

# News Experiences and Opinions in Denmark 2020

Constructive Institute



Epinion



# Contents

04	Foreword
05	Executive Summary & Key Findings
07	News Avoidance and the Focus of Modern News
12	News Credibility
15	Demand for the News of Tomorrow
20	The Effect of Constructive News Consumption
24	Personality and News
28	The Impact of COVID-19 on Danes' Behavior and Preferences for Constructive News
33	Methodology



# Foreword

In the media industry we are painfully aware of, how much people are using us: How much they click, how much they view, how many have stopped following news and how few actually want to pay for traditional journalism. The numbers are too often depressing for anyone who believes that a well-functioning press is a cornerstone of democracy.

Far too rarely we focus on the answers to the questions “why”, “now what” and “how”. Constructive Institute has commissioned this survey to look more closely into the public’s perceptions and attitudes towards news. The survey provides new insights into people’s demands and hopes for news and investigates people’s trust in news, journalism and journalists in general. Furthermore, it is an important first step to better understand how audiences and readers perceive constructive news, and the survey will be conducted in other media markets for international comparison.

With a philanthropic donation from the Salling Foundations (Salling Fondene) we have asked The Danish analytics company Epinion to conduct an independent and representative study on “news experiences and opinions” among more than 2000 Danish citizens. The survey has been conducted by Epinion based on a questionnaire developed in collaboration with Constructive Institute (Peter Damgaard Kristensen, Gustav Aarup Lauridsen), Aarhus University (Hans Henrik Knoop) and Epinion (Thomas Skaalum Bargisen and Christian Fisher Vestergaard).

The initiative has been supported with input from The DR Audience Research Department (DR Medieforskning), TV2 Analysis (TV2 Analyse) and with the umbrella organization for the Danish press Danish Media (Danske Medier). All data collection and analysis in the report has been made by Epinion, who is also responsible for writing up of the report.

The publication provides unique insights regarding the preferences, frustrations and expectations towards news providers among present and potential news consumers – and among those who we lost along the way.

It is our shared hope that this survey will inspire newsrooms in their daily quest to find better ways of serving their communities. Journalism might be one of the reasons for the trust crisis in our democracies. Journalism also needs to be part of the solution.

*Aarhus, June 2020  
Ulrik Haagerup  
Journalist and CEO  
Constructive Institute*

# Section 1

## Executive Summary & Key Findings



This report investigates current media trends with a profound focus on news credibility, perceptions of news negativity and the tendency of some to avoid news.

More specifically, we look at how Danes perceive the content of news media, and we use this to get an impression of the current state of the news. This is important in identifying what problems the broader population are seeing in the media.

Next, we also test whether the constructive news paradigm is potential a solution to some of the issues raised. We test if there is a demand for constructive news and if reading constructive news content is any different from conventional news. Lastly, we provide novel evidence on the effect of the corona outbreak on Danes' opinions and behavior towards news.

The report builds on data from survey interviews with more than 2.000 Danes conducted in February and March 2020.

## **A SUMMARY OF THE MOST IMPORTANT FINDINGS FROM OUR RESEARCH**

- 16 % of Danes periodically avoid news. People who report that news often makes them feel bad and who think that the media focus too much on conflict are more prone to avoid news. News avoiders use traditional media sources less compared to non-avoiders. Instead, avoiders use social media and streaming as their source of news.
- A third of the population feel that news often puts them in a bad mood. More than half of the population believes that news focuses more on negative than positive perspectives on events. Almost six out of ten Danes think that far too much news focuses on conflict.
- News credibility in Denmark is lukewarm. Around a quarter of Danes agree that the media paint a fair and accurate picture of the world. News credibility varies across segments of the population.
- Most Danes (68 %) would prefer news that focuses more on illuminating a case from different perspectives, on informing about solutions to societal problems (58 %) and on inspiring action (51 %). The demand for news content that 'incites debate' or 'focuses on people that live in a different way' is lower.
- 57 % of Danes would prefer to read a news article with a constructive rather than a conventional news headline.
- People who read a constructive newspaper article are less inclined to feel uncomfortable and more likely to agree that 'the world needs more articles of this kind' compared to a control group who read a conventional article about the same topic.
- People high in the trait neuroticism, who are generally more prone to negative thoughts, are more likely to avoid news and less likely to think that following news is important. People who are agreeable or conscientious tend to think that following the news is important but are more likely to experience today's news as too conflict oriented.

## Section 2

# News avoidance and the focus of modern news



This section deals with the tendency of some people to avoid news and illuminates the public's view on the preoccupation of the news with issues relating to problems and conflict. The study finds that a small, but noticeable, share of Danes periodically avoid news. People who report that news often makes them feel bad and who think that news focuses too much on conflict are more prone to news avoidance. News avoiders use traditional media sources less than non-avoiders. However, a larger share of avoiders use social media and streaming as their source of news. The study further documents that around a third of the Danish population feel that news often puts them in a bad mood. Moreover, there is widespread belief amongst Danes that the media focus more on negative than positive news and most Danes agree that the media focus too much on conflict.

In their [Digital News Report 2019](#), Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism document a troubling trend: Across several countries, around a third of the population actively avoid news. In our study we set out to take a closer look at this phenomenon. Our study shows the same conclusion as the Reuters Institute study: Although a comparatively low share of Danes avoid news, the number is still quite high at around 16 %.

While some people may simply be predisposed to avoiding the news, the tendency might also be explained by how people perceive and feel about the media these days. Indeed, the data from our study shows that people who report that news often make them feel bad are significantly more prone to news avoidance. The same goes for people who think that news media focus too much on conflicts. This is the case even after taking personality traits and other factors into consideration.

The evidence suggests that low trust in news drives news avoidance behavior, while a feeling that following the news is important leads to less avoidance. This last point is best interpreted as signaling that people who think of reading the news as a duty are more likely to read news.

From a political perspective, promoting a sense of trust and duty towards news consumption seems like the most promising strategy to combat news avoidance.

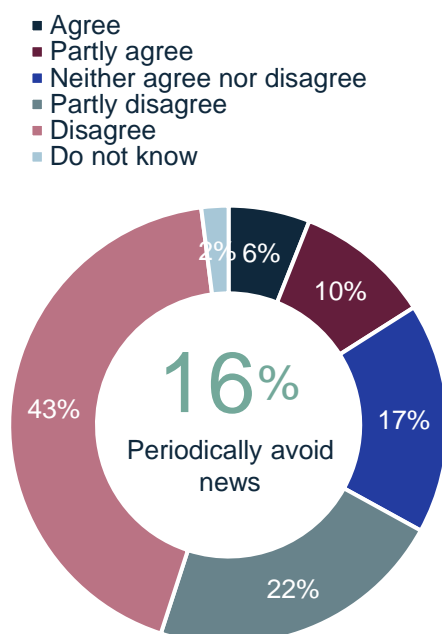
But from the standpoint of news media, enticing trust and duty seems like a hard path to counteract avoidance. The media can play on consumers' sense of duty through advertisement and build a trustworthy brand. News media can directly control news content and thus the degree to which news focuses on conflict and – to an extent - the degree to which news causes negative emotions. From the perspective of the individual news media provider, this might be the more fruitful strategy.

### Demographics and news avoidance

Understanding who is likely to exhibit news avoidance behavior is important in directing any countermeasure against it.

News avoidance is more pronounced among young people. Among aged 18 to 34, 23 % periodically avoid news. This figure is comparatively lower among people aged 35 to 55 (17 %) and 56+ (9 %).

Figure 1: News avoidance in the Danish population



N=2.014. Question wording: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement: I periodically try to avoid news.



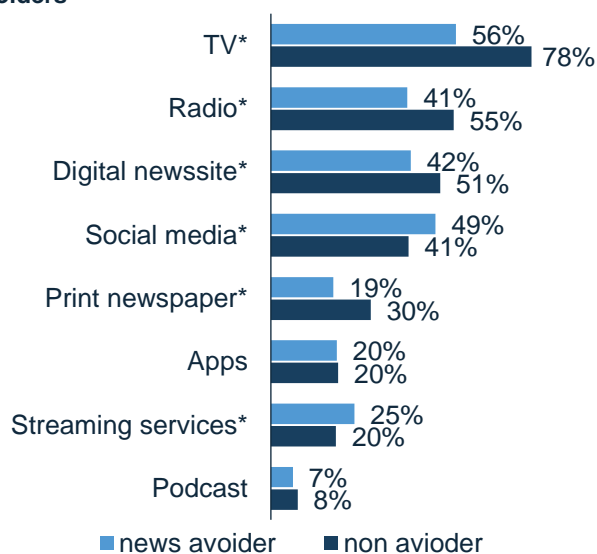
Women (17 %) are more likely than men (14 %) to exhibit news-avoidance behavior. Education seems to have less to say when it comes to news avoidance. People with higher and lower levels of formal education are about equally likely to be news avoiders.

### Social media users are more likely to be news avoiders

The media habits of news avoiders diverge markedly from non-news avoiders. News avoiders rely less on news sources such as print newspapers, TV, radio and digital news sites than non-avoiders. Of those who report that they periodically avoid news, 19 % read a print newspaper the week before, while that number is 30 % among non-news avoiders. This might not come as a surprise – they are after all news avoiders.

What may be more surprising is the fact that they rely more on social media and streaming for news than non-avoiders. This, of course, does not imply that streaming and social media cause news avoidance. As we have documented above, news-avoidance behavior is also closely linked to age and other factors.

**Figure 2: News sources among news avoiders and non-avoiders**



N=2.014. Wording: Which of the following media, if any, have you used to listen to/read/watch news the last week?

However, people who read a newspaper, visited a digital news site, and/or watched news on the TV are less likely to exhibit news-avoidance behavior even after we control for age, level of education, personality traits and the general tendency of news avoiders to consume less news overall. At the very least, this seems to suggest that news avoidance is linked to consumption of specific news media.

### Around a third of the population feel that news often put them in a bad mood

While news avoidance is not a widespread phenomenon, a significant share of Danes report that news affects their mood in a negative way. In our study, 31 % of Danes report that they feel that news often puts them in a bad mood. 25 % do not agree while 41 % neither agree nor disagree; the remaining 3 % do not know. Whether these numbers are troubling or not is up for debate. Investigative journalism – the traditional hallmark of journalism - is not intended to make the reader feel good. However, as we will describe in detail below, our study also reveals that most people believe that the news are biased towards negative topics and conflict.

As with the people who report that news often puts them in a bad mood report are less prone than the rest of the population to consume news from traditional news sources such as TV, radio and print newspapers. Meanwhile they are more likely than other Danes to get their news from social media and streaming services.

This evidence can be interpreted in multiple ways. People who often feel bad about news may unavoidably stumble across news content when visiting social media sites and streaming services despite choosing not to consume traditional news. Alternatively, social media and streaming content could be more likely to focus on conflict-driven content and thus cause a worse mood than traditional news sources.

<sup>1</sup> <https://epinionglobal.com/en/>

Lastly, the correlation may be incidental. Some other factor may cause both media habits and the feelings described by the respondents.

**There is widespread belief that news is biased towards negativity**

The results reported above show that around a third of the population agree that news often puts them in a bad mood, while an admittedly smaller share of the population periodically avoid news. As Reuters Institute note in their study, this may be *'because the world has become a more depressing place or because the media coverage tends to be relentlessly negative – or a mix of the two'*. It is beyond the scope of a survey to settle whether media coverage is relentlessly negative. What we can do and have done is ask people whether *they* agree that news focuses as much on the good things as the bad things in the world.

58 % of Danes disagree with this statement, 15 % agree, while 28 % neither agree nor disagree. The remaining 3 % say they do not know. The results show that the purported bias of the media towards negativity is a widespread belief among the Danes.

**Most Danes agree that news focuses too much on conflict**

Our study also reveals that most Danes believe that news media focus too much on conflict; 58 % of Danes agree with the statement *'far too much news focuses on conflict these days'*. 11 % disagree, and 28 % neither agree nor disagree. The remaining 4 % state that they do not know. This question is more normative in the sense that it asks for the respondent to make a value judgement. It does not ask the respondent to report if there is a more pronounced focus on conflict than on agreement. Rather, it asks if the respondent him- og herself think that too much of the news is conflict oriented.

While news-avoidance behavior is most widespread amongst the youth (18-34 year-olds), both the belief that media is biased and that it focuses too much on conflict is more widely held among 35-55 and 56 year-olds.

The study also points to the fact that people who believe the media to be biased towards negativity or too conflict oriented on average get their news from a more diverse set of news sources than the remainder of Danes. This might indicate that they consume more news on average.

Figure 3: News focus on negativity and conflict



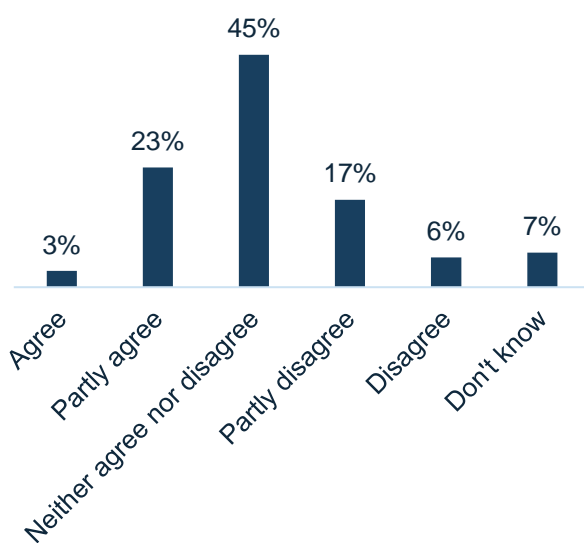
## The study tells us what Danes perceive, not if news is in fact biased

The results cannot confirm whether news is generally biased towards negative frames. We can only conclude that most Danes perceive that this is the case and are willing to agree with the more normative assertion that news focuses too much on conflict.

## Some report that news about problems give them a feeling that they can also find a solution

As mentioned above, news that focuses on problems, conflict and so on are not problematic per se. Our study reveals that around 26 % of Danes think that news about problems often leaves them with a feeling that they can also find a solution to that problem. An almost equal share (23 %) of Danes, however, do not agree with the statement and 45 % say that they neither agree nor disagree. The last 7 % answer that they do not know.

**Figure 4: Agreement with the statement: News about problems often leaves me with a feeling that you can find a solution to the problems**



N=2.014. Wording: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement: News about problems often leaves me with a feeling that you can find a solution to the problems?

<sup>1</sup> <https://epinionglobal.com/en/>

# Section 3

## News credibility



News credibility is an important topic that has gained much attention in the West with the rise of fake news and the resurgence of populist parties. Our study investigates perceived news credibility in Denmark. Our results suggest that news credibility is lukewarm. For example only around a quarter of Danes agree that the news paints a fair and accurate picture of the world. News credibility varies across segments of the population. Men are more critical than women and older generations more so than younger groups.

News credibility has been heavily debated in recent years. The emergence of ‘fake’ and ‘junk’ news and the increasing willingness of some populist politicians to question the laudability of news media have put pressure on traditional media. In this section we report on a series of questions which aim to measure the perceived credibility of news media.

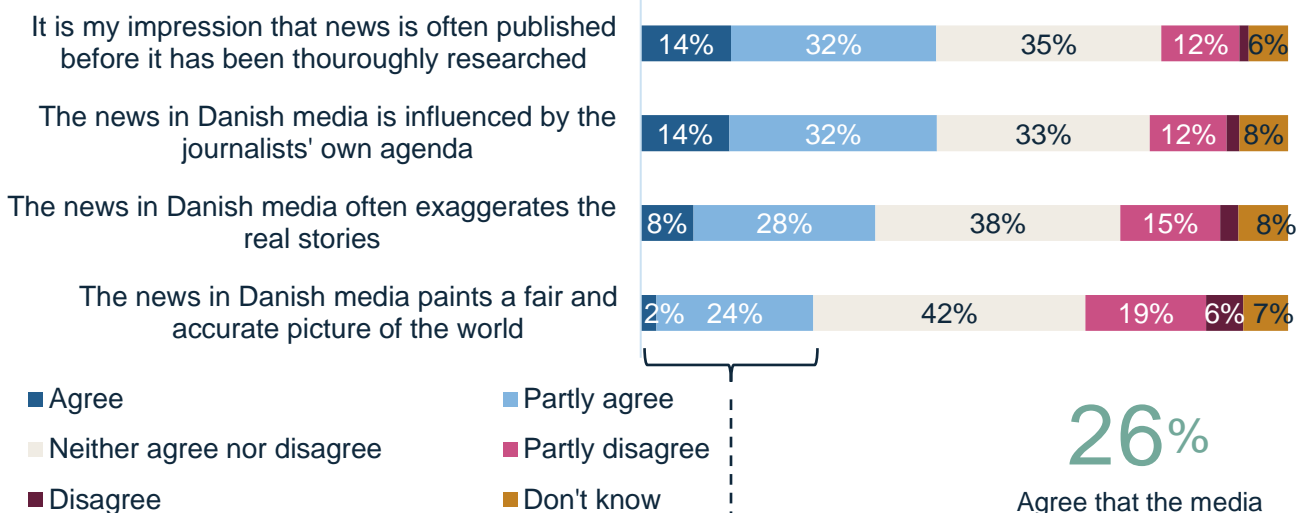
**Credibility is lukewarm**

Generally, the study shows that news credibility is not soaring. 46 % of Danes have the impression that news are published before having been thoroughly researched. Similarly, 46 % believe that news is influenced by journalists’ own agendas. Only 26 % agrees that news media paints a fair and accurate picture of the world and only 11 % disagree that news media often exaggerate the real stories. More than 30 % answer that they neither agree nor disagree with each statement.

**Fairness is associated with media usage**

People who consume news from TV, print newspapers, streaming services, radio or digital news sites are all more likely to find that news media paint a fair and accurate picture of the world. This can either show that perceived media fairness is conducive to news consumption, that news consumption increases perceived fairness or both. That perceived fairness is linked to media habits is further underscored by the result that people who believe that news are fair are less likely to exhibit periodical news avoidance (and vice versa).

**Figure 5: News credibility**



N=2.014. Question wording: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement... Note: The order of the questions has been randomized.

### Age matters when it comes to news credibility

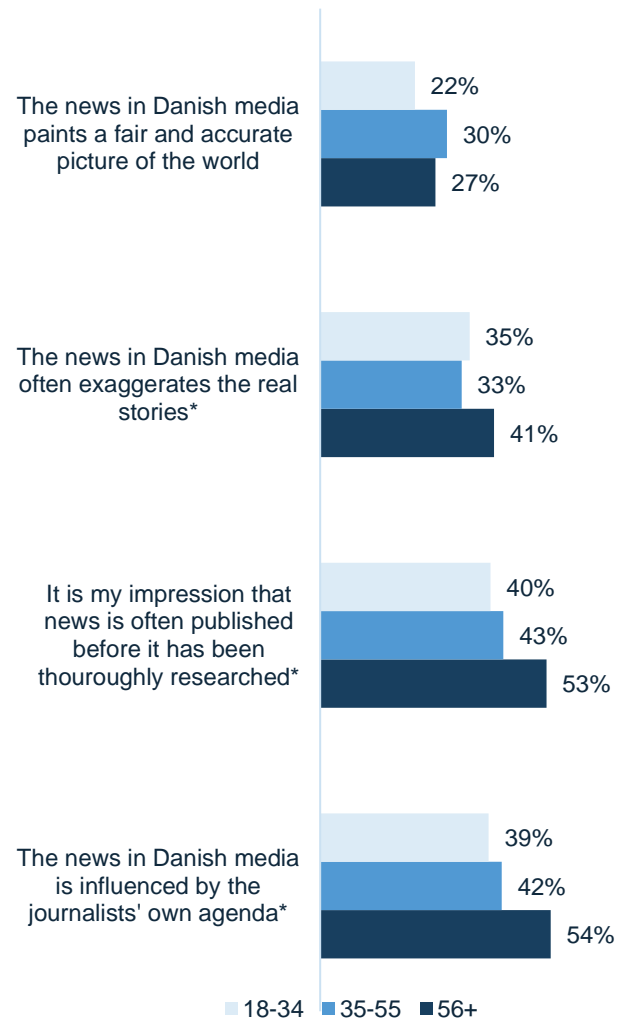
The study reveals some significant differences between age groups when it comes to news credibility. The oldest (people aged 56+) are more likely to indicate a low level of news credibility. They are significantly more likely than the young (people aged 18-34) to believe that news is influenced by journalistic agendas, exaggerated and has not been thoroughly researched before publication. This is shown in figure 6.

There are several possible explanations for this tendency. Older generations may miss a time when news were less fragmented and/or may find it hard to navigate in today's media reality. An alternative interpretation is that the young are perhaps more blue-eyed and idealistic

### Men show less faith in the credibility of news media

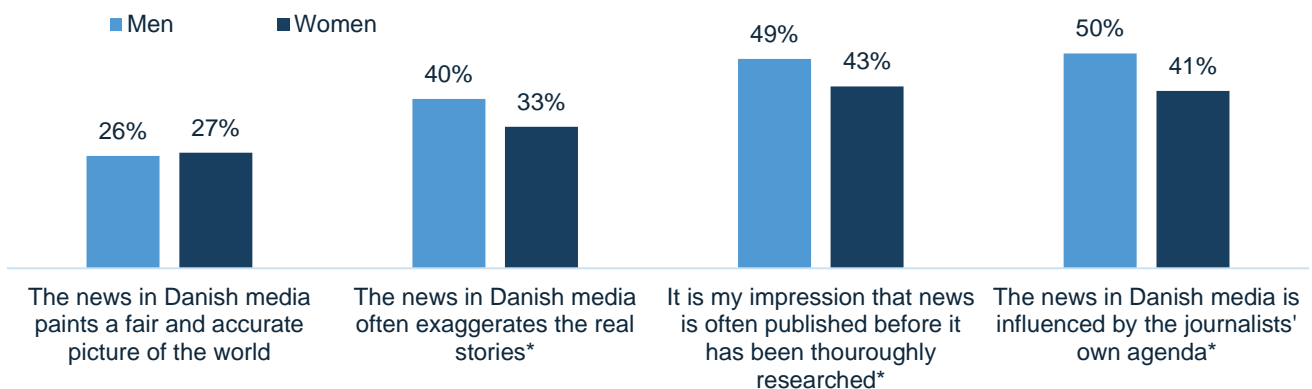
Men are more likely than women to take a critical stance on news credibility. 40 % of men agree that media often exaggerate stories, while 33 % of women agree with this statement. Similarly 49 % of men are of the impression that news is often published before it is thoroughly researched. 43 % of women are under this impression. 50 % of men believe that news is often influenced by journalist's own opinions, while only 41 % of the women hold this belief. Men and women are about equally likely to believe that news media paint a fair and accurate picture of the world.

Figure 6: Age and news credibility



**Note:** N=2.014. Each bar shows the percentage of people who agree or partially agree with the statement. \* specifies that the difference between the oldest and youngest group is statistically significant.

Figure 7: Gender and news credibility



**Note:** N=2.014. Each bar shows the percentage who agrees or partially agrees with the statement. \*Specifies that the difference between men and women is statistically significant.

## Section 4

# Demand for the news of tomorrow



In this section we focus on news demand with a deliberate forward-looking approach. First, we focus on demand for news that reflects different news ideals. The study reveals that most Danes would prefer that news focuses more on illuminating a case from different perspectives and informing about solutions to societal problems and inspiring action – the ideals proposed by the constructive news movement. Demand for news that ‘incites debate’ or ‘focuses on people that live in a different way’ is smaller. We also test whether people prefer to consume constructive over conventional news. The results reveal that most Danes prefer to read a news article with a constructive rather than a conventional headline. However, caution is needed when interpreting the result – a more complete answer would require us to look more closely at the complex interplay between issue and framing effects – e.g. the use of personal stories and issues.

**Some constructive news ideals are quite popular among the public**

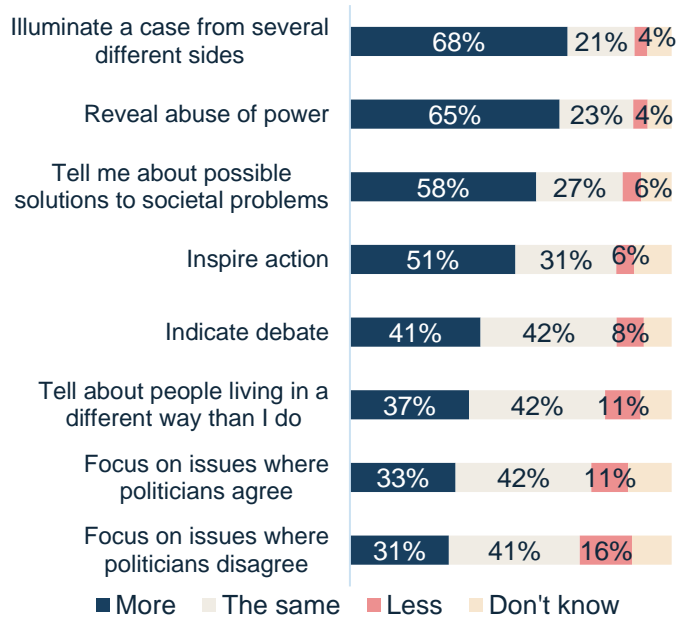
What do people want from the news of tomorrow? What (high-minded) ideals do they think that news media already live up to and where do they fall short? In our study we sought an answer to this question using a survey question specifically designed to gauge demand for news ideals: We showed respondents a set of actions that media can focus on in their news coverage. We then asked respondents if they wanted news media to do more, less or the same with respect to each action in the future.

Figure 8 shows the share of people who prefer news to focus more, less and the same amount on each action. The results show that only a few prefer news to do less of each action. That seems to suggest that all listed ideals are recognized as somewhat important among the population and that – at least to the broad audience - news media are not overperforming on these ideals.

**Methodological note**

At first glance this survey question can seem a bit problematic from a methodological perspective. It demands a lot from the respondent. It can be prone to social desirability bias – answering what one believes to be socially acceptable. Also the connection between an answer and actual behavior is dubious. If all newspapers met the ideals that respondents demand, it does not automatically follow that more people would sign up for a newspaper subscription or even read more news. It is certainly possible, but not necessarily the case. What we measure here is *the ideals that people believe in*. Whether they wholly or in part believe them because they think other people expect them to, and if they are willing to act upon such ideals, we will have to set aside. Another approach to the demand for specific news types is laid out in section 5.

**Figure 8: News sources among news avoiders and non-avoiders**



N=2.014. Wording: *Below several actions that media can focus on in their news coverage are listed.*

*For each action, please answer if you think the news should do more, less or the same of that action in the future if you were free to choose.*



There is, however, substantial variation between the demand for different news ideals; some ideals are more popular than others. Almost three out of four Danes (68 %) think that news in the future should focus more on illuminating a story from different perspectives, and 58 % would like future news to focus more on possible solutions to societal problems. About half of the population (51 %) would like news content that focuses more on inspiring action. To "inspire action" and "inform about solutions" are not traditional news ideals. Rather, we included them in the survey to test how constructive news ideals would fare with the public compared to more traditional ideals. The results here show, that most of the public support more news content with a constructive angle. However, when it comes to informing about different ways of living, there is no clear majority in favor of more focus.

### **No clear majority in favor of more debate and disagreement**

A lot of today's news explicitly focus on inciting debate or highlighting differences between political candidates. 31 % of respondents think that news in the future should focus more on issues where politicians disagree.

But even more respondents (41 %) seem to think that the current amount of focus would suffice. The same goes for the question about inciting debate. Here 41 % would like even more focus on debate while 42 % think that the current focus is ideal. Investigative journalism ideals are also very important to Danes. Thus, 65 % would like future news to focus more on revealing abuse of power.

### **A preference for more focus is more common among the old than the young – on all actions**

On all actions, respondents aged 56+ are more likely than the young (aged 18-34 to prefer increased focus. This probably reflects the fact that the older segment is more concerned about news credibility while also being more inclined to think that it is important to keep up with the news (see section 6 for more on this issue).

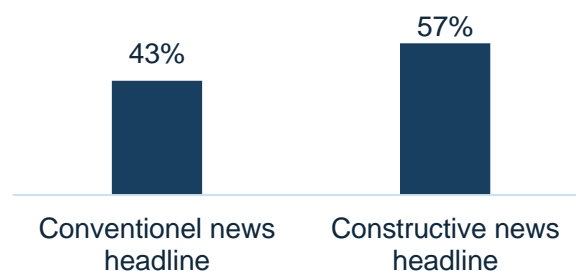
The same basic conclusion holds for the well-educated. People with higher levels of formal education are significantly more inclined to prefer more focus than are those with lower levels of formal education. The exception to this rule is the issues of focus on issues where politicians agree and focus on issues where they disagree. Here Danes with higher and lower levels of education are about equally likely to prefer more focus.

### **A majority prefer constructive over conventional news**

The results above show a broad public support for news that increasingly focus on some of the news ideals proposed by the constructive news movement. Others are less popular. The analysis does not, however, tell us whether people prefer to buy or consume constructive news over more conventional news. To shed light on this question, we used a choice-based experiment which enabled us to calculate the probability that an individual will choose to read a conventional over a constructive news article. We presented each respondent with fictional news headlines and asked them to choose which article they wanted to read the most and the least. The news headlines covered ten issues, and for each issue headline a headline was written with both a constructive and a conventional angle.

The experiment is described in more detail in the methodological note on the next page.

**Figure 9: Percentage of people who prefer constructive and conventional news in the experiment**



**Note:** N=2.014. Calculated via. max diff latent class analysis.

<sup>1</sup> <https://epinionglobal.com/en/>

### Methodological note

The demand for constructive and conventional news was measured indirectly by using a so-called max-diff choice experiment. In the experiment we repeatedly presented the respondent with five fictional newspaper headlines. Each time we asked the respondent to choose the one he or she would like to read the most and the least. Beforehand, ten news issues had been chosen and ten constructive headlines and ten conventional headlines were written. The twenty headlines are shown in figure 10.

Based on the data from the max-diff test we calculated the probability that a respondent would choose each news headline as his or her preferred option using a method known as latent class analysis. Using the results it was possible to compare conventional headlines to constructive headlines as to how probable they are to be chosen as the preferred headline.

The analysis shows that most Danes prefer to read constructive headlines over conventional headlines. This is evident in figure 9, which shows the percentage of respondents who prefer conventional and constructive headlines. In our experiment we find that 57 % of adult Danes would prefer to read more of article when presented with a constructive news headline rather than a conventional news headline. 43 % prefer to read more when presented with a conventional news headline.

The preference for constructive headlines is not specific to a single segment in the population. We do find some significant differences between groups, but they remain small in substantial terms. This suggests that constructive headlines and news has a broad appeal. Below we sum up the results in more detail.

### The well educated and the old are particularly fond of constructive news

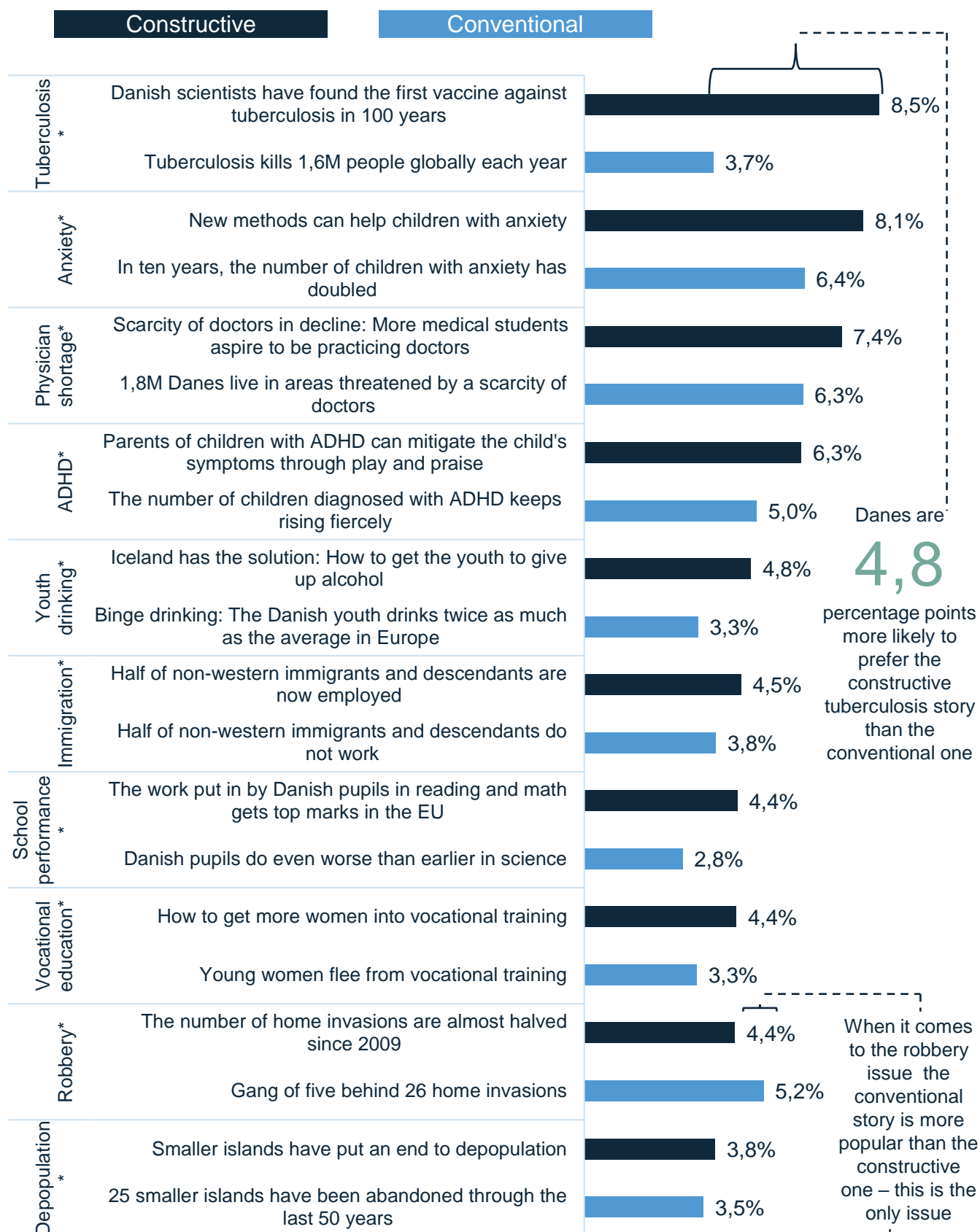
People with higher levels of formal education are slightly more likely to prefer constructive headlines over conventional headlines compared to people with lower education. Age also plays a role. While 55 % of the people aged 18-34 prefer constructive headlines, this number is 58 % among people aged 56+.

Constructive headlines also seems to be weakly related to income with 59 % of high-income earners (+600.000 kr. per year) preferring constructive headlines to 56 % among low income earners (0-199.999 DKK).

### Demand also depends on other tools that may be attractive to audiences

The results from the choice experiment suggest that readers prefer constructive news to conventional news. However, the experiment did not present readers with all possible news topics or even a random sample of news. It is possible that Danes prefer constructive news on some issues and conventional news on others. And we do indeed find some evidence that this might be the case. On all issues except one, a significantly larger share of Danes prefer the constructive headline over the conventional one. The exception to the rules is the issue about robbery. The conventional headline reads "*Gang of five behind 26 home invasions*" while the constructive version reads "*The number of home invasions are almost halved since 2009*". What makes this topic stand out from the rest? Although it is not possible to give a definite answer using the available data, we will suggest a possible interpretation: While the remainder of headlines are impersonal in the sense that they tend to focus on statistics, the conventional headline here is more personal. First, it presents us with a *gang of five*. Second, the reader is presented with *26 robberies* rather than abstract numbers such as "half". What would have happened if the constructive version had also deployed such instruments, e.g. "*Here's what we can learn about home robbery prevention from 26 recent gang robberies*", we cannot tell using the design used here. And this underscores an important point about the result and invites further investigation.

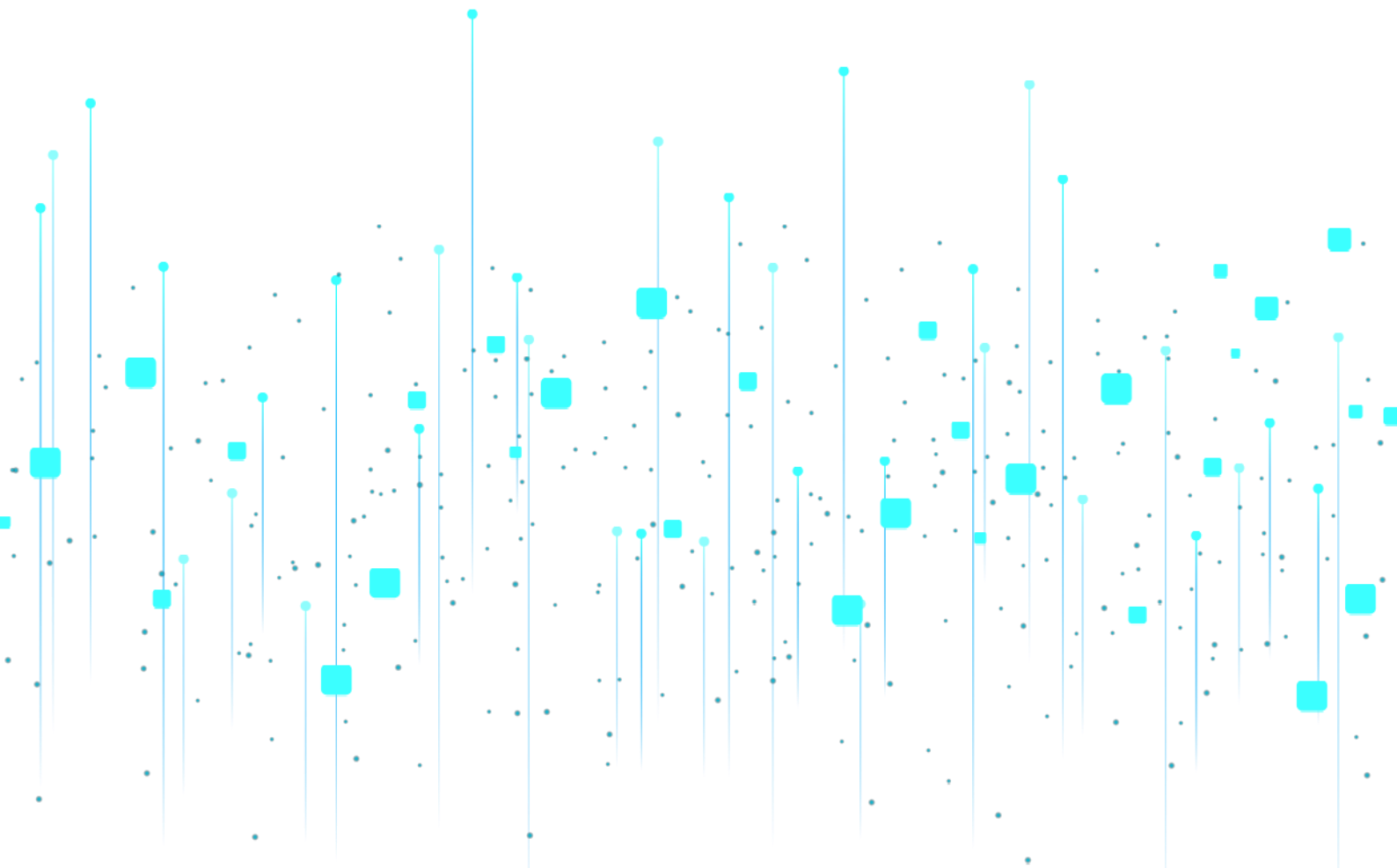
Figure 10: Percentage who prefer each news article



**Note:** N=2.014. Calculated via. max diff latent class analysis. \* Marks results where the difference between constructive and conventional news are significant at conventional levels. Test conducted using cluster robust standard errors.

# Section 5

## The effect of constructive news consumption



In this section we focus on the impressions, feelings and types of behavior that news consumption elicits in its audience. We show that people who read a constructive newspaper article are less inclined to feel uncomfortable and more likely to agree that the world needs more articles of this kind compared to a control group who read a conventional article about the same topic. We do not find evidence that constructive and conventional articles differ in their effect on the propensity of audiences to talk to others about the article, share it or engage more in the topic.

In the last section we focused on the demand for news content with a specific focus on constructive news. In this section, we turn the focus away from demand and towards the feelings and types of behavior that news consumption elicit in an audience. Here we report the results from an experiment designed to measure the effects of reading a conventional versus a constructive news article.

### **Constructive news makes readers want to read more news like it**

After each article we asked the respondents to report whether they felt that the world needed more articles like the one they just read. The analysis shows that people who read a constructive news article generally are more inclined to agree that the world needs more news like the story just presented than are those who read a conventional news article. In the story about burglaries 28 % agreed that they felt the world needed more news articles like it when presented with the conventional story. The same figure was 39 % when respondents were instead presented with a constructive burglary story. The result is similar when it comes to the child mortality stories. With the story about rape, however, we find no significant difference. People of higher education are less likely to agree with the statement when presented with the conventional burglary story. Meanwhile, they are about as likely to agree with the statement when presented with the constructive story.

### **Methodological note**

We conducted an experiment in which respondents were asked to read three fictional newspaper articles. The articles covered three topics: rape, burglary and child mortality. For each topic we randomly assigned each respondent to read either a constructive or conventional article about the topic written by fellows at Constructive Institute. After having read each of the articles, we asked the respondents six questions about their thoughts on the article.

By comparing the answers of those who read the constructive version to the answers of those who read the conventional one, it is possible to obtain a valid estimate of the different impressions that the news articles elicit.

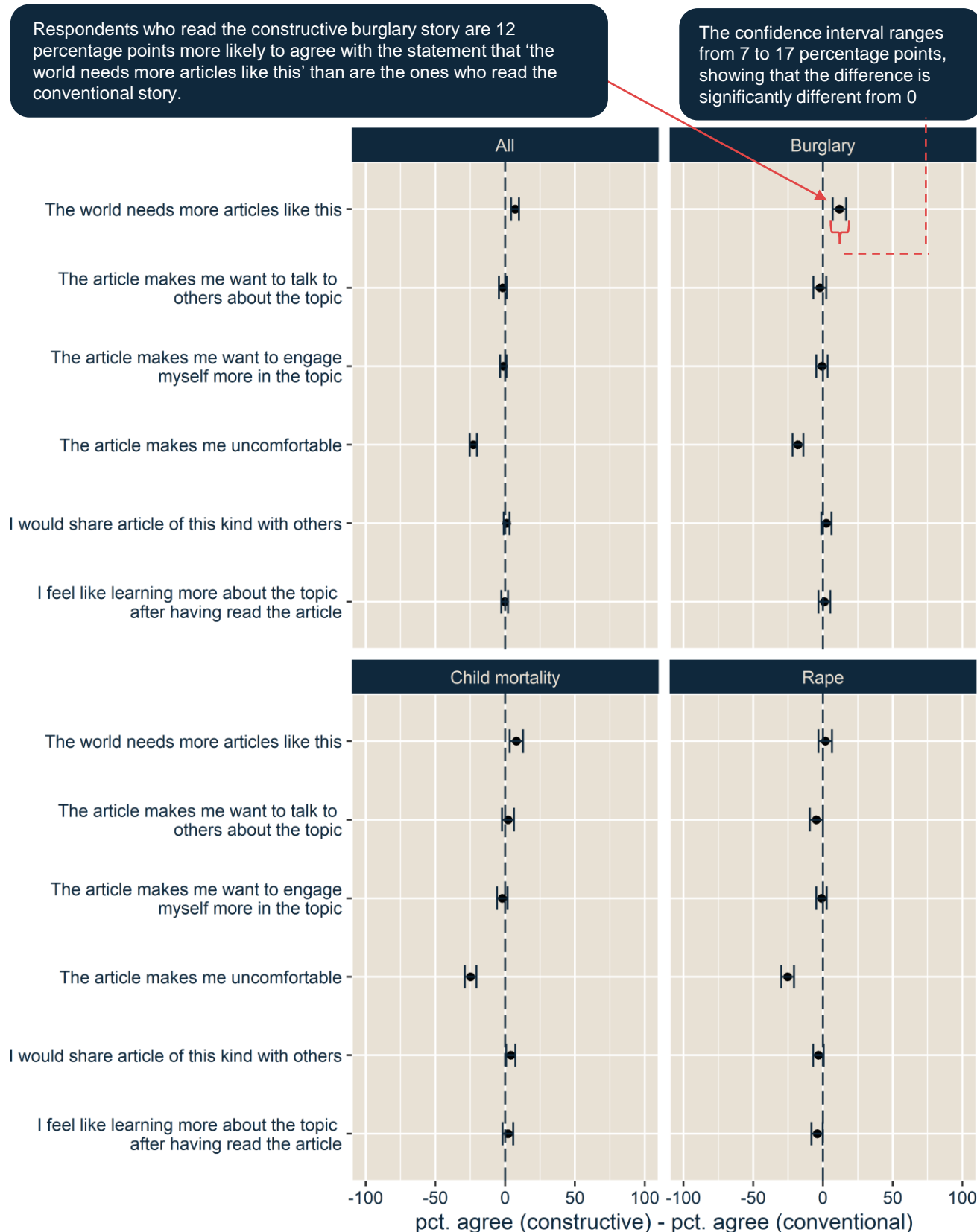
Had we instead asked respondents to read a constructive as well as a conventional article about the same topic, we would have run the risk of revealing the intention of the study to the respondents. This could have caused the respondents to answer what they deemed socially desirable, probably biasing the results in favor of constructive news.

This could show that a bigger 'gain' can be obtained by shifting from a conventional news focus to a constructive news focus for a well-educated audience.

### **Constructive news makes readers less uncomfortable**

We also asked the respondents if the article made them feel uncomfortable. Our data shows that with all three articles respondents who read the constructive version felt less uncomfortable. For example, 45 % of those who read the conventional news article about rape reported that they felt uncomfortable, while only 20 % reported feeling uncomfortable after having read the constructive version.

**Figure 11: Difference between share of population who agree with given statements when reading constructive and conventional news articles on the same topic**



**Note:** N=2,014. In "all" standard errors are cluster robust at the individual level. Wording: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the article you have just read? Percentages reflect the share who partly agree or agree. Only findings that are statistically significant at the conventional level ( $p$ -value > 0.05) are commented on.

<sup>1</sup> <https://epinioglobal.com/en/>

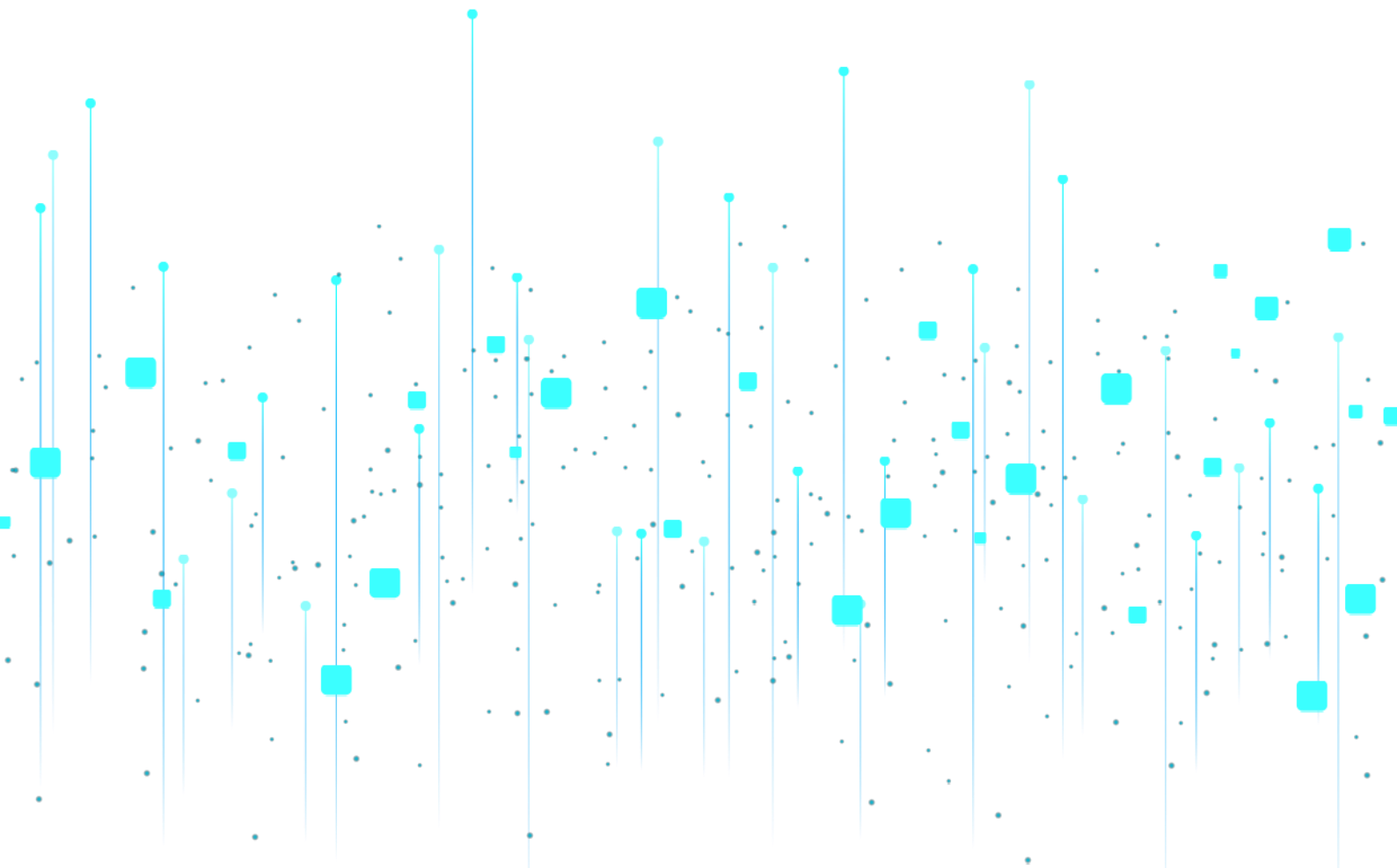
We also find that age plays a role in the reception of news content. Generally, the older generations show a more polarized reaction of comfort on the two news versions (although this is not the case for the child mortality story). The people aged 56+ were more likely than the young to feel uncomfortable after reading a conventional stories and/or less likely to feel uncomfortable after having read the constructive version, however the data is not sufficient to support which conclusion is correct. Either way, the result suggests that a bigger 'comfort gain' can be obtained by shifting from a conventional to a constructive news focus when the audience is older.

**We only find sparse evidence that constructive and conventional articles have different effects on the remaining indicators**

The remaining four survey questions that we asked respondents all concern behavior. We asked respondents to report whether they would share the article, if it made them want to talk to someone about the topic or share the article. Lastly, we asked if the article made them want to engage with the issue. Here we find no significant differences between the respondents assigned to conventional and constructive articles when it comes to the burglary and child mortality stories. However, readers of the constructive rape story were 4 percentage points less likely to report that they felt like learning more about the topic. They were also 5 percentage points less likely to agree that the article made them want to talk to others about the topic.

# Section 6

## Personality and news





The study finds several interesting connections between personality types and news experiences. People high in the trait neuroticism, who are generally more prone to negative thoughts, are more likely to avoid news and less likely to find it important to be updated on the news compared to people who score low on neuroticism. People who score high on the trait agreeableness tend to think that it is important to keep up with the news but are more likely to experience today's news as too conflict oriented. The same holds true for people scoring high in conscientiousness, who are well organized and dutiful.

Personality traits have received growing attention in recent years. Personality traits provide us with a useful heuristic for understanding ourselves and others. In academia, they provide novel insights into human behavior and in work-culture where firms deploy personality tests to locate their next hire. In this section, we focus on the link between personality traits and news experiences/behavior. We look for hints that personality might drive some of the phenomena that we reported in the last sections.

The main result of this section is shown in figure 13 on the next page. The figure illustrates the correlations between people's personalities and their answers to some of the survey questions discussed in the earlier sections.

We focus on five traits known as the big five personality traits, which you can read more about in the info box to the right.

### **Methodological note: The big 5 personality traits**

#### **Openness (to experience)**

People with high levels of openness are more likely to seek out a variety of experiences, be comfortable with the unfamiliar, and pay attention to their inner feelings more than those who are lower on the trait. Those with low levels of openness prefer familiar routines, people, and ideas.

#### **Conscientiousness**

Conscientiousness is related to impulse control. It influences whether people set and keep long-range goals, deliberate over choices, behave cautiously or impulsively, and take obligations to others seriously.

#### **Extraversion**

People who identify as extroverts tend to search for novel experiences and social connections that allow them to interact with other individuals as much as possible.

#### **Agreeableness**

An agreeable individual is a people-oriented person who usually enjoys good social skills. These people often see others through a rose-colored view. The less amenable person, however, is more inclined to being manipulative, callous and competitive.

#### **Neuroticism**

Is typically defined as a tendency toward anxiety, depression, self-doubt, and other negative feelings.

Text by: [psychology today.com](https://psychologytoday.com)

Neuroticism is positively and significantly correlated with the question "periodically try to avoid the news". The correlation is 0.21. This means that people who are high in conscientiousness also tend to be more likely to agree with the question as the figure to the right shows. The correlation could be stronger +1 being the maximum and -1 the minimum.

Figure 12: Correlation between news avoidance and neuroticism

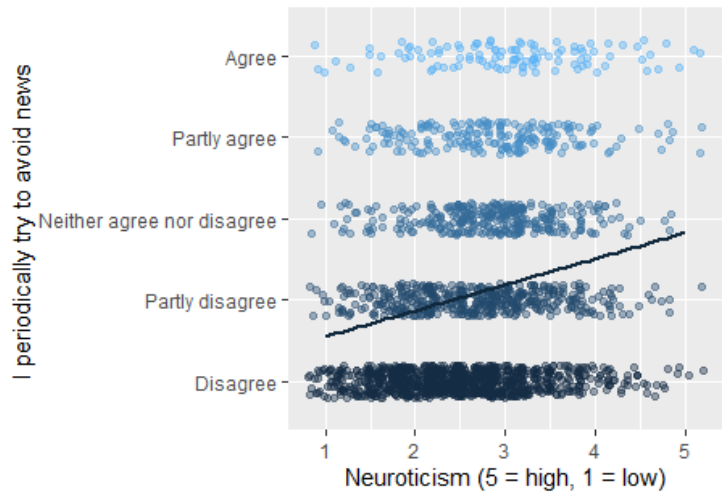
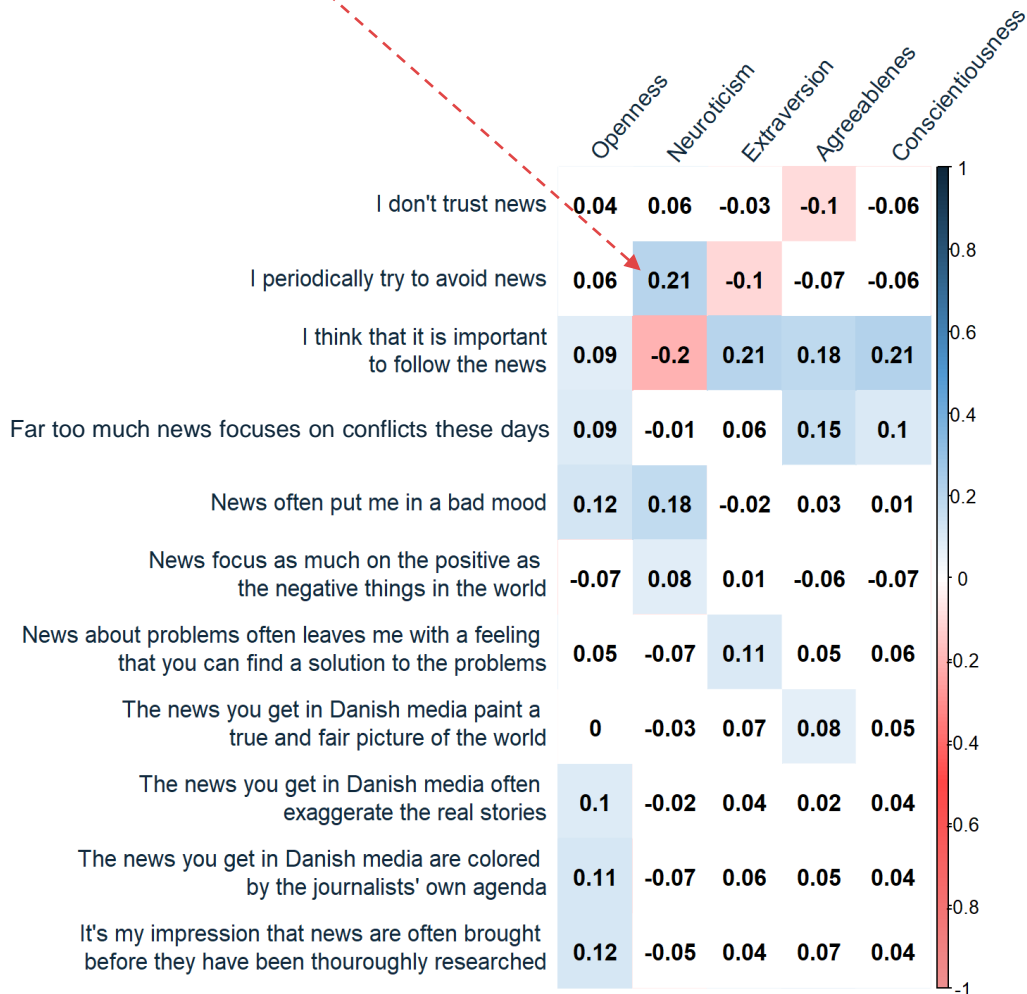


Figure 13: The correlation between personality traits and news experiences



**Note:** N=2.014. Correlations are pairwise spearman's rho correlations. This metric is chosen because the answers are ordinal Likert style questions. All the questions are scaled from 1-5, where 5 is agree and 1 is disagree. "Don't know" is coded as missing. Only statistically significant correlations (p-value > 0.05) are colored.

### **People high in neuroticism have a harder time with news**

The personality trait neuroticism should not be confused with the now outdated term ‘neurosis’ which has been used to describe a specific class of mental disorders. Neuroticism in the sense used here is not a sickness although people who exhibit the trait are prone to anxiety, moodiness and tend to worry a lot.

The analysis shows that there is a significant and negative correlation between neuroticism and believing that it is important to keep up with the news. That tells us that people who score high on neuroticism (that is, who tend to worry a lot) are generally less inclined to agree that it is important to be updated on news compared to those with a low score on the personality trait. Neuroticism is also positively correlated with avoiding news and feeling that news often puts one in bad mood.

### **Extraverts are less prone to news avoidance**

We also find that people high on extraversion – that is, highly sociable people - are less likely to exhibit news avoidance behavior compared to people who score low on the trait. Furthermore, people high on the trait find it more important to keep up with the news.

### **People high on the traits agreeableness and conscientiousness are more trusting and dislike conflict-focused news**

Agreeable people are cooperative, kind and sympathetic with a preference for social cohesion of the group. People with a low score on the trait are more selfish. It should come as no surprise that people high in this trait are significantly more likely to agree that much news content focuses too much on conflict.

They are also more trusting of the news and think that it is important to follow the news. Conscientious people take obligations seriously and are efficient and organized rather than easy-going. Like agreeableness, a high score on this trait is correlated with higher trust in news and a distaste for the conflict focus of news.

### **Methodological note: measurement validity**

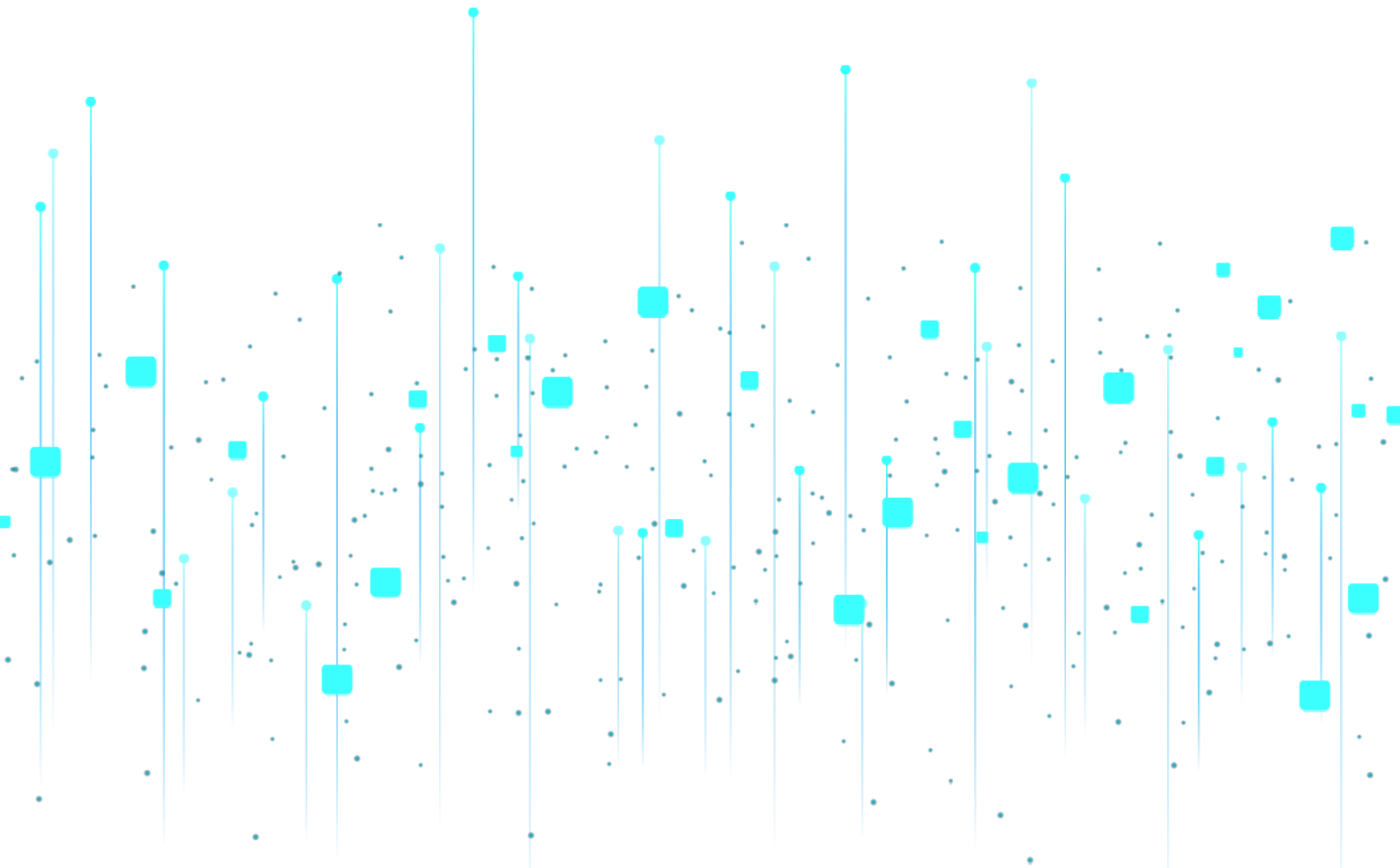
In the study we used a 15-item Big Five Inventory (BFI-S) that has been tested by [Lang et. al. \(2011\)](#). This is a short personality test that, to the best of our knowledge, has not been validated on Danish interview subjects. We did our own small-scale validation. We used principal axis factoring and performed an exploratory factor (we used oblimin and quartimax rotations). The analysis suggests 5 factors with an eigen value above 1 and the items cluster on the correct dimensions. However, we should advise the reader that this is only a ‘quick-and-dirty’ test of the measurement validity.

### **Open people show less confidence in the credibility of news**

People who score high on the trait openness tend to seek out a variety of experiences while people with a low score tend to prefer well-known experiences. It may then sound counterintuitive that the study shows that open-minded people are more likely to doubt the credibility of news. While this could be a result of open people seeking out more diverse news sources of more dubious quality in their search for new perspectives on a subject, it could also stem from a perception of conventional media as being too narrow-minded.

## Section 7

# The impact of COVID-19 on Danes' Behavior and Preferences for Constructive News



## **SUMMARY & KEY FINDINGS**

The outbreak of COVID-19 in the beginning of 2020 has had profound effects on people's lives and behavior in many aspects of life. In this section we take a closer look at the impact of the crisis on Danes' media and news habits as well as their preferences for constructive news. To achieve this goal, we compare survey data collected right before and right after/during the outbreak of COVID-19 in Denmark.

### **A SUMMARY OF THE MOST IMPORTANT FINDINGS FROM OUR RESEARCH**

- The COVID-19 outbreak has increased news avoidance in Denmark. But news credibility has also increased rapidly following the outbreak.
- Demand for constructive news has not been affected, but we do find a decrease in demand for news that meets certain normative ideals.
- Demand for news content that inspires action, is nuanced, provides solutions to societal problems and reveal abuse of power has decreased.

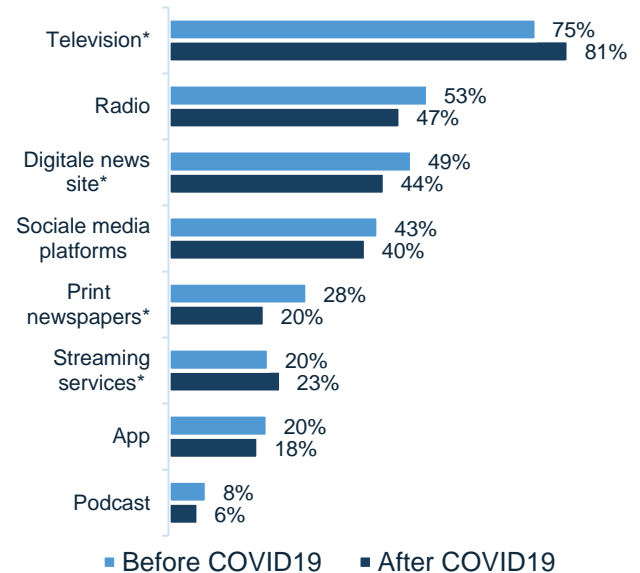
In this section we explore what COVID-19 has meant for Danes' behavior regarding the consumption of news and their preferences for constructive news. We look closer at what the crisis has meant for the news habits of the population, news avoidance, negativity bias, news credibility, the demand for constructive news and the wishes of the population for the news in the future. The study suggests that the crisis has changed news habits, increasing consumption of news on TV and digital news sites at the cost of print newspapers. On the one hand, the outbreak has increased news avoidance. On the other hand, we show that news credibility has increased rapidly. Demand for constructive news, however, has not been affected, but we do find a decrease in demand for news that meets certain normative ideals.

### Changing media habits

The COVID-19 crisis has had clear implications for Danes' news habits. While television was the most widespread source of news before the outbreak of COVID-19 (used by 75% of the population), we find that even more Danes (81 %) watch news on television after the outbreak of the virus. At the same time, we find a moderate increase in the use of streaming services during this period.

Concurrently with the increase in consumption of news on TV and streaming services, our study shows that fewer Danes use digital news media and print newspapers during the crisis than before. The use of social media platforms, radio and apps for the purpose of news consumption remains unchanged.

**Figure 14: Share of people who have consumed their news by reading, hearing or watching the following media the last week (before and after the corona outbreak)**



N(before=2.014) n(after=1.013). Question wording: "Think back on the week that just passed. Which of the following types of media, if any, have you used for reading, listening or watching the news the last week?". \*Specifies that the difference is statistically significant.

The increase in TV news viewers may be due to the fact that the Danish authorities convened for multiple press meetings related to the virus in the period after the outbreak, which is a format well-suited for live TV and streaming. Meanwhile, it might be that fewer people have had access to newspapers through work or organizations due to the quarantine following the outbreak.

### COVID-19 has increased news avoidance

Besides having an impact on the source of news, the outbreak of COVID-19 has also changed Danes' news preferences.

First, COVID-19 has increased Danes' news avoidance meaning that the crisis has made Danes more prone to avoid news. Before the outbreak of COVID-19, 16 % of the Danes agreed that they "periodically try to avoid news". This share grew to 25 % after the outbreak of the virus.

## But also increased news credibility

The COVID-19 has had positive effects on the perceived credibility of news. The figure below shows the credibility of news before and after the crisis on several survey questions that measure different aspects of news credibility. The results show a decline in the share of Danes who believe that media exaggerate stories, that news are influenced by journalists' agendas and that they are published before being thoroughly researched. At the same time the data shows that the share who agree that news content paints a fair and accurate picture of the world has increased by 6 percentage points.

The increase in the perceived credibility of news can have several explanations. First, it might be a rally around the flag effect. In times of crisis people might gather around old intuitions such as the prime minister, national media etc. and indeed concurrent polls show massive increases in support for Danish prime minister Mette Frederiksen. Second, people might prefer news from different and more credible news sources due to the outbreak. Third, news themselves might have 'rallied around the flag' for a while. Due to the crisis news might – for a while - have turned focus away from the murky political discussions towards an agenda that is less critical. The crisis has not affected the Danes' experience of negativity bias.

### Methodological note: COVID 19 Effects

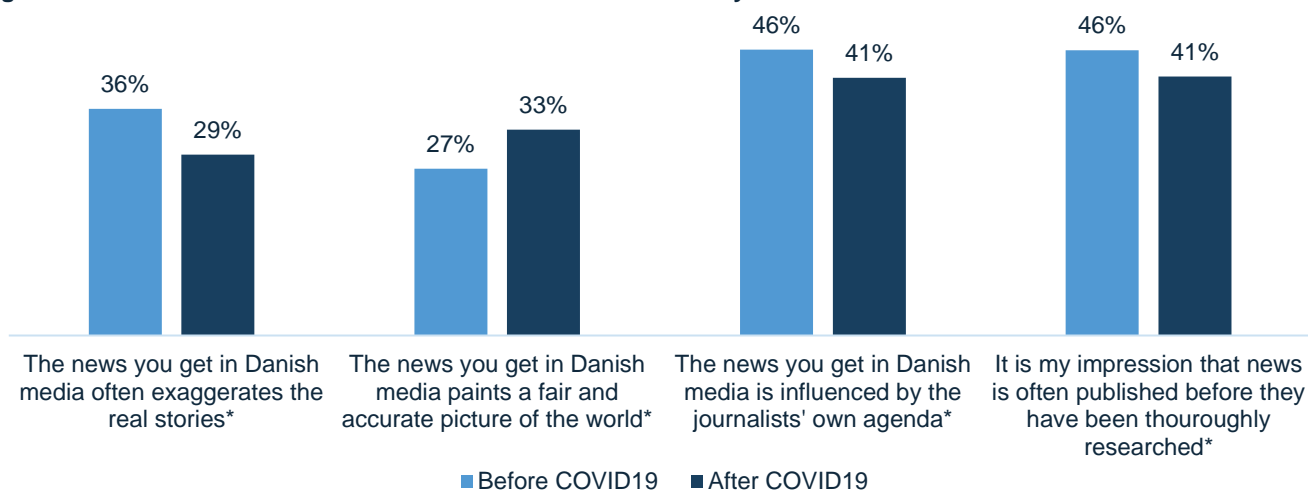
In interpreting the data presented here, we attribute changes between the two data points (before and after/during the outbreak) to the COVID-19 outbreak.

However, other factors might also explain these changes. Specifically the rise in temperature in April may also play a role in changing media habits. We cannot rule out such effects using the current design. We find that COVID-19 is the most likely explanation for any changes.

We choose to attribute changes to the COVID-19 because it is the *most likely explanation*.

Also we cannot be sure that these changes are lasting. Things might return to normal when the COVID-19 crisis is over.

Figure 15. The effects of the COVID-19 outbreak on news credibility



Note: N(before)=2.014, n(after)=1.013. Each pillar shows the percentage of people who agree or partially agree with the statement before and after the outbreak of COVID-19. \* Specifies that the difference is statistically significant.

### **The crisis has no effect on demand for constructive news**

Whereas the COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on Danes' attitude to news, our study suggests that the pandemic has not affected the tendency to choose constructive news in general.

In a comparison of the population's preferences before and after the outbreak of COVID-19, we find almost no difference in the probability of people preferring constructive news to conventional news. The probability of people preferring constructive news to conventional news was 57 % before the crisis and 56 % after the crisis.

The analysis does not explicitly relate to constructive news in relation to the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic by the authorities, but it does relate to general news preferences. That is to say, the study does not address whether the crisis has led to specific demand for constructive news about the pandemic, but it rather shows that there is no general trend towards greater demand for constructive news.



# Section 8

# Methodology



## The main study

The main study builds on 2,014 interviews conducted with Danes aged 18 or above. Interviews were gathered online using Epinion's panel partners from February 10 to March 11, 2020. It is the results from this data collection that figure in all results throughout the report except for Section 7 on the COVID-19 crisis.

## The corona study

While the first study was conducted before the Danish prime minister, Mette Frederiksen, imposed a lockdown on the country due to the COVID-19 crisis, we also conducted a follow-up study during the lockdown. We conducted 1,013 interviews from March 30 to the April 8, 2020. In section 7 we combine the two data sources to track the impact of the COVID-19 crisis.

## Representativeness

Table 1 compares the distribution of respondents with respect to age/gender, level of education and region. With respect to region and age/gender, the sample distribution is very close to that of the population. There is, however, an underrepresentation of people with a lower level of formal education and an overrepresentation of well-educated respondents.

## Weighting

After the data collection the data was weighted to improve the representativeness of the sample. The survey weights ensure that the weight given to respondents in the sample reflect the distribution in the general population when it comes to age, gender, region and education. The weights were calculated using the method raking. All results throughout the report are calculated using the survey weights.

## Statistical uncertainty

We have not interviewed all Danes. What we have is a sample. Hence, statistical uncertainty should be taken into consideration. Throughout the report if nothing else is specified we only report on findings that are statistically significant at the conventional level ( $p\text{-value} > 0.05$ ).

## Balance tests

In section 5, The Effect of Constructive News Consumption, we have reported on an experiment in which respondents were randomly assigned to read either constructive or conventional newspaper articles on the same topic. How can we know that respondents were in fact randomly assigned, and that the experiment is not confounded by a large dropout rate in one or more groups?

Table 2 on the next page shows the result of a balance test on age, gender, education and region. There are no significant differences between any groups. The result thus shows that we cannot prove any difference in the age, gender, education or regional distribution of respondents in the eight groups.

In table 2, we use so called Bonferroni corrected standard errors. These standard errors minimize the risk of finding a difference that is merely due to randomness when making many comparisons as we do here. Using unadjusted standard errors we do find some significant differences. That is to be expected. However, we find nothing that points towards systematic between-groups differences.

## Experimental stimuli

In section 4, Demand for the News of Tomorrow, we reported on an experiment in which respondents were assigned to read some constructive and conventional news headlines. The news headlines are reported in table 3.

The news articles used in the experiment in section 5, The Effect of Constructive News Consumption, are reported in table 4.

**Table 1. Demographic distribution in samples and population**

		<b>Main study (N=2.014)</b>	<b>Corona study (N=1.013)</b>	<b>Population</b>
Age and gender	Men 18-34	10%	9%	13%
	Men 35-55	17%	17%	19%
	Men 56 or above	22%	18%	17%
	Women 18-34	17%	18%	13%
	Women 35-55	15%	18%	19%
	Women 56 or above	18%	19%	19%
Level of education	Lower (Primary school or vocational education)	36%	37%	59%
	Higher (High school or higher education)	64%	63%	41%
Region	The North Denmark Region	9%	9%	10%
	Central Denmark Region	28%	27%	23%
	The Region of Southern Denmark	20%	20%	21%
	The Capital Region of Denmark	31%	30%	32%
	Region Zealand	13%	14%	14%

**Table 2. Balance test: Constructive and conventional news articles**

	Story	Version							
		Conv.	Conv.	Conv.	Conv.	Constr.	Constr.	Constr.	Constr.
	<b>Rape</b>	Conv.	Conv.	Conv.	Conv.	Constr.	Constr.	Constr.	Constr.
	<b>Burglary</b>	Conv.	Conv.	Constr.	Constr.	Conv.	Conv.	Constr.	Constr.
	<b>Child mortality</b>	Conv.	Constr.	Conv.	Constr.	Conv.	Constr.	Conv.	Constr.
Age and gender	Men 18-34	9%	12%	12%	10%	7%	16%	8%	8%
	Men 35-55	18%	17%	19%	16%	15%	13%	20%	17%
	Men 56 or above	26%	23%	23%	22%	22%	17%	20%	20%
	Women 18-34	16%	16%	18%	19%	18%	19%	17%	17%
	Women 35-55	16%	13%	14%	14%	15%	16%	15%	19%
	Women 56 or above	15%	21%	14%	18%	22%	20%	20%	19%
Level of education	Lower (Primary school or vocational education)	37%	41%	37%	32%	39%	31%	37%	37%
	Higher (High school or higher education)	63%	59%	63%	68%	61%	69%	63%	63%
Region	The North Denmark Region	10%	10%	8%	9%	6%	8%	8%	13%
	Central Denmark Region	29%	29%	28%	25%	24%	27%	33%	26%
	The Region of Southern Denmark	18%	19%	18%	19%	22%	25%	18%	19%
	The Capital Region of Denmark	31%	29%	33%	33%	32%	28%	28%	29%
	Region Zealand	12%	13%	14%	14%	16%	11%	12%	13%

**Note:** Unweighted data reported. \* Specifies that the difference is statistically significant. We use Bonferroni adjusted standard errors. Using unadjusted standard errors there are some significant differences (as is expected), but nothing that points towards systematic between-groups differences.

**Table 3. Conventional and constructive news headlines**

Conventional news headlines	Constructive news headlines
The number of children diagnosed with ADHD keeps rising fiercely	Parents of children with ADHD can mitigate the child's symptoms through play and praise
Binge drinking: The Danish youth drinks twice as much as the average in Europe	Iceland has the solution: How to get the youth to give up alcohol
1,8M Danes live in areas threatened by a scarcity of doctors	Scarcity of doctors in decline: More medical students aspire to be practicing doctors
Tuberculosis kills 1,6M people globally each year	Danish scientists have found the first vaccine against tuberculosis in 100 years
Danish pupils do even worse than earlier in science	The work put in by Danish pupils in reading and math gets top marks in the EU
25 smaller islands have been abandoned through the last 50 years	Smaller islands have put an end to depopulation
Young women flee from vocational training	How to get more women into vocational training
Half of non-western immigrants and descendants do not work	Half of non-western immigrants and descendants are now employed
Gang of five behind 26 home invasions	The number of home invasions are almost halved since 2009
In ten years, the number of children with anxiety has doubled	New methods can help children with anxiety

**Table 4. Conventional and constructive news articles**

Theme	Conventional news article	Constructive news article
Rape	<p><b>Huge rise in the number of rape cases – almost 1000 women reported being raped in one year</b></p> <p>In a single year, the number of reported rapes in Denmark rose 20 percent. Meanwhile the number of sexual offenses grew by more than 40 percent. A growing number of Danish women reports that they have been the victim of rape or sexual assault according to a new poll from Danish Statistics. In just a single year, from 2016 to 2017, the number of reported rapes rose from 791 to 944, a rise of almost 20 percent. This is the highest number of rapes reported in more than ten years. Other forms of sexual assault on women and children like indecent exposure is becoming increasingly widespread. In the same year, the number of other indecent exposures have risen by more than 40 percent from 2.114 cases to 2.992 cases. During the period 2007-2015, the annual number of reported sex crimes have been stable between 2.000 cases and 3.000 cases. That number, though, have risen in both 2016 and 2017. Centre for Rape Victims strongly advice women to contact their local branch around the country if they have been the victim of rape or if they think they might have.</p>	<p><b>New rules make women report more sexual assaults</b></p> <p>Danish women are increasingly going to the police to report incidents if they have been the victim of rape or other forms of sexual assault. Almost 1000 women went to the police in 2017 to report a case of rape and that is an increase of almost 20 percent compared to the year before. The actual rise is from 791 reports to 944 reports in one year. According to Centre for Rape Victims the increase in reports is due to the change in rules regarding reporting rape. In 2016 the Danish Parliament voted for the “rape bill” which meant that the police had to change the way they treated reports of rape. Earlier many attempts of reporting rape were simple not treated as proper cases but rather put away as “cases to look into”. Meanwhile the police have advised victims of rape and other sexual assaults to report it. Meanwhile the public has been very focused on rape i.e. as in multiple articles in newspapers and the conversation about the me-too movement. Both the police and the Centre for Rape Victims estimate that the public debate regarding the subject and the actions taken to better the police’s handling of rape cases have led to more reported rapes. The number of indecent exposures has risen from 2016 to 2017 where the numbers are 2.114 to 2.992. According to Danish Statistics the rise in the number of offenses is due to the number indecent exposures that have been shared online.</p>

**Table 4. Conventional and constructive news articles**

Theme	Conventional news article	Constructive news article
<b>Burglary</b>	<p><b>Danes are the most exposed to break-ins in Europe</b></p> <p>Only few cases of break-ins in Denmark are solved and it is estimated that every fifth break-in is not even reported to the police, as Danish families have given up. Not anywhere else in Europe are people coming home to this frightening sight:</p> <p>The whole apartment is trashed by burglars while drawers and closets are emptied for your personal belongings and jewelry, computers, TV's, and other items of value have been stolen.</p> <p>Danes are the most exposed people to break-ins per capita in Europe.</p> <p>Denmark has the sad record, according to Eurostat, of 700 break-ins per 100.000 inhabitants while the number in Germany is 120 and in Finland is 80.</p> <p>On average every three hours there is a Danish family exposed to a break-in. These families should not have high hopes about getting their valued possessions with great sentimental value back. Only 6,5 percent of all break-ins lead to charges been pressed against the burglars.</p> <p>Some areas of the country are much worse than other. In Fionia, the number of break-ins has increased by 20 percent from 2017 to 2018.</p> <p>Despite the record Denmark has as the country in Europe with the most break-ins per capita, the number of in Denmark have been decreasing as is now the lowest it has been since 1995.</p>	<p><b>An active effort has led to a fall in break-ins in Denmark to the lowest level so far</b></p> <p>Campaigns against break-ins and cooperation between neighbors about hindering break-ins look to bear fruit. The number of break-ins keep falling.</p> <p>Still fewer Danes experience break-ins.</p> <p>I the second quarter of 2019, 12.269 break-ins were reported which is the lowest number since Danish Statistics began making seasonal adjustments to the numbers in 1995.</p> <p>For a comparison, there were the same twice as many break-ins in the same quarter in 1997, where the number of cases were 28.212.</p> <p>According to the Council for Prevention of Crime, the constant fall in the number of break-ins is due to Danes being a lot better at securing their homes.</p> <p>This is, among other things, a result of citizen gatherings with the police hosted by the Council for Prevention of Crime and in cooperation with a Danish fund that offers free lock checks on houses and have given information about securing houses against break-ins.</p> <p>There is a difference between how big the fall in break-ins have been, depending on where you live the country.</p> <p>For example, the number of cases of break-ins in Northern Jutland has decreased by more than 20 percent.</p> <p>Compared to other European countries, Denmark is still the country with the most break-ins per capita.</p>
<b>Child mortality</b>	<p><b>Every five seconds a child under the age of 15 dies somewhere in the world</b></p> <p>Children from countries with the highest mortality rates have 60 times higher risk of dying I their first 5 years of living than children from countries with the lowest mortality rates.</p> <p>Around 6,3 million children under the age of 15 died in 2017, this is equivalent to one child dying every five seconds somewhere in the world.</p> <p>This is what a new poll from WHO and UNICEF shows. Most of these deaths, 5,4 million, happen in the first five years of the child's lifetime. Newborns account for half of the deaths.</p> <p>Half of the deaths in 2017 took place in sub Saharan Africa, where one in 13 children died before their fifth birthday. In high income countries, the number for the same age group is one in 185.</p> <p>"Without an immediate effort, 56 million children under the age of five will die from now to 2030. Half of these children will be newborns", says Laurence Chandy, CEO at UNICEF.</p> <p>Most of the children die of preventable causes like complications at birth, pneumonia, diarrhea, and malaria.</p> <p>Despite the challenges with child mortality, today there are fewer children worldwide who die. The number of deaths for children under the age of 15 has fallen from 14,2 million in 1990 to 6,2 million in 2017.</p>	<p><b>More children than ever before in world history survive</b></p> <p>The effort to create better living conditions for children has led to halving the child mortality rate worldwide in less than three decades.</p> <p>In 1990 14,2 million children died worldwide before they reached the age of 15. But in 2018 that number had fallen to 6,2 million.</p> <p>Countries in the eastern and south-eastern parts of Asia have made the most significant progress, as the number of deaths for children under the age of five has fallen by 80 percent during the period.</p> <p>The most significant cause leading to more children surviving worldwide, is batter access to basic equipment in an improved health sector.</p> <p>"We have done remarkable progress to save children since 1990 but there are still millions of children who die because of who they are and where they are born. With simple solutions like medication, pure drinking water, electricity and vaccines we can change the reality for every child", says Laurence Chandy, CEO at UNICEF.</p> <p>The most common occurrences of high mortality rates are found in sub Saharan Africa. In this region, one in 13 children die before their five-year birthday, a number that is 15 times higher than in Europe.</p>

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