a solution: In the experiment 'America in One Room', 526 Americans were brought together and asked to discuss five extremely polarizing political issues over three days.

First, the citizens received neutral, fact-based background information, after which representatives from both parties were brought together in small groups with a moderator. The idea was to create a space for informed, respectful and argument-based dialogue.

After the process, hostility fell markedly, participants understood one another better, became more nuanced and distinguished to a greater extent between facts and prejudices. The participants may not have come to agree, but they understood one another better and experienced that it was possible to talk together (Fishkin et al., 2021).

4.9 The Holbæk model and the community facilitators

One of the reasons for the flourishing associational and voluntary life on Tuse Næs may perhaps be found in the way things were handled during the Municipal Reform in 2007. At the time, the government encouraged municipalities to work with involvement and local democracy, but it was up to the individual municipalities to decide how they wanted to approach it.

In 2010, three years after the Municipal Reform came into force, local-government researcher Kasper Møller Hansen examined how citizen involvement and local democracy were faring in the new regions and municipalities. He identified four sources of inspiration, and one of the places he highlighted was Holbæk, where local forums were established to represent the interests of 18 different areas in the municipality. A model that later became known as the 'Holbæk model' (Thuesen et al., 2022).

The idea behind the model was to open space for people's desire to act and create something on an ad hoc basis. It could be the sudden passion that arises because one is angry about the threat of a school closure. The starting point, then, was a platform where people could show up, raise issues and explore how far the local community itself could take them.

In the 18 local forums, anyone can stand for election and participate on an equal footing in discussions and decisions. The forum then represents the entire local area in relation to the municipality, which was obliged to consult the local forums in all matters affecting the local area. The municipality also guaranteed rapid case handling and attached a municipal employee to each forum. At the same time, politicians showed up twice a year to meet citizens face to face in so-called dialogue committees (Hartje 2008).

Today, the dialogue committees have been abolished, but the 18 local forums still exist, and a municipal employee, a so-called “community facilitator”, is still attached to each forum. Allan Tronborg is the community facilitator for Tuse Næs and thinks the function makes good sense:

“We never take over as project managers, but we support the process and can tell our local areas whether they have a good idea underway and then guide them towards who they need to bring on board, or where they might be able to apply for funding” (Tronborg, 2026).

The community facilitators also come from different departments in Holbæk Municipality and can therefore draw on one another’s knowledge. If, for example, there is a question about poorly maintained roads, Allan Tronborg can seek out the community facilitator who knows something about traffic and the environment. Since the beginning, the number of community facilitators has been reduced from 12 to 6 (Ibid.). Even so, the local forums, at least the one on Tuse Næs, are pleased with the direct point of contact with the municipality:

“Cooperation with the municipality works well, and it’s a good idea to have a community facilitator. It makes it much easier for us to get hold of the right people in the municipality and get the right help. It can save us a great deal of time” (Olsen, 2026), says Henning Wallin Olsen, who is chair of Tuse Næs Local Forum.

He was born on Tuse Næs and has been a volunteer since 1986, when, as a 24-year-old, he was tapped on the shoulder. In 2007, he was elected to the Local Forum, where he has been chairman since 2021, and he believes that Tuse Næs has for many years been moving in a positive direction:

“In the area, there are around 20 associations, ranging from sports clubs to the local history association, and all of them have grown out of strong personalities. That means we are constantly singled out as an active local area, and people are happy to come here. And now that Fællesmark has arrived, we are signaling that there is room for everyone here, and we support them, because the point is to attract all types of people to develop the area”.

5. The role of local journalism

5.1 When the news is missing

In June 1945, newspaper delivery workers in New York went on strike, and a desperate reader exclaimed:

“It’s like being in jail not to have a paper. You feel put out and isolated from the rest of the world. It practically means isolation. We’re at a loss without our paper”.

The behavioral scientist Bernard Berelson seized the opportunity and conducted a study of what it meant to be without the newspaper. What ‘Missing The Newspaper’ Means” was published in 1949 and shows that readers missed the newspaper as a practical tool for finding out what was showing at the cinema, or who had died. They missed the comics and the lighter entertainment content used for relaxation, and the newspaper as a means of gaining social recognition by appearing cultured and informed. They also missed the social contact and identity that the newspaper provided through columns and commentary, and finally, readers missed the very activity of reading the newspaper itself (Berelson, 1949).

In addition to news, the newspaper provides a layer of something social, practical, entertaining and identity-forming, and in fact the newspaper already functioned at that time as a social medium (Westergaard and Jørgensen, 2018, 48-49). We will return to that, but first we need to look at how pressured the traditional media are, especially outside the major cities.

5.2 Local and regional media are bleeding readers, revenue and advertising

Overall, regional and local daily newspapers, weekly newspapers and other local media have experienced a significant decline in revenue, according to figures from the Danish Ministry of Culture. In current prices, this represents a decline from DKK 3071 million in 2017 to DKK 2691 million in 2023, a loss of DKK 380 million over six years. At the same time, the accumulated operating result of commercial regional and local media has fallen from DKK 64 million in 2017 to DKK -173 million in 2023. In other words, a decline of DKK 237 million, and the average profit margin in 2023 was -6 percent, meaning that, overall, earnings were negative.

During the same period, employment in the industry was reduced by 773 full-time equivalents, or by 22 percent.

Declining advertising revenue is a major reason for the strained finances. In 2014, print advertising revenue for all the country’s daily newspapers amounted to DKK 1770 million. The local newspapers’ share was DKK 426 million. In 2023, advertising revenue had fallen to DKK 429 million for all the country’s daily newspapers and to DKK 154 million for the regional and local newspapers.

The tech giants have cannibalized the daily newspapers. From 2014 to 2023, the share of total Danish advertising revenue going to foreign actors rose from 22 to 50 percent, and their share of digital advertising revenue rose from 52 to 71 percent.

The readership of daily newspapers, including printed editions and e-papers, has also fallen markedly, from a weekly reach among the population aged 18 and over of 47 percent in 2010 to 20 percent in 2023. The daily newspaper industry has therefore seen a significant decline in both advertising and subscription revenue within just a few years (Heiselberg, 2025).

5.3 Local newsrooms and journalists are disappearing

The strained finances can be seen in the number of local newsrooms and local journalists.

A survey in Fagbladet Journalisten shows that the number of permanently employed Danish Union of Journalists members in local newsrooms fell from 835 in 2021 to just 587 employees by the end of 2025, a decline of 30 percent (Jørgensen, 13 October 2025).

“It is serious, and unfortunately the development is moving very quickly,” says Mark Ørsten, professor of journalism at Roskilde University, to the magazine, and he fears what it means for the skewing of news coverage:

“That means a concentration, where both physically and mentally one moves towards the larger cities, and the larger cities will come to take up a great deal of space.”

Particularly hard hit is Lolland-Falsters Folketidende, where almost half of the editorial positions were abolished between 2021 and 2025. Nordjyske Medier also said goodbye to around 40 percent of its journalistic positions during the same period. At the same time, the newspaper closed all its local newsrooms, of which it had 13 in 2010 (Ibid.).

In all, the number of local newsrooms has fallen sharply across the country, from 111 in 2010 to 68 in 2025, while the number of printed weekly newspapers has fallen from 248 to 135 between 2010 and 2025 (Heiselberg, 2025).

5.4 Risk of news deserts

The challenged finances and falling employment of regional and local media raise the question of whether there currently are, or could emerge, geographical areas without journalistic coverage.

In the United States, people have for many years spoken of “food deserts”, describing areas where there is no longer access to fresh and healthy food. This concept has inspired the term “news deserts”, places where the democratic calories are missing because local newspapers close. A shortage of news that regional television and radio stations cannot simply replace, because newspapers account for by far the largest share of local coverage.

A 2019 study examined 100 medium-sized communities of 20,000-300,000 inhabitants and found that local newspapers far surpassed local television and radio stations and web-only media in news production. Local newspapers accounted for 50 percent of all original news stories in the study, even though they made up only 25 percent of the news providers, and the researchers call local newspapers the epicenter of the local news ecosystem (Østerby, 2021, 24-64).

In 2019, an American report reaches the same result and shows that local newspapers in Colorado, despite decline, still accounted for the largest share of original local journalism. While television and radio each accounted for 15 percent, and online-only media for 10 percent, newspapers accounted for a full 60 percent of the original local news stories. Traditional newspapers therefore remain crucial to the local public sphere, even though the economic model has been weakened (Colorado Media Project, 2019).

5.5 The state of Colorado

Overall, the report from Colorado is worth dwell on. It was published by the Colorado Media Project, an independent philanthropic initiative and a community-driven response to the deep media crisis in Colorado. A crisis that is not only about the closure of newspapers, but also about how this connects to political polarization and the spread of misinformation.

By bringing together existing research, the report shows why local journalism should be understood as a public good that becomes a democratic problem if it disappears. The causal connection is that when access to trustworthy local news is absent, civic engagement falls, political polarization increases, fewer candidates run for public office, voter turnout falls, and the local economy weakens.

Citizens simply become less able to participate in democracy, hold authorities accountable and understand the decisions that affect their everyday lives. The question, therefore, is not simply how to save newspapers and journalists, but how to secure citizens' access to the information necessary to function in a local community and a democracy (Ibid.).

As in Denmark, the economic foundation for local journalism has collapsed in Colorado. Advertising revenue has moved to the global technology companies, which in 2019 accounted for around 60 percent of the market, with the result that almost one in five newspapers in Colorado closed between 2004 and 2018, and the number of journalists covering essential local news fell by almost 44 percent, from 1,010 to 570 reporters (Ibid.).

At the same time, citizens are not aware of how serious the crisis is. Seven out of ten Americans believe that their local news media are doing "very or fairly well" financially. And only 15 percent of adults in the Denver-area had paid for local news during the previous year (Ibid.).

One county in Colorado had no local newspaper left at all. In 30 other counties, there was only one. This is particularly serious in rural areas, where the local newspaper is often the last remaining source of information. In the 30 counties with only one newspaper left, 83 percent of the newspapers were weeklies, and 83 percent were located outside the metropolitan areas (Ibid.).

5.6 The state of the entire United States

There is concern across the United States, not just in Colorado. Every year, Northwestern University publishes the report 'The State of Local News', which describes the overall state of local media in the United States. The 2025 report is no more uplifting than the previous ones.

Over 20 years, circulation for printed newspapers in the United States has fallen by an estimated 80 million copies, corresponding to a loss of 70 percent, and since the university began measuring the development in 2005, more than 3,400 local newspapers have disappeared in the United States. A decline from 8,891 to 5,419, corresponding to 39 percent. This has left 50 million Americans with limited or no access to reliable local news.

Independent digital news sites and other digital media platforms are indeed growing, but they are heavily concentrated in urban areas and are not emerging quickly enough to offset the losses of the "old" media.

News deserts therefore continue to grow. In 2005, there were just over 150 counties without a local news source in the United States. In 2025, that number has risen to 212. In a further 1,525 counties, only one news source remains, typically a weekly newspaper. In this way, 50 million Americans have limited or no access to local news.

At the same time, news deserts hit unevenly, in the sense that they are typically poor counties with lower economic activity than the rest of the country and populations with lower levels of education. In addition, 80 percent of news deserts are in counties that the U.S. Department of Agriculture, USDA, classifies as predominantly rural. The lack of local news is therefore yet another inequality among many (Metzger, 2025).

5.7 The state of Denmark

In Denmark, outright news deserts are fortunately not widespread. A survey of editorial content in week 46 of 2024 shows that all 581 place names in Denmark received some degree of editorial mention, although in many cases it was very limited (Heiselberg, 2025).

But the seriousness of the situation is evident from an article in *Fagbladet Journalisten*, in which former minister for culture Jakob Engel-Schmidt speaks of a "veritable slaughter" in the number of local newsrooms and warns of news deserts.

"Magtudredningen" has also questioned whether especially local and regional media can still perform the role that raises the level of local debate about politics and society. Or, as Per Møller, the Conservative deputy mayor of Hjørring, says:

"Whether it is on television or in the newspaper, journalists have always been good at telling a story. But the shared story about our municipality is somehow gone" (Albrecht and Nyhus, 2025).

News deserts are not yet widespread in Denmark, but there are clear signs of drifting sand, and the love of the newspaper that newspaper readers in New York displayed in 1945 is difficult to trace in circulation, advertising and readership figures today. One may also ask whether traditional news media are even relevant today, but later studies show that readers in fact find them important for precisely the same reasons as those Berelson identified in 1945.

5.8 News media are still missed 50 years later

In 1998, Clyde Bentley followed up on Berelson's 1945 study by interviewing subscribers whose daily local newspaper had not arrived. The reactions closely resembled Berelson's, and the newspaper is described "as a friend or neighbour dropping by", while readers remember the moment when they discover that the newspaper has not arrived as a feeling of emptiness and disappointment (Bentley, 2001).

In addition to missing the news, readers described repeatedly that they also missed the newspaper's unifying function. It simply helps maintain a social community and makes it possible for readers to participate in local society (Ibid.).

Again, the newspaper is associated with usefulness, ritual, security, social contact, relaxation and identity, but how does this look in a digital age of smartphones and social media?

In his 2016 PhD dissertation, Søren Schultz Jørgensen asked 32 citizens to keep a detailed diary of their media consumption for one week. He also gained access to the participants' Facebook-use and subsequently interviewed them.

His study 'Old media are also social' concludes that everyone reads news and orients themselves through several different media. It also shows that media are used for comfort, passing time and gaining a sense of belonging. At the same time, they provide material for conversations and a routine in everyday life (Westergaard and Jørgensen, 2018, 51-54).

Søren Schultz Jørgensen therefore reaches some of the same findings as Berelson in 1945 and Bentley in 1998, and argues that news media have always been, and still are, social media, but that they have gradually forgotten the connection to citizens, and that this connection must be rediscovered if they are to survive (Ibid.).

5.9 Social media cannot replace local media

Although Danes are enthusiastic and heavy users of social media, they are also fond of news. At least when it comes to local news, which they would rather get from their local media than from social media. This is shown by the study 'Danes' use of news media' published in 2025 by Roskilde University. Almost 60 percent of Danes answer that they are best informed about local politics by the news media. Only 18 percent answer social media (Jørgensen, 13 October 2025).

Local Facebook groups can replace some of the roles that the newspaper played before the digital age, but not all of them, Søren Schultz-Jørgensen points out:

“Social media can do a great deal. They can provide information, create a sense of belonging, entertain and so on, but there is one thing they cannot do. They cannot independently and credibly scrutinize, that is, on their own initiative and of their own accord go and say, “Hey mayor, how did you get that carport built?” (Jørgensen, S).

We therefore lose the watchdog role if we lose the traditional media, and that role is important for two reasons. First, citizens gain knowledge of how local powerholders act. Second, the absence of media as a control institution gives powerholders free rein and creates greater conditions for poor behavior, or as Søren Schultz Jørgensen summarizes it:

“Roughly speaking, a higher risk of bribery, horse-trading, corruption and waste of resources that no light is shed on” (Ibid.).

In 2016, Flemming Svith reached roughly the same conclusion when he examined the importance of local and regional media, and at that time too there was nothing to suggest that Facebook-groups could replace local media.

The paradox is that local media are under pressure from social media because they take over readers and advertising, but at the same time local media cannot be dispensed with as critical watchdogs. But it is not only citizens who call for a critical local press; the same is true of the politicians whom that very press scrutinizes. It seems paradoxical, but as Flemming Svith said to Fagbladet Journalisten in October 2025:

“It comes from an understanding that an informed democracy is also built on information about things that are less favorable. That local areas develop less if one does not look at conditions that are open to criticism” (Journalisten, Jørgensen 2025).

5.10 A need for new journalism

But what, then, is the solution? How do traditional media become relevant again? Søren Schultz Jørgensen has been concerned with this since he published his PhD dissertation in 2016. He points out that the media must rediscover the journalistic connection to their readers, and he also points to how.

Today, Søren Schultz Jørgensen teaches at the Danish School of Media and Journalism in Aarhus, DMJX, where he welcomes students to a lecture in the blue auditorium. Søren Schultz Jørgensen graduated in political science before becoming a journalist, and he teaches the roughly one hundred assembled students in the course ‘Politics and the public sphere’. Lesson 10 in particular, he thinks, is relevant in this context: ‘The struggle over the local agenda - actors, processes and media in the local public sphere’, is about democracy and “very much about what we go around calling community”, as Søren Schultz Jørgensen tells the students, who for the rest of the morning will, among other things, hear about the development of local media.

But Søren Schultz Jørgensen can also tell of a road trip he took in 2017 with his colleague Per Westergaard. Together they visited 50 media outlets in Europe and the United States that had in common that they challenged journalistic conventional thinking and were in the process of renewing journalism so that it gained enough value and relevance for today's citizens that they would pay for it (Westergaard & Jørgensen, 2018, 10).

“It was an incredibly uplifting trip. We encountered passion and an enormous preoccupation with what journalism can and should do. People who had the nerve and burned for the profession, and the desire for journalism to make a difference in society, but unfolded in a different way” (Jørgensen, S).

5.11 The journalistic connection

Based on the road trip, they published the book “The Journalistic Connection” in 2018, which is about journalistic renewal, involvement and community, and shows through practical examples how it can be done. A book that is still relevant, not least because many of the media outlets that represented innovative journalistic business models with rising user satisfaction, circulation and earnings still exist.

“We learned an insane amount. First and foremost, we came home with knowledge of the news media field in the broadest sense, and then we came home with a feeling that a great deal is happening, and that even in a dramatic, crisis-ridden economic situation there is fighting spirit, desire and perhaps also hope that the umbilical cord in journalism can be re-established,” Søren Schultz Jørgensen says today (Ibid.).

Some of the media spoke of members rather than subscribers and made use of engaging, involving, advocating, constructive or even activist journalism to attract readers. And in order to reach out to their audience, they used events, festivals and physical meetings, thereby achieving the journalistic connection that is precisely the title of the book, and which Søren Schultz Jørgensen believes is one of the greatest shortages in the media today, because they must “not merely speak to people, they must speak with them and in the same dialect”, as they write in the book (Westergaard & Jørgensen, 2018, 75-79).

Søren Schultz Jørgensen blames omnibus newspapers for cutting their ties to the popular movements from which they had sprung, in the name of the principle of neutrality. Instead, they replaced it with what media researcher Jay Rosen has called “a view from nowhere”. But the media outlets that Schultz Jørgensen and Per Westergaard visited in 2017 had reinvented the connection to users:

5.12 New York Times had forgotten its readers

One newspaper that found itself on a far warmer platform than it realized was the great, old and venerable New York Times. In 2014, the newspaper's own employees prepared an internal report that attracted attention because the problems were not only technological challenges, economic wastefulness and a worn-out business model, but also because the media outlet had lost its connection to its audience. As the report states: “Of all the problems we discuss in this report, the challenge of

connecting with and engaging readers ... has been the most difficult ... The audience is our largest untapped resource” (Westergaard & Jørgensen, 2018, 26). The report therefore recommended that the newspaper should gain better knowledge of its audience, that departments should work better together, and that the newspaper should experiment with new ways of attracting, engaging and presenting its content (Ibid., 262).

5.13 Readers help expose Trump

An example of how the individual journalist can reach out to readers and involve them was found by Søren Schultz Jørgensen and Per Westergaard in Washington, D.C. David Fahrenthold works for the Washington Post, but whereas classic journalists often dig behind closed doors and keep their leads close to the chest, David Fahrenthold continuously shared his findings, doubts and missing pieces on Twitter and asked the public for help. In a story about Donald Trump’s alleged donations to charity before the 2016 election, David Fahrenthold used hundreds of readers and organizations as a kind of extended research tool by asking them for help. He revealed that Trump had not donated anywhere near the amounts he claimed, and David Fahrenthold’s method shows how crowdsourcing can make journalism more open and at the same time more effective. For his innovative ability to involve readers, David Fahrenthold received the Pulitzer Prize (Ibid., 199).

5.14 Users decide which stories should be told

The book also contains examples of entire media outlets that work deliberately and strategically with user involvement, for example the public service station KQED, which produces articles, radio and television for the entire Bay Area in San Francisco. Using the software tool ‘Hearken’, they have turned the news food chain upside down in the concept ‘Bay Curious’.

On an ongoing basis, the editorial team selects the questions that users are wondering about and holds an online vote in which users decide which stories they find most interesting and which the station should produce (KQED). What is interesting is that the stories, which are based on citizens’ own questions, have four times as many users as KQED’s other journalism (Westergaard & Jørgensen, 2018, 172-174).

KQED still exists, Bay Curious is now in its 11th season, and in 2023 KQED published a 256-pages book with 49 of the best Bay Curious stories. By that point, the series had passed 300 episodes (Partourche, 2023), and in Denmark both TV 2 Kosmopol and tvSyd have learned from KQED and today produce stories according to the same template.

The experiment ‘The Party Line’ is a good example of how KQED also practices constructive journalism. The television station placed a telephone on the street in the most Democratic stronghold in San Francisco, where 80 percent voted for Kamala Harris in the 2024 presidential election. Another telephone was set up in the most Republican area, namely Abilene, Texas, where more than 80 percent voted for Donald Trump.

The television station recorded more than 200 conversations in which a citizen happened to pick up the phone at one end and talked the person who happened to pick it up at the other end. What is remarkable about the conversations in the deeply polarized United States is that there were no negative calls. Arlene Kasselmann, who owns the bookstore in Abilene where one of the phones was hanging, experienced the calls like this:

“Honestly, everybody who has used it has come in and said that it was amazing”, she says, and elaborates: “When you hear a voice, you are reminded that it’s a human. It’s not a keyboard warrior on Facebook spouting something that you would never say to somebody in person” (Dahlstrom-Eckman, 2026).

5.15 Members rather than readers

Another way of re-establishing the connection to users is practiced by The Texas Tribune in Austin. The media outlet was established in 2009 and does not speak of readers but of members. In reality, they get nothing out of the membership other than attachment, because all content on the site is free for everyone, and so are the newspaper’s 60 annual events and activities (Westergaard & Jørgensen, 2018, 139-140). The logic is that the free journalistic events tie people more closely to the media outlet and create loyalty and community that make them want to pay. And that is what they have done in Texas. Today the media outlet still exists and writes on its website that since its launch it has held more than 500 events with a total of more than 100,000 participants (The Texas Tribune, events). The events are described as follows:

“Each year, we host dozens of on-the-record, open-to-the-public live events - in our own events space, on college campuses, in community centers and everywhere in between - at which public officials, policy experts and others talk about the work they’re doing and various issues affecting Texans” (The Texas Tribune, about us).

The events are also livestreamed and can subsequently be watched on the media outlet’s website. In addition, The Texas Tribune holds a large annual three-day signature event ‘The Texas Tribune Festival’ where decision-makers, business-leaders and activists participate, and which “attracts thousands of participants to downtown Austin to gain insight into Texas’ biggest challenges and to create thoughtful debate about possible solutions” (Ibid.).

The Texas Tribune Festival costs money to attend, and members receive a discount, but otherwise more than 13,000 individuals support the media outlet largely without receiving anything other than a car sticker, a special monthly newsletter and attachment to the community (Ibid.). In addition to voluntary donations and gifts, the media outlet is supported by foundations, and it earns money from the many events. The 2024 financial statements show revenue of 15 million dollars, of which just over 1.7 million dollars comes from voluntary members and 2.2 million dollars from events, while 55% of revenue comes from major individual donations, gifts or foundations (The Texas Tribune, Financial Statements).

Figures from The Times in 2017 show that citizen involvement can significantly strengthen readers' attachment. Users who commented and took part in the debate spent four times as long on the website as others.

Financial Times experienced something similar with the project 'The Future of Britain' after Brexit. Readers were invited to write short essays about Britain's future. The newspaper received 800 contributions, and each contribution received on average 80 percent more comments than other Brexit debate posts. User involvement can therefore create stronger engagement and increase willingness to pay, but it requires time and journalistic presence (Westergaard & Jørgensen, 2018, 203).

5.16 Commercial data points are not dialogue

Per Westergaard and Søren Schultz Jørgensen's book was published eight years ago, and there is a difference compared with today, Søren Schultz Jørgensen says. The biggest is that journalists' publications do in fact receive a great deal of response today, because their articles are tracked, monitored and optimized, so headlines and placement on the page are constantly adjusted in the hunt for clicks, reading time and conversions. But this is not the kind of data and connection to users that Søren Schultz Jørgensen is calling for:

"In reality, the (journalistic) data have been connected to the commercial data. Right down to the individual journalist's desk, the divisions between the editorial and the commercial have been eliminated, so decision-making is almost at the point where it is no longer editorial" (Jørgensen, 2026).

He warns against confusing clicks and reading time with a real relationship. The deep connection arises when media meet people physically and create conversations, presence and community, and he describes himself as "a fiery, sharp voice chirping in a sea of datafication and AI".

On the other hand, Søren Schultz Jørgensen is hopeful and refers to his latest study of young people's media habits from April 2026. Together with a colleague, he measures not only what young people do, but also what they want. There is a difference:

"Young people are completely digitally trapped by all sorts of crap in their social media feeds and spend 4 hours and 10 minutes a day doomscrolling, but if you ask them, they dream of something completely different: They dream of conversations, presence, fresh air, laughter, red wine and meetings with people" (Ibid.), he says, and concludes:

"We can see that there is a desire, and there are also small oases of a countercurrent, and we have to meet and talk about things, meaning, live events, debates, conversations - the longing for analogue life" (Ibid.).

5.17 Three paths for the future

Søren Schultz Jørgensen points to three paths for the future. First, existing media must become better at producing journalism that citizens are willing to pay for. Second, public service and media support are more important than ever and should be expanded, especially to rural areas where too few people

are willing to pay for journalism. The final path is the most hopeful and concerns entrepreneurship and new media:

“We see sporadically that there is a basis for creating new media, including new local media. Some of it has the character of local citizen groups, while some has the character of local media such as KunMors and KunThy, which we talk about all the time” (Ibid.).

With this, Søren Schultz Jørgensen is referring to a media outlet that is succeeding against all odds, and to which we will return, but first we need to go to Kjellerup in Central Jutland, where there is a local newsroom that is precisely reaching out to readers.

6. Midtjyllands Avis and KunMors

6.1 Midtjyllands Avis involves its readers

The phone call with Rasmus Viuff paid off. The local editor in Kjellerup is exactly the right person to talk to about the role and relevance of local journalism in a local community. When asked whether it would be possible to come out and visit him, he corrects it to “in”, which says a great deal about his view of what others call the periphery: “You are welcome to come into Kjellerup and visit me.”

After changing buses in Silkeborg, however, it felt more like out. Bus 60 rumbled north along Route 52 towards Viborg. Behind us were million-kroner villas overlooking Silkeborg Langsø and rising home equity; ahead, snow swept across flat fields as roadside villages such as Svingkær and Resdal passed by. There are only 18 kilometers between Silkeborg and Kjellerup, but the mental, cultural and economic distance is monumental, or as Rasmus Viuff puts it:

“In Silkeborg, the greatest joy in the morning is to get up, look out your door and out at your house and feel how prosperity is simply growing, because the price of your bricks rises every day. In Kjellerup, nothing rises” (Viuff, 2026).

Rasmus Viuff assesses that there are only few places in Denmark where such large price differences exist within so few kilometers in the same municipality:

“You cannot imagine a greater gap in Denmark than between living in Sejs-Svejbæk near Silkeborg and in Gråmose, out here by the A13. No one in Silkeborg understands how large the gap really is. If you ask a man in Sejs-Svejbæk, he lives on the outskirts of Aarhus in one of the most beautiful, wealthiest places in the world. But right next door there are people living in a house worth 250,000 kroner out in Gråmose, who can only just make ends meet if the gas price does not go up” (Ibid.).

Rasmus Viuff has covered Kjellerup for Midtjyllands Avis since 1995 and is today one of the last remaining local journalists in the area.

“Previously, there were editorial offices in Bjerringbro, Hammel, Gjern, Ry, Ikast, Them and out by Thorsø. There were at least six or seven of them, each with a couple of journalists” (Ibid.).

Today, apart from the main newsroom in Silkeborg, only the local editorial office in Kjellerup remains. Two journalists cover Ry, Viborg, Hammel and the northern part of Silkeborg Municipality, while Rasmus Viuff and a colleague cover Kjellerup and the surrounding area. He begins by describing the consequences of the municipal reform:

“It was bloody awful. It was not only the town hall that closed. The court and the hospital closed too. Everything is gone. The only thing left is the newspaper” (Ibid.).

That is why he sees his role as a voice for the town and the local area, especially now that the local politicians live farther away:

“The politicians in Silkeborg Municipality do not understand the difference either, so we have to keep telling them, just to make them more or less understand that it exists” (Ibid.).

It is a story Rasmus Viuff approaches differently from most. In recent years Midtjyllands Avis has invested in constructive journalism, which adds nuance, points to solutions, and reaches out to involve readers in the work. This is an approach to journalism that Ulrik Haagerup, through his institute for constructive journalism at Aarhus University, has helped bring into focus. But Rasmus Viuff is not easily impressed and says he has practiced this kind of journalism since he graduated as a journalist 36 years ago and from his very first day at the Kjellerup editorial office.

“When I was hired in 1995, the first thing I did was to make a series of special pages about what Kjellerup is and should become. And I organized a conference where the city council, the administration and all sorts of people supported it” (Ibid.).

For many years, Rasmus Viuff has used meetings, running events and a microfestival as part of the newspaper’s local presence. For him, journalism is not only coverage, but also participation in the life of the town.

In that way, he has always been in dialogue with readers and involved them in his journalism, exactly as one of the pillars of constructive journalism prescribes. He did so again in 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine and gas prices rose, but not everyone in the municipality was hit equally hard:

“Down in Silkeborg, they have district heating, and that is fine. But when I went out and talked to some of the people I knew in Vinderslev and Thorning and places like that, they were really on their knees. They only had gas, and they had been forced onto it, so they could not afford to switch heating source” (Ibid.).

But instead of merely writing about the problems, Rasmus Viuff reached out to the residents of the affected local communities:

“So, I spoke with three local councils and joined forces with them to organize a large meeting at ‘Arena Midt’ here in Kjellerup, and a couple of hundred people turned up” (Ibid.).

6.2 District heating for Vinderslev

One of those who attended was Hanne Møller Jensen. She is an optician at Thiele in Kjellerup which, very conveniently, is door to door with the newspaper office, so she can easily pop in to see the local editor. And she make use of that, because Hanne Møller Jensen is also deputy chair of Vinderslev Local Council and collaborates with the newspaper, not least because of the reader-involving journalism that Rasmus Viuff practices.

Vinderslev is a village with 210 households, four kilometers south of Kjellerup. Here, they are fighting the usual rural battles, including the struggle to preserve the local school, but Vinderslev was also one of the places hit hard by the rising gas prices in 2022:

“The newspaper came and asked whether we should not hold a meeting about this, and we said: “Yes, we should” (Jensen, H., 2026), says Hanne Møller Jensen, who appreciated the newspaper’s initiative:

“The fact that he took responsibility for arranging it and finding a room we could use was really good” (Ibid.).

After the first citizens’ meeting, the local council took over contact with the district heating company and coordinated the subsequent citizens’ meetings, but the contact between the newspaper and the local council remained close throughout. After a year and a half of work, the residents of Vinderslev were finally able to turn on the district heating in 2025, and for Rasmus Viuff it is satisfying to help change things in that way:

“Why does one become a journalist? It is to change the world, as simple as that, and you must be where the world is” (Viuff, 2026).

6.3 Editorial meetings with readers

Most recently, the newspaper has moved into new premises with plenty of room for meetings, and the local editor makes use of this as well. Among other things, Rasmus Viuff organizes what he calls expanded editorial meetings, where he invites ordinary people in to take part and provide input. He has, for example, invited people from the trade association to an editorial meeting to discuss how to secure more shops and more life in the town, and Claus Jensen is pleased about that.

Claus Jensen is chair of ‘Kjellerup Borgernes By’, an association whose purpose is to develop Kjellerup and the surrounding area. Claus Jensen himself moved to Kjellerup in 2019 with his girlfriend and son and commutes daily to his job in Aarhus. In principle, he could be indifferent to getting involved in Kjellerup, but he is not:

“That would be to let things drift, and if you let things drift, things fall apart. I believe that those who can do something should also do something” (Jensen, 2026).

Today he is chair of the association. He spends between 10 and 30 hours a month on it, and for him the local editorial office is important because it helps the town set a direction, gather the debate and create visibility towards the municipality and local politicians.

“My impression is that the newspaper has tried to be a co-creating actor. That is, it does not only report; it also goes out and contributes by saying what is needed to keep life and activity going in Kjellerup” (Ibid.).

Claus Jensen points out that the newspaper's editorial layer can sort through the debate and, unlike social media, can lift the debate to a higher level and address it to the right place. He believes this requires journalists who are present in the town and not merely driving in from the main newsroom in Silkeborg:

"If they live here, they have a local connection. That means they know the people who live here, they talk to them every day, they meet them in 'Brugsen', they hear what is going on and how things are connected. If you do not live here, you miss the context of what you are communicating. Then your communication also becomes poorer, I would assume, if you even discover that there is something to communicate in the first place" (Ibid.).

Claus Jensen believes that the local editorial office's involving, constructive journalism helps change the perception of the newspaper, so that local businesses will continue to pay for an advertisement because the newspaper helps create life.

And in recent years, this form of journalism has entered every column of Midtjyllands Avis.

6.4 Constructive journalism throughout Midtjyllands Avis

Midtjyllands Avis is struggling with the same problems as all other newspapers: declining subscribers, failing advertising sales and ageing readers.

New solutions were necessary, and the entire newspaper now focuses on constructive journalism, which the newsroom has boiled down to 'KLIO': K for critical, L for solution oriented, I for involving and O for follow-up.

Today, the newspaper hosts events and involves readers in its stories by asking for new angles and issues. The newspaper also focuses on solutions and works deliberately with transparency, so readers can see how the articles have been made.

It is an initiative that Rasmus Viuff welcomes and finds logical:

"There are many others who are better at stealing people's time than we are. So, if we are to highlight something where we are strongest, it is creating local solutions" (Viuff, 2026), he says, and he is beginning to sense the results in the circulation figures:

"We have no doubt that the reason our subscription numbers are still holding steady and not falling as quickly is that we are relevant to someone. Not to everyone, not at all. There are many, many, many people who have no idea who we are" (Ibid.).

It is at least relevant to Hanne Møller Jensen and the local council in Vinderslev. Most recently, attention has been directed at a new cycle path and Vinderslev's struggling school, but although the collaboration between the newspaper and the local council is close, it is not too close, Rasmus Viuff believes:

“If you constantly distance yourself from what you write about and constantly have to distance yourself from people... then there is no connection between the newspaper and the people it writes for” (Viuff, 2026), he says, and he does not think the constructive approach means uncritical journalism:

“There are a lot of people doing wrong stuff around here who need to be written about, of course. And with the structure we have in the municipality, it is not difficult to be critical of Silkeborg. Constructive does not mean being a fellow traveller; it means asking why this problem cannot be solved” (Ibid.).

6.5 Dit Kjellerup

Midtjyllands Avis is also trying to make the newspaper relevant with a new publication that was first tested in Kjellerup. Alongside the ordinary newspaper, which covers the whole local area, the newspaper now produces an ultra-local digital edition called Dit Kjellerup, which contains only content from Kjellerup itself.

“It is the same material that we put in the newspaper, but only from Kjellerup, and they get nothing but that” (Ibid.), the local editor explains.

But apparently that is enough for several hundred subscribers who do not want to buy the old newspaper but are happy to pay 50 kroner a month for Dit Kjellerup with its targeted content. For that reason, Midtjyllands Avis now also publishes ultra-local editions in other towns, Rasmus Viuff explains, summarizing the concept: “We are just as ultra-local as KunMors” (Ibid.).

This is the same initiative Søren Schultz Jørgensen referred to, and in that way, Rasmus Viuff sends me onward towards the Limfjord and Mors, and to a niche medium that is thriving in a place where everyone else gave up.

6.6 KunMors

On a rain-soaked high street in Nykøbing Mors, Katrine Hedegaard welcomes me with coffee and cake. We sit in the small kitchenette at the KunMors newsroom. She is not the type to fill the room with grand gestures and small talk, but her voice is steady and her opinions precise when the conversation turns to what good journalism is:

“We have to be credible and distinguish ourselves from Facebook and the great problem of our time, which is that people make up facts themselves” (Hedegaard, 2025).

That is why she was fact-checking letters to the editor when I arrived. Normally, they are simply printed, and then the writer must answer for the content and credibility, but that does not work on Mors. If Katrine Hedegaard finds errors, she corrects them and asks the writer whether they can accept the changes.

After 142 years, the local daily newspaper on Mors, Morsø Folkeblad, was bought by Nordjyske Stiftstidende in 2019. The first thing they did was close the newsroom in Nykøbing Mors in order to cover the island from Aalborg. One of the newspaper's writers, David Højmark, thought that was a mistake, and in January 2020 he started his own ultra-local, purely digital medium dedicated to Mors and the people of Mors. It was an initiative that was well received on the Limfjord island:

“Otherwise, no one tells those stories, because there is no one there to do it” (Hedegaard, 2025), says Katrine Hedegaard, who was appointed editor-in-chief in 2023.

Today, KunMors receives 400,000 kroner a year in media support and has four employees and an intern. They have moved into larger premises, launched a new website and have just opened the sister medium KunThy. Katrine Hedegaard may have an explanation for how they can make it work financially when the traditional newspapers struggled:

“We were digital from the start, while the print newspaper was expensive, and we charge only 700 kroner for an annual subscription” (Ibid.).

KunMors does not necessarily prioritize young readers or chase clicks, which she says stresses her. And unlike other media that talk about pace, Katrine Hedegaard publishes only five articles a day, because, as she says: “People are already bombarded with content, so I would rather publish more thoroughly worked-through pieces” (Ibid.).

Nor is she in a hurry to be first with the news, as many other media are. Instead, credibility is important, and so is the fact that KunMors is only about Mors:

“I go to work every day to lift Mors up constructively, but not uncritically, and being close to the sources places higher demands on decency, because I meet them,” she says, explaining the constructive approach to journalism:

“We try to be constructive, and we keep sensational stories and emergency-service stories factual. It is important that we take journalism further and find solutions, but we must not be uncritical.”

Constructive journalism is also about nuance, and Katrine Hedegaard has found a solution when this leads to long articles. She simply writes a short summary at the beginning, where she explains why it is important that the article is long. The newsroom in the middle of the pedestrian street is also important for involving readers:

“Then they come in off the street with their iPad, which we just must help them with. And we prioritize getting out and doing reportage where we meet people, because there we get something different from what we get in press releases. Then we set off in the little blue car, and people wave when they see it” (Ibid.), she says with a smile.

Coverage of the local that apparently also works as a business model, and which Dit Kjellerup is inspired by. And when Katrine Hedegaard is asked why she goes to work, the words could just as easily have come from Rasmus Viuff:

“I think it is important for a medium to celebrate what exists here. To show that it is wonderful to live here, that exciting things happen here, and that everything is not crap” (Ibid.).

In her work, she tries to be everything other than what people post on social media, and sums up her publicity responsibility:

“It is great to set the agenda and help decide what people talk about, but also how they talk about it,” she says, expressing her mission: “To get people to talk properly with one another on an informed basis” (Ibid.).

7. Summary

Many local communities are under pressure from structural developments: Out-migration, centralization, declining public services, an uneven housing market and greater distance to political decision-makers. These are conditions that rural areas are struggling against, and when the school, the grocery shop or the library closes, it is not only practical functions that disappear. Important meeting places also disappear, places where relationships, trust and community are formed.

However, the story of rural areas is not only a story of decline. Both the research and the concrete cases in this report point to an important paradox: Many people experience a high quality of life in the countryside because nature, proximity and community play a larger role there than in the city.

In Falsters Hjerter, the threat of school closure became the beginning of strong cooperation between 11 villages. On Tuse Næs, associations and voluntary communities are flourishing, building bridges between residents and attracting young newcomers. The examples show that rural areas do not necessarily lack resources.

The most important conclusion is therefore not that rural areas simply need to pull themselves together and fight on their own to preserve a good place to live. In many places, dedicated local volunteers are doing what they can.

Rather, the most important conclusion is that good conditions for life in the countryside require interaction between local communities, municipal prioritization and largely greater focus and support from central legislators. Small symbolic changes such as relocating state jobs and demolishing empty homes are not enough on their own.

The report shows that political prioritization of rural areas is in the established parties' own interest if they want to avoid increased polarization, democratic backsliding and prevent their voters moving to parties on the far right.

When economic inequality grows and services in rural areas disappear, the distance between people grows and mutual understanding declines. Rural consciousness and the urban-rural divide are therefore new political concepts. The report shows that increased inequality has consequences not only for the citizens left behind in the countryside, but for society, because social cohesion erodes and democracy comes under pressure.

Rural areas must be seen as more than simply places in decline but keeping them afloat requires dedicated support and attention.

Here, local journalism can make both the problems and the consequences of political decisions visible, give a voice to the local communities that are otherwise rarely heard, and highlight the places where people succeed in creating development.

If the media only drive out to rural areas to tell stories of decay and decline, they confirm the feeling of being overlooked and ridiculed. More constructive journalism is not about covering up problems or being uncritical, but when journalism also shows possible solutions, it contributes to a more nuanced public conversation. The task of journalism is not only to describe what is going wrong, but also to examine which experiences can be learned from.

Local journalism is important, but it is under pressure. The report describes why it should be strengthened and why the state should help. If local media disappear, a democratic infrastructure in rural areas disappears with them. Not as an advertising pillar, but as a critical, present and constructive actor that both holds power to account and makes visible that life, agency and a future still exist outside the largest cities.

7.1 Weakness

The many issues in rural areas, each of which is important, made this a demanding task. The report's main weakness is the broad problem formulation, in which the individual examples and consequences risk drowning in each other. If the report is to be used journalistically, each issue should be addressed from its own independent angle and lead to separate products.

7.2 Opportunities for further journalistic work on the problems facing rural areas

- Investigate concrete solutions instead of merely describing rural decline. The report provides examples of many independent angles and many dedicated local volunteers who are fighting for their area.
- Cover rural areas in everyday life as well, and not only when schools close or when studies show how badly rural areas are doing. The report shows that there are plenty of good everyday stories linked to important agendas.
- Work in a more involving way with the people who live in rural areas. Instead of the media inventing stories they think interest people in the countryside, local councils, local volunteers, young people, newcomers or others can be asked to point to the problems and potentials that journalism should investigate.
- Fewer, stronger stories that start from a specific place and its people may be more valuable than constant news pressure, where nuances risk being lost.
- Dedicated staff, who have the urban-rural divide as their beat.

- The bigger story: that it is in the interest of all of Denmark that rural areas function, and not merely an agenda for those who live there. If we do not trust one another, social cohesion suffers, polarization is strengthened and, in the end, democracy may be put at risk.

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