

# Constructive News

Ulrik Haagerup

*Why negativity destroys the media and democracy  
- And how to improve journalism of tomorrow*



InnoVatio Publishing AG

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- And how to improve journalism of tomorrow*

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# Preface

By Helmut Schmidt

Publisher of Die Zeit and former Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany

Democracy is a European invention. So is the newspaper, the radio and the television. The Western world also invented the computer and the network of computers - the Internet. And globalization has exported it all to the rest of planet Earth. It ought to be good, but it is not. This is because Western civilization has developed into media-democracies, where often the media is more influential than the politicians. The influence of the news media is now stronger than it has been in the history of mankind, and as it has seemingly taken over, it can set the agenda and influence how the population sees itself and the world. Often, the media will focus mostly on the negative and superficial; perhaps this is because media people believe that is what people want and where the money is.

The consequences are many and severe. Firstly, people get a false picture of reality, and secondly, the West now suffers from a lack of leadership. Media-democracies do not produce leaders, but populists. Silvio Berlusconi comes to mind when one thinks of an example of the kind of populist production of media-democracy.

2 500 years ago, the ancient Greeks did not have media, nor did the ancient Romans 200 years ago. However, they had leaders. Arguably, the best political leaders in Europe in the last 100 years were Winston Churchill and Charles de Gaulle. They both came to power before democracy turned into media-democracy, where the constant media focus of exposure is on any politician who wants to attract votes and the attention of the masses to earn their seats.

We now see newsrooms and politicians tweeting – any story and any policy in less than 140 characters. It produces superficiality, not only in the minds of the receivers, but also in the minds of those who want to talk and impress.

The superficiality and negativity in the media has influenced politics. The lack of political leadership in the West will diminish its global influence. None of the European nations have understood that the population of the world has quadrupled during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and at the same time globalized almost all of the 200 nation states in the world.

At the same time, the European nations' population is getting older and smaller, as is the case with in Russian and the Japan. Although the Europeans made up about 30 percent of the world's population (collectively) in 1950, it is estimated that by 2050, Europeans will account for approximately 10 percent of the people on this planet. By the end of this century, that number would have dropped to around 7 percent. This decline shows that European integration is not moving forward – due to the lack of leadership. The result is that China, and possibly also the Muslim world, could take over.

A change in the way in which the press operates, and a stronger focus of playing a more constructive role in our societies, is welcome. I will soon be 95 and I am a has-been in all aspects of life, but my age makes me a realist. Ulrik Haagerup is half my age. He has the right to be an optimist, believing that it is possible to change journalism to be more inspirational and to benefit the global society.

I wish him the best of luck with this book. The need is certainly there for more constructive news.

## Part 1

# What is the Problem?

# Why are you so Negative?

## The Toilet is on Fire

*Houston, we have a problem.*  
Apollo 13 astronaut Jim Lovell

The truth is: We know.

Just about every time we - publishers, editors, reporters and other members of the press - happen to talk to people outside of our profession, we get asked: "Why are you always so negative?"

We routinely answer: "We are not negative, we are just journalists", and then follow up with very long explanations with the simple point that journalism is about dealing with reality, and just imagine if we stopped covering stories like terrorists flying passenger planes into tall buildings in order to avoid being negative. That usually shuts people up for a while.

We have given up on the politicians and the 'guys with ties' a long time ago, because they always say: "Why don't you write something positive as well, for instance about all the good stuff we are doing?," to which we answer: "Buy an ad", which is also intended to embarrass them. What do they take us for, PR agents or advertising sales people?

For me it began on the first day of journalism school back in 1982. "A story nobody is mad about, is a commercial", the teacher said. That sounded cool, because he had worked for a real newspaper and now we were part of a brotherhood where nobody could be trusted. A good story was a bad story, we had to understand. And everybody arguing against that logic had only free publicity in mind: Politicians, who only dreamt of getting in the paper to attract votes for the next election, CEOs who only wanted to raise profits, interest groups who only wanted help to put their special interests on the public agenda.

Critique was the social interaction and a philosophy of life. The person doing the critique was seen as brighter than the rest, and now we were part of the ruling class who should reveal corruption, fight perpetually against the untamable greed among the elite. Uncover problems. Criticize power. The Fourth Estate. The chosen few. Here we come. This is how we were going to shake the world.

We loved to quote the biggest in the profession, like the former editor of The Sunday Times in London, Harold Evans, who said: "Before interviewing a politician always ask: Why is this bastard lying to me?"

We watched 'All the President's Men' on video, where the heroes of our new profession looked like Dustin Hoffmann and Robert Redford, and we understood what journalism could and should do: It can tip presidents, if only we were as smart, as diligent and as uncompromising as Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein – and looked closely enough after a Deep Throat. One problem arose pretty soon, which is that we do not have any presidents in Denmark. But then we had to settle for CEOs, ministers, members of parliament, lawyers, policemen, priests and everybody else with authority and a tie.

Almost every year the Danish version of the Pulitzer Prize, The Cavling Prize, is donated to a journalist who unveils a problem and finds someone to blame for it. A real news story has to be angled on a conflict, a drama, a crook or a victim. And in order for it to not be boring, it has to be written short, square and without too many shades. That is the way the bloodhounds, out there want it, and that is the way that they would get it. Because that's the way journalism is, and this is how we have done it for as long as anyone can remember.

And it is difficult to change habits.

Do not be mistaken: I love my profession and I do not want journalism to be the boy scouts. I have been an investigative reporter for years, I have earned a Cavling Prize - with two colleagues uncovering fraud in the financial sector- and I am a proud member of the International Consortium for Investigative Journalism. In my mind, real journalists are indeed watchdogs. Independent, uncorrupt and always seeking the best obtainable version of the truth. We represent the most important profession in any democracy. Go to any country and see if the national press is allowed to report



critically about the president without the risk of prison, death or other unpleasantness. If journalism is not free, democracy is dead.

I agreed then. And I agree today, more than 30 years later.

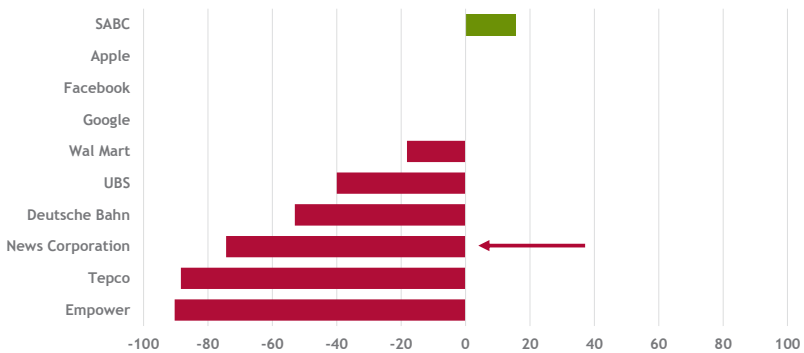
But increasingly I am worried about how we as a media industry, publishing houses, newsrooms and as editors and reporters manage the power and the influence we have on society, on politics and our common future. Are we really to the benefit of the societies we love to claim that we are here to serve? Or have the last few decades polluted our identity, our ethics, our view on the world and our internal newsroom cultures? What has happened?

## You can be Better

A conversation in June 2010 serves one version of an answer. It took place one year before the death of Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple, who in two decades had transformed both the personal computer, the Walkman, the telephone, the music industry and the animation film business. Steve Jobs had agreed to talk to Rupert Murdoch on the problems facing the news business. Murdoch is the CEO of News Corp., the global giant of the media world with ownership of both Sky News, Fox News, The Wall Street Journal, the New York Post, The Times of London and tabloids such as the British newspaper, The Sun. Murdoch wanted Jobs to have Apple's iTunes Store do for the print business what the digital platform had done for the music industry, creating a legal model to use for easily buying content in a digital world. According to Steve Jobs, who spoke about the conversation to the biographer Walter Isaacson, Murdoch was told that the problems for the news business were not only related to eroding financial models or a too slow transformation from an analog to a digital age. It was about mindset, content and its role in society:

"The axis today is not liberal and conservative", Jobs explained his view on the change in news media to Murdoch during a dinner. "The axis is constructive-destructive, and you've cast your lot with the destructive people. Fox has become an incredible destructive force in our society. You can be better, and this is going to be your legacy, if you are not careful". One year later Murdoch was forced to shut down his British tabloid, The News of The World, following the scandal of the methods used by the paper, among them the routine of hacking the phones of celebrities. And as a consequence, the reputation of his company suffered.

## NewsCorp's image almost as bad as nuclear disaster



The media tone on most of the 10 most visible companies on international TV news was severely negative. For Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, the tone was almost as negative at Tepeco, indicating eroded trust in major media provider.

Basis: 10,960 reports on companies on international TV news

Mediatenor  
CORPORATE REPUTATION CONSULTING

How did it go so wrong, and was Jobs right in pointing to the news axis no longer being between different political directions and ideologies, but between the different roles we play in society? A choice between being constructive or destructive?

Traditional news journalism builds on four tendencies in society that merged into the newsrooms in the 1970s.

1. The first was a commercialization of news where tabloid media in the late 60s and early 70s became successful with their different approach to journalism than the so-called serious media for the elites: Tabloid media wanted to entertain a broader audience with a preference for crime, scandals, sex, celebrities and sports, it focused on the little man against the system, simplified issues and turned political coverage into matters of persons rather than visions and ideology. This approach quickly spilled over into local TV news and from there, into mainstream media.
2. The second was the anti-authority riot of the 1968 movement which attracted many political motivated activists to journalism, seeing news media as an

important tool to put social injustice on the public agenda and keeping the political establishment accountable.

3. The third important trend to form newsroom culture in the last decades originates from the Watergate scandal uncovered by the Washington Post and the publication of the Pentagon papers by The New York Times. Both stories were seen by new generations of journalists as proof of both the power of the free press and how political power could not be trusted. It created new heroes and defined truly great reporting.
4. The fourth is a massive investment in PR and communication in interest groups, industry and political parties: They all know how that perception is reality, and they use every mean to make the public see the world through their eyes. They also know that media coverage is both cheaper and more credible to the citizens and try to influence the stories covered by news media. They are extremely effective in serving the right problems, the right victims, the catchy conflict and the drama which all tricks traditional instincts of most news organizations.

Now the question is, where have these four trends taken journalism, news media and the public debate?

## What is the Job?

In a 1997 study about attitudes towards the press by the American nonprofit research group, Public Agenda, it was found that 79 percent of respondents agreed on the statement: "A reporter's job is to cover bad news".

In many Western countries the press is in fact better than its reputation. A great deal of good journalism helps people become updated, become smarter and helps them make up their own minds. Still I claim that far too much news reporting has become stupid, negative and trivial. I claim that we who are paid to look at the world on behalf of other people do it too often through worn lenses; scratched and greasy by narrow-mindedness and conventional thinking. And that we, the people of the press, collectively do not always work to the benefit of the societies and the public we dare ask to pay for our salaries. In dramatically increasing numbers they also refuse to do so.

The crisis of the media is not only due to digitalization and corroded business models. The crisis is also due to the fact that our customers – the readers, viewers and users

– in larger and larger numbers turn their backs on traditional news journalism. This detraction erodes the traditional media, and the focus shifts to dramatizing, exhibiting conflicts, finding crooks and pity victims, adding stories on the best deals on flat screen TVs so that advertisers can get their share.

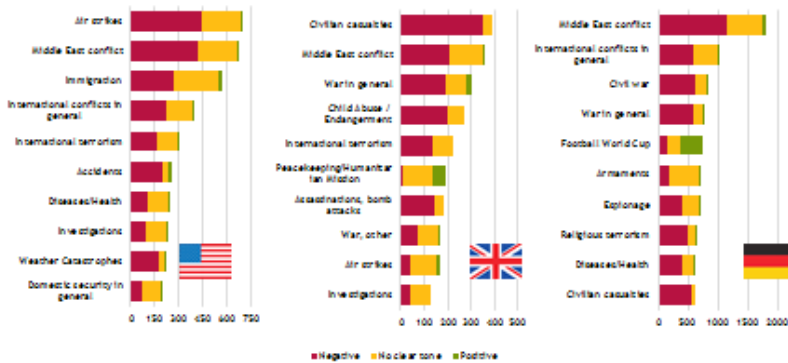
The consequences of media focus on things that do not work, on the maladjusted, and on the negative, are comprehensive, not only to dropping circulation figures, advertising revenues and declining reach. It also changes the mental condition for those who get their picture of reality through the press. It defocuses politics and prevents the changes and the progress, which should have been to the benefit of society. The development threatens the political process and democracy itself.

Roland Schatz is founder and CEO of Media Tenor, a Swiss-based international company doing analysis on media content all over the world for governments, interest groups, media companies and other businesses with offices in Europe, Russia, the United States of America, Vietnam, South Africa and Australia. His message is not popular in newsrooms:

“Negativity is an illness caught by even serious newspapers, magazines and not at least TV News broadcasters all over the Western world. Our surveys show that up to 60 percent of all news stories deal with problems and things that are wrong, depending on the country and the media. The problem is that the world is not like that, but news organizations feverishly go on painting a far too dark picture of reality”.

Schatz, who has shared his research in newsrooms and universities on all continents—from Harvard University to Ho Chi Minh Academy - since 1993, underlines that the press does not lie directly: “The problem is not that their numbers are wrong. The problem is that the picture is wrong, because most news reporters systematically ignore the facts which do not fit into the traditional negative news angle. Reporters tell for instance that the big German companies fire people, but they ignore, that small and family-owned German companies who, at the same time, hire more people than the big ones lay off. The public and the elected leaders get the wrong impression that the German unemployment rate is going up, when in fact, it is going down. This journalistic negativity sickness creates fear and ignorance; it is bad for the press itself, bad for people, bad for politics, bad for business and bad for the future. I consider this one of the most dangerous tendencies in our democracies”.

## Conflict and crime shape international news agenda



The child abuse scandal in England finally hit the surface. International conflict and terrorism shaped the news agenda in the U.S., the UK and Germany. The Ebola disease made it among the top news as well. Weather catastrophes were featured in the U.S..

Source: 9,923/7,297/24,067 stories on U.S./U.K./German TV

Mediatenor  
 ANALYTICS FOR MEDIA MONITORING

## Don't Panic

Think for a moment of Africa for instance. What do you see? People starving, children dying from diseases, mothers infected with HIV, endless wars, depression and little hope will be the answer of many. Because this is what is being reported by our news media supported by help organizations and NGO campaigns. Not that it is wrong that hunger is still a problem in areas when harvest fails. Not that it is false that malaria and AIDS still kill thousands. Not that it is wrong that civil wars in Sudan, The Democratic Republic of Congo and The Central African Republic are terrifying and seem to go on and on. But is that the full picture of a continent of one billion people? Hans Rosling, a Swedish professor who has devoted his statistical skills to get the facts of the world straight, says that it is not the case. Few people know that East African countries, such as Rwanda, experience a growth rate of their GNP close to China's. That the middle class has doubled in Africa south of the Sahara. That more and more governments of African countries now change not due to revolution, but as the results of democratic elections. And that diabetes is becoming a bigger problem than AIDS in many African countries, where obesity is more widespread than starvation.

In one of Rosling's speeches for the United Nations, titled 'Don't Panic' (also published on his independent website Gapminder.org) he states that "The differences between different areas in Africa are huge. But in general Africa is really improving. Child mortality is decreasing rapidly, life expectancy is growing rapidly and so is the number of people, who can read and write".

As a professor at the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, Rosling began to test his students and fellow professors' knowledge on the basic facts of the world. And it turned out that they performed worse than a test group of chimpanzees, which means worse than random.

"Such wrong answers could not be the results of guessing. They must be due to preconceived ideas that in a systematic way create and maintain ignorance. Only preconceived ideas can make us perform worse than random", explains the professor.

His organization, Gapminder, has tested the knowledge of the general population in Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States of America, using large opinion polls representing the total population in the three countries who normally consider themselves blessed with an educated and literate public. The answers are interesting.

The population in all three countries turn out to be sure, that the average number of children per woman in the world is 4,5. The true number is 2,5. Two thirds of the population in those three countries believed that poverty in the world has doubled since the early 1990s. The fact is that according to the World Bank, the number of people living in poverty globally has been almost halved in the last 30 years, from 42 percent of the world population in 1981 to 17 percent in 2010 – the lowest ever.

People were asked how many children United Nations experts expect there to be in the world by the year 2100. They could choose between two, three or four billion children. Less than seven percent of the American population had the correct answer, that the United Nations expects no increase in the amount of children in the world, which is now two billion. The reason is that birth control is widespread, wealth is growing, and that the United Nations and national programs to reduce the number of children, have had a massive effect. In 40 years, the number of children per woman in one of the most populated countries in the world, Bangladesh, has dropped from seven to two.

“Statistical facts don’t come to people naturally. Quite the opposite”, says Rosling, “Most people understand the world by generalizing personal experiences which are very biased. In the media the ‘news-worthy’ events exaggerate the unusual and put the focus on swift changes. Slow and steady changes in major trends don’t get much attention. The danger is that we, and our politicians, make the wrong decisions if we base them on a false picture of the world”.

In Denmark the frustration of the traditional news media has led to a very untraditional initiative by the Government and the United Nations, called the World’s Best News Story initiative. It aims to circumvent the traditional news media’s focus on suffering and want, and to change Danes’ attitudes. The most interesting is not the message itself, but the distribution channels. Instead of trying to persuade news media to tell the facts or run costly ads, the organizers chose to use milk cartons, apples and bread bags to get their message out: “More than ever before it’s important to provide a platform for success stories. How many people know, for example, that 1.8 billion people have gained access to clean water in the last years”, says Thomas Ravn-Pedersen, head of the World’s Best News Story Secretariat.

“The newest UN figures show that even though there are significant challenges ahead, the efforts we have made up to now have created significant and lasting improvements in the living conditions of hundreds of millions of people in developing countries. The vast majority of children in developing countries now receive an education, and fewer die of malaria”, says Ravn-Pedersen, who is a trained journalist with many years’ experience. “We want to tell that story, and it has turned out to be too difficult to get traditional media to tell it for us. So we have found other and just as effective ways to tell the facts of the world”.

The World’s Best News tell stories like:

- 17.000 fewer children now dies every day in 2014 than in 1990.
- 90 percent of the world’s population now have access to clean drinking water
- De-forestation of wood has dropped 3,1 million acres per year annually.
- Since 2000 the number of people who die from malaria is down by 42 percent.

Founder of IT giant Microsoft, Bill Gates, wonders in his annual news letter from his Bill Gates & Melinda Gates Foundation why the world in fact is a much better place, than most people think: “Bad, dramatic news is easy for reporters to cover

in newspapers and TV. Good news however happens in slow motion and without drama. Countries become richer, but it is difficult to show in pictures. People's health improves, but nobody invites to a press conference about the children, who did not die from malaria."

## Journalistic Cynicism

The fact that it is necessary to use milk cartons and not newsprint or broadcasting to get the facts straight, does not surprise a growing number of people in public office who express a growing frustration towards what they see as a tabloidization of news. This frustration is evident when one listens to the Speaker of the Danish Parliament, former Minister of Finance and Secretary of State, Mogens Lykketoft: "It endangers democracy when news media, in order to let sensationalism attract a larger audience, in reality becomes the least responsible of the four pillars of power in society.... As a public we do not get any smarter or wiser. And society does not improve".

In a keynote at the global broadcast conference NewsXchange in Marrakech in November 2013, CNN's skilled reporter Christiane Amanpour raised a warning flag to her, and my, profession: "We need to keep thinking about what it is that we do and how we want to be relevant every day... We need to find a balance between holding government and all those in authority accountable without flipping to the other side and creating a cynicism based on a false premise, that all governments, all authorities, all elected are somehow corrupt, war criminals and all the rest. By doing so, we risk undermining further civil society by adding to the public notion that every form of authority is useless, hopeless and doesn't work".

Her worry of a growing journalistic cynicism finds support in the results of a study published by The Associated Press in 2008. It found that young consumers of news felt 'debilitated by information overload and unsatisfying news experiences': Adding to news fatigue among these participants was the widespread belief that all news today is negative, the report noted. Over and over again in the study, the negativity of news (tragedy, crisis, war, terror) added to the desire to tune out.

A survey amongst Danes, made by Analyze Denmark for DR in December 2011, supports the public dissatisfaction of traditional news:



- 75 percent of viewers said that they are tired of watching politicians quarrel on TV;
- 50 percent said that news programs focus too much on conflicts;
- Five percent wanted more stories on conflicts;
- 83 percent asked for more stories inspiring solutions to the challenges facing society and the world.

And tune out they do. Young readers and viewers leave traditional news media in the millions or even worse, they never tune in. Instead they turn to other media sources, with one of the most popular being social media like Facebook where they can concentrate on their own interest, their own friends, their own self-image and be less inclined to be confronted with conflicting views of the world besides their own.

## Irrelevant Content

Erik Rasmussen is the CEO of the international, Danish funded think tank, Monday Morning. He is former Editor-in-Chief of news magazines and business papers and a frequent participant at The World Economic Forum meetings in Davos. His critique of traditional news media sounds ruthless:

“If the media, especially the news organizations, believe to have a responsibility for democracy and being one of its main pillars, it is now they have to prove it by revitalizing their own role. If not, they undermine their own importance and risk a justified critique for weakening and not strengthen democracy... We see newspapers all over the Western world lose circulation and trying to cut costs, but the reason is not only competition from news digital media. The main reason is that traditional news organizations have not in due time redefined their task and responsibility. Just like it is not a strategy to go on cutting costs, the future is not a new financial model on the web. The solution is a serious shift in focus. The problem is not the media itself or the change of distribution of news. The problem is when the content becomes useless”.

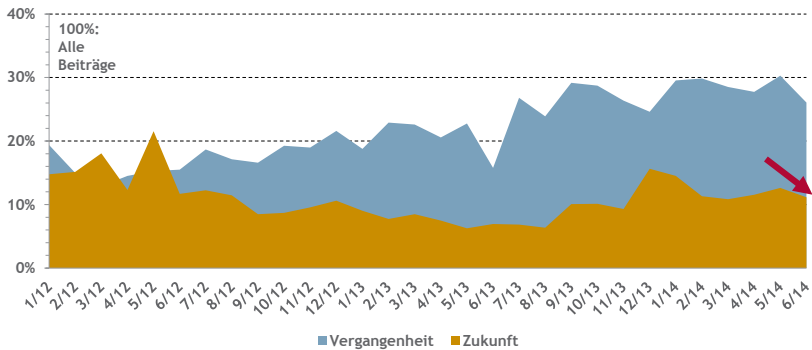
And he does not stop there: “Most news media now follow a strategy of a journalism focusing on processes and people and covering conflicts and crises in combination with a widespread use of commentators and opinion polls in an effort to set new agendas. The ambition seems to be clear in every newsroom: To be the first to trigger

the next political scandal and/or tip a minister or even better, the whole government. Nothing indicates that this strategy will save the media. On the contrary, it risks locking journalists in a position among the least trustworthy in society”.

The latest list of Danish public trust in different professions, places nurses, doctors and policemen at the top, and journalists and politicians at the very bottom - leaving them to compete with real estate agents and used cars sales people. In Great Britain a survey by YouGov following the phone-tapping scandal in the Murdoch-owned tabloids in 2011, showed that only 38 percent of people in Britain trust content in their newspapers.

What News Media provide in regards to Corporates  
 Company coverage by breakdown of time: news on the past, the present and future, 1/2012-6/2014

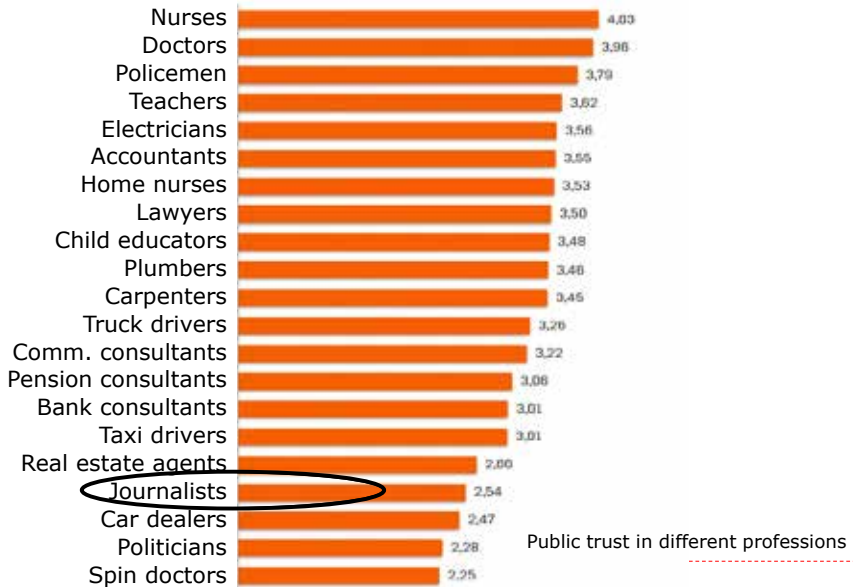
**Less than 10% of all corporate news focuses on the future**



▶ No matter if the audience is interested in reading about companies because they are looking for a new job, partnering in projects or buying stocks: as long as media provide less than 10% on companies in regards their plans: why should one read the paper?

Base: 79.801 reports on Companies in 19 opinion leading German Media

# Trust is Gone



The customary view of traditional journalism would be to stop at documenting just another problem and then asking the responsible minister or CEO for a response. He would then blame his predecessors, call for more money or more control. Another more and more popular strategy is to blame the media, which only leads to editors and publishers shooting back at the politicians accusing them for interference with the free and independent press. However, then we would get nowhere.

Just imagine if we in the press began with ourselves, dared to look in the mirror and start changing the things we do not like. Imagine if we had the guts to get involved in a dialogue on how we could improve together. Imagine if we spent less effort on shooting at each other, disagreeing and fighting over who is mostly to blame. Imagine if we could inspire each other to find new roads for journalism, for media, for politics, for society, and for the future.

Perhaps the time has come where we in the press are just as critical towards ourselves and assess our own bad habits that we are always seeing in everybody else? Here is the short answer: Yes.

Imagine if we agreed on the fact that good journalism can also be inspirational and provide good stories about possible solutions. Stories that show the world is not only crazy, evil and dangerous, but that it is also full of options, hope, joy and people who dare do new stuff, dreaming of a better tomorrow.

Imagine if we dared to supplement the traditional news criteria with a new one: Constructive news. As Albert Einstein once said: "Without changing our pattern of thought, we will not be able to solve the problems we created with our current pattern of thought".

The time has come to form a rebellion against the tabloidization of news. It is time to get out of the strait jacket that the tabloids have put on even the so-called serious media. The focus of the yellow press on dallying entertainment, postulating drama, simplistic conflicts, haunt on everybody with power, and the claim to be the true defender against the evil system has for years been seen as the key to success in the media industry. Also for the so-called serious media in their struggle against boredom, routine and their elitist humanity talking down to or over the heads of the masses, it turns out that the public found alternatives in the tabloids and magazines. These mediums follow their mission to help people kill time, which also became the concept for TV news: Make it short, make it uncomplicated, make it fast, make it dramatic and undifferentiated, so that the conflict is clear.

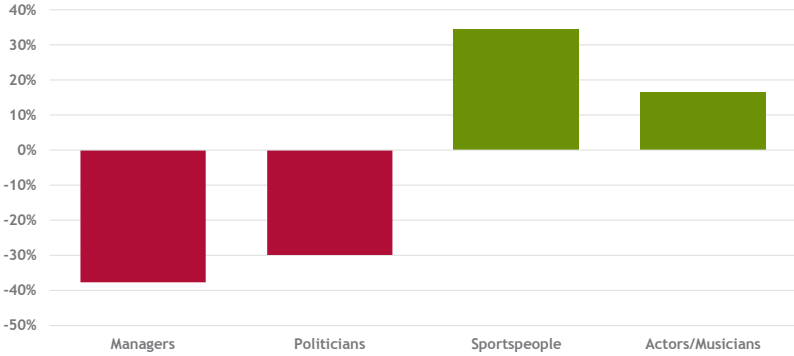
The concept is evident, when a person running for office comes up with a new idea, he gets dragged into the TV studio opposite his worst political opponent, who clearly starts by telling the interviewer and the audience why this is the most ridiculous idea ever and proceeds to attack his opponent's intellect, trustworthiness or morals. Can the interviewer turn the fight physical? After all, it is called good television. A little verbal boxing for one minute and 40 seconds will also do, before the anchor routinely interrupts with the 'I guess you won't agree tonight, we have run out of time, but the debate continues. Thanks for being with us tonight'.

Who got any wiser? What was the new idea? Was it any good? Where do they agree? Where is the solution to the problem that the public really wants to have fixed? The two politicians forget those questions as they withdraw from the TV spotlight to each of their ring corners. Here they meet their growing army of PR agents, spin

doctors and one-liner writers who immediately continue to train them to get more airtime by attacking faster, sounding smarter and communicating directly into the real news criteria of the media: Conflict, drama, victims and crooks.

German TV news on public figures: July 1, 2011 - June 30, 2014  
*Coverage tone on occupational groups*

## What are managers and politicians missing?



Journalists seem to be reflexively negative on politicians and managers no matter the company they work for or party they represent. Actors and sportspeople are usually praised, yet all jobs are done by humans with the same margins of error, egoism and success.

Basis: 17,060 reports individuals on German / South Africa / U.K. / U.S. TV news

Mediatenor  
1

# The Moments of Truth

## Why we Need to Change

*Don't Stop Thinking about tomorrow.*

*Yesterday's gone.*

Fleetwood Mac

At a local street party with neighbours, I ended up next to a teenager and moments later I realised that my profession is on a wrong track.

"So, how's school", I asked, attempting to start a conversation.

"It's deadly", she answered in the local patois. "They gave us homework. And it is such a drag".

"We have to watch the news and read an entire newspaper every day for a WHOLE week. It is so depressing. Why does it all have to be so negative?", she asked with irritation from behind her dreggy fringe and 9th grader's attempt to apply mascara.

There it was again. So I spent the next few minutes routinely explaining, between mouthfuls, how we journalists were basically just doing our job by telling the public what was going on in the world, and that one of the things that happens as you grow up is that you start to follow the news so as to be able to take part in democratic debate.

"I'm looking forward to Monday", she said quietly, "then I can watch Paradise Hotel again".

The following Friday, as I was watching the national TV news, for which I was responsible, her words came back to me. Like many other Danish householders, I had settled down with my family for an evening in front of the box to watch the news, X-Factor and a good movie with a glass of wine and a bowl of candy. But first we wanted to watch how the world was today:

This was the News (September 8th 2008):

- *Denmark faces new terrorist threats*
- *New shooting in Copenhagen*
- *New trains from problem supplier*
- *Cervical cancer threat to young girls*
- *Drivers' strike continues*
- *Woman abused in Swedish shed*
- *Social Democrats hold crisis congress*
- *Old presidential candidate for crisis-hit US*
- *Court case following on 200 air crash deaths*
- *Suppressed North Koreans do gymnastics*
- *20 kilo mechanical spider causes Liverpool panic*
- *And finally, the weather: The rain continues...*
- *Have a nice evening!"*

"Whoa," I thought on that evening of 8 September 2008. "Is the world really like that? What on Earth are we doing?"

Considered individually, there was nothing whatsoever the matter with any of the news items. They were all somewhat newsworthy; being current, relevant, important or fascinating. But, that said, did TV AVISEN 18:30 provide a fair representation of the state of the planet? Or was there something in the accusation that we journalists have spent all our time telling the story of the fly in the soup - without actually mentioning the soup? Do we focus so much on covering the holes in the cheese that we forget to report on the cheese? Is our journalistic glass always half empty instead of half full?

Or do our routines and habits and our view of the world lead us to paint an overly negative picture of the world, because the criteria we use to select items of 'news' from the information torrent lead us to focus instinctively on things that aren't working: The people who lose out, the people who are to blame, and the drama that surrounds them?

## Help!

I started reading newspapers in a new way. Bankruptcy, downturns, accidents, melting ice caps, roadside bombs and endless political bickering jumped out of the page at me. Admittedly there were also stories about the price of flat screen TVs or columns enthusiastically espousing the virtues of homemade jam. But the trend went beyond the TV news. The morning news on the local radio station had only one item that wasn't angled on something that didn't work, someone who was angry, in disagreement or just making a fuss. It was a story that built on some peculiar research that purported to show that people from eastern Jutland went to more office Christmas parties than all other Danes. However, the journalist's spin on this harmless little item was that '*People from eastern Jutland wake up with more December hangovers than folk in the rest of the country*'.

At times, the morning paper ritual took on a tragicomic aspect, as on 5 March 2012 when the front page of the Danish broadsheet, Jyllands-Posten, carried an illustration of two theatre masks, the mouths of both of which were firmly turned down – very symbolic of the world view that the paper presented to its readers:

- Page 1: *Royal Danish Theatre in uproar*
- Page 2: A page devoted to the subject of suicide
- Page 3: *Body of 22-year-old man discovered in woods* and *New values battle in state schools*
- Below these was an article about the failure of dog walkers and mountain bikers to agree about access to a wood under the heading: *The battle of the wood*
- Page 4: *Social Democrats' situation serious*
- Page 6: *Civil servant humiliated* and filler articles: *No more metal hips*, *Trains grind to halt*, *Gluten allergy more common* and *Gambler behind bars*
- Page 8: *Norwegians in call for secret service transparency*
- Page 9: Carries culture news, in this case two articles under the headings: *Summer turned to winter* and *Buried alive*
- Page 10: *No confidence in Royal Danish Theatre Management*
- Followed, on page 12, by the obituaries...



Before anyone gets the impression that Danes are a particularly imprudent bunch, take a look at the news items on a typical July day in 2013 on the world's supposedly leading news channel – America's CNN:

- *44 people injured in head-on train collision in Switzerland*
- *High tension in Egypt*
- *Pope on gay clergy*
- *Spain mourns train crash victims*
- *Train driver accused of homicide*
- *150 child prostitutes arrested in U.S.*
- *Syrian forces take rebel stronghold*
- *38 killed in Italian plunge*
- *Stolen jewels worth nearly 138m*

Be careful out there: It is a mean world. And if you think otherwise, CNN pinpoints these stories 'not to be missed': "*Man sets fire to nursing home - 11 die*", "*China launches debt audit*", and "*1 200 inmates break out of Libyan prison*".

Maybe a European look at the world is less violent? Here is how a snapshot of the world looked like the same day on BBC.com:

- *Wave of deadly car bombs hits Iraq*
- *Italy coach plunge leaves 39 dead*
- *Spain crash driver was careless*
- *Mursi backs stage defiant marches*
- *Syria troops "retake" key Homs area*
- *China orders government debt audit*
- *Boeing in global aircraft inspection*
- *Apple in China worker abuse claims*
- *Rising fuel cost Ryanair profit*

Did Copenhagen Mayor, Frank Jensen, have a bit of a point in a comment piece headed "One per cent journalism", in which he criticised a series of 2012 articles in the Danish broadsheet, Berlingske, about dissatisfaction with Copenhagen

kindergartens? The Mayor's point? The fact that the paper in question's own survey showed that 84% of respondents were satisfied with the care their children received, could perhaps have been granted greater prominence. "Berlingske have consistently given space to a few mad parents, cheating the reader and giving a false impression", wrote the Mayor. He was subsequently put in his place by the newspaper's editor who claimed that it was the press' duty to cast light on problems.

In fact, you'll find the same conflict-filled front pages in any newspaper or online version anywhere in the world. In the United States of America, where competition for attention and ad revenue in local markets in all the big cities is intense, TV crews compete to get to the scene before ambulance crews and angle all political stories in terms of politicians' attacks on their opponents. When, in the spring of 2011, I visited a local TV station in the Los Angeles area which had about twice the ratings of Denmark's leading public service channel DR1, I found the channel had subdivided the newsroom into four broad categories: Crime, traffic, weather and scandals. 'Scandals' was the name of the desk where the so-called political reporters worked. This was the channel that kept local residents informed of local politics and the challenges Los Angeles, the United States and the world faced. What sort of worldview are their viewers likely to end up with?

## If it Bleeds it Leads

'If it bleeds it leads' is the cynical slogan typical of the editorial standpoint across American local news media that promotes the myth that to be successful, mass media communications need an unhealthy dose of blood and guts. American media take this axiom seriously and are full of sensationalist attempts to out-shout the opposition with headlines like '*Plastic surgery disasters*' '*Killer bras?*', '*Can frozen yoghurt make you ill?*' or the jewel in the crown, '*What's happening in our public toilets?*', which TV news channel, Channel 13 News, used in New Mexico a few years ago to scare parents into believing that paedophiles were using the states' 50 public toilets as a base for their activities. Backed by dramatic music and with a rifle sight as a logo, a deep voice promised that Channel 13 would investigate. The report later revealed that journalists had investigated three toilets and found nothing. The entire series, which ran for several evenings, was based on a police report of two possible incidents at the same location during which a man had taken off his clothes.

This might be just an example of terrible journalism of course, but perhaps it is also an example of the stories which we as a profession look to because we believe

that it's the only way to generate attention, ratings, views and advertising revenue/ legitimacy for the license fee.

As the Vice Chairman for the Committee of Concerned Journalist, and now Executive Director for The American Press Institute, Tom Rosenstiel writes in a report on American local TV news that "Newsroom decision makers operate by a set of elaborate, long-held assumptions about what motivates viewers, reinforced by anecdote, inference and corporate mandate". He has data to back his critique on American news journalism: Almost two-thirds of the 33 000 news stories at 154 local TV-stations all over the United States opened on crime, accidents or a disaster. In the book 'We interrupt this Newscast' from 2007, Rosenstiel and his research team show that whereas 30 percent of crime, accident and disaster stories are one minute or longer, 73 percent of stories about politics are less than a minute - more than one-third less than 30 seconds - long.

"Local TV news is the main source of information for many Americans about what is happening in their neighbourhood, their economy and their culture. How well news serves its audience matters not only for the station's bottom line but also for the bottom line of the democratic enterprise", Rosenstiel warns and serves one explanation to those who find that the broad American public has little knowledge about the outside world. "The assumption in the newsroom management...are reinforced by limited resources, lack of time, lack of reporter expertise, and growing demand for more programming - all conditions that are on the increase... But many of the current newsroom conventions lead to the practices that annoy not only critics of TV news but also viewers as well."

American doctor and lecturer at New York University School of Medicine, Marc Siegel, knows the exact meaning of that statement. Siegel has written an interesting book entitled *False Alarm*, and in it he attacks the industries that live off frightening people unnecessarily. His critique isn't limited to the pharmaceuticals industry (which he criticises for influencing practice in the West in the direction of treating illness rather than curing it), the media is also the subject of his ire:

"Fear invades our homes as never before, and it is affecting growing numbers of people. Newspaper headlines are apocalyptic warnings. The media's obsession with fear pours fuel on our worries, which burn out only to be replaced by further alarming news items".

## The Lene-Effect

Increasingly puzzled with the culture and traditions in our own newsroom, I started to talk to my colleagues at DR about our work and editorial habits. One of the experienced reporters recalled finding some statistics a couple of years earlier which detailed employment rates amongst female immigrants by municipal authority. It didn't look good: More immigrant women were unemployed than the average in all the authorities. There was one exception: 0 percent unemployment amongst female immigrants in the small-town Danish municipality, Fredericia. The journalist was so surprised that he contacted the city hall to ask whether their data had been entered correctly.

"Oh yes, it's quite true," they explained.

"It's the Lene effect."

"The what?"

"Well, you see a couple of years ago we got a new immigrant consultant called Lene. And she just gets on really well with these women. She's won their trust and she started to take them out to meetings at companies all over town. She booked herself a meeting with the CEO, kicked the door in and said: This is Fatima, she's fantastic. She can help you do something you need doing. What it is, we don't yet know. That's what this meeting is all about. And what's the worst thing that can happen? If I'm wrong it won't cost you a dime as her wages will be paid by the government for the first three months. Now come on, give her a chance..."

And within 18 months all the women were employed. The reporter enthusiastically called the then TV News Editor with his story about the Lene effect.

"That's not a story," was the response. "Where's the conflict in that? Why should we give airtime to a commercial for the mayor running that city?"

And so the Lene effect story never ran.

The former leader of the Danish political party, Ny Alliance, Naser Kahder, who now works for a conservative American Think Tank in Washington D.C., can tell that things hasn't improved much since then. With the help of friends, he organized a conference in 2011 at parliament in Copenhagen with more than 100 examples of entrepreneurial immigrants who had started their own business and created jobs. He explains his experience in the statement: "I wanted to show that there is another side of the

stereotypical picture of poor, passive or fanatic immigrants we see in the media. We invited all the newspapers, radio stations and TV shows. We sent out press releases, we called them and had the most fantastic people lined up. Do you know how many reporters or photographers came? Not one. Can you imagine the media turnout if instead we had arranged a conference on fanatic Muslims? There are not so many of them as there are immigrant entrepreneurs, but the rest of the population only learn about the fanatics, because that is the story news organizations want to run”.

## Committed to Improving the State of the World

The extent of the global media crisis was crystal clear a couple of years ago when the independent organisation, the World Economic Forum, invited 700 experts to a Dubai congress. Under the slogan “Committed to improving the state of the world”, the World Economic Forum transported professors, thinkers, researchers and other experts in 60 subjects to the desert sands. The idea was that these experts would provide a status report for the planet and deliver advice to the United Nations and the political leaders that meet every year in the Swiss town of Davos. There were experts in water resources, ghetto formation, AIDS, terrorism, climate change, mobile communications and numerous other subjects which, the organisers felt, would be likely to affect the planet’s future. For four days these experts discussed the state of the world and developed a set of global recommendations and innovative solutions to bring hope and a pathway to success in a time of crisis.

One of the expert groups was tasked to discuss the future of the journalism. We spent three days in a gigantic air-conditioned desert conference hall, and the 12 of us, drawn from all over the world, who’d been asked to provide a status update for the media sector in a forum officially titled “Global agenda council on the future of media”, came up with a pessimistic prognosis: “We live in an over-communicating under-informed world. The greatest effects of the communication technology revolution have probably hit no other sector harder than the news media itself. No other industry has experienced such a fundamental challenge to their role, such an erosion of their values and such threats to their business model such that the sector itself is now threatened with extinction”.

We asked the rhetorical question: “How can we save journalism to help it save the world?”

A possible answer to that question was inspired by the final day of the conference where the assembled experts were invited to discuss their findings with other groups to achieve new perspectives on the challenges they faced.

There was broad agreement that, in addition to increased regulation of the financial sector and new standards amongst its principle actors, there was a need for innovative solutions and an end to protectionist national policies. All groups saw the media's role as communicator and agenda-setter as crucial.

Surprisingly the queue in front of our media room started to grow explosively; expert after expert from the other groups came to pay us a visit. Their message was the same and regardless of whether they were experts in African AIDS, refugee flows or ghetto formation, one after another the experts asked us: "We've spent three days assessing the challenges the world faces in our various sectors. And they're enormous. But there are also opportunities. For example, there's something interesting going on related to this specific project, and we want to get that message out there so others can be inspired to follow our example. We've discussed how to spread this message – about actions that can actually help alleviate the crisis. We can write about it on our website, but no-one will ever find it. We haven't got the funds to take out advertising. We're left with the job of trying to get the media to publish a positive story, a story that can inspire others and give people some hope. But you won't do it: Why do you always focus only on the negatives?"

The group whose focus was on AIDS reported that the situation in Africa was frightful but that something interesting was happening in a project in Sudan. A despairing AIDS expert accounted that "When we actually got the New York Times to come to Sudan, the journalist and photographer were only interested in the story about orphans with AIDS, which they had already cooked up on their way over because their editor thought that that was what their readers wanted to read. Why are you like that?" This shows that at a global level there is a big demand for a press that is critical, investigative and, at the same time, open to reporting new ideas and solutions that can inspire others. But it is not something we as media outlets like to do. Why?

Well, because we have learned not to. Criticism and conflict is the backbone of journalism, which is in our blood, as well as in the well-used handbook for Danish journalism students authored by Mogens Mejlby, who puts it: "Just as the battle

between good and evil plays a fundamental role in adventure stories, pulp fiction and films, so conflicts between people are an essential ingredient in many news items. The conflict entails a dramatic element that wakes our curiosity. It allows the reader to pick sides and identify with one or other of the protagonists”.

That attitude is familiar to Danish Police Chief, Jens Kaarsgaard. In his experience, pensioners in a mid-size provincial Danish town are scared of going out in the evenings because of the stories about organised crime that they see every night on their televisions: He explains that “The media is awash with stories about murders, fatal traffic accidents, shootings and burglaries. But that’s not actually what’s going on out here, and it frightens people unnecessarily. The truth is that there have never been fewer murders in Denmark and fatal traffic accidents are also at an all-time low. You’re about as likely to be burgled in your own home as you are to win the big prize in the lottery. And, to be honest, organised crime isn’t a major problem here, so there’s no need to be nervous just because the rolling news broadcasts live from the site of some idiotic shooting in Copenhagen where some guy’s just rolled past on his motorbike and fired a bullet through a laundrette window. All these little trivial incidents get repeated again and again on the rolling news channels and on regional radio news slots every half hour”.

In 1971, 1 213 people lost their lives on Danish roads. The real story is that 40 years on, only 220 people lost their lives, even though there are twice as many cars on the road now as there were back then. The truth is that not a single person has died inside a car in an accident in Copenhagen for three years. The heavy traffic prevents speeding, and safety features in modern cars do the rest. But do people know this? No, because news media only report on the accidents.

Lasse Jensen is one of the most experienced commentators of the ways and off-roads of Western journalism. The Dane has worked for newspapers, been Head of News at two national TV stations and has worked both as a correspondent in Washington D.C and for the European Corporation of Public Broadcasters, EBU. He expertly articulates how media and politics influence each other, and that the result often is neither pretty nor constructive: “A good fight is still a better story than a dull dialogue. When a media avalanche is rolling on for instance internal disagreement in government it is almost impossible to stop and the media democracy develops: The news media is no longer on the side line, but has become a political player. Not

that the media necessarily has a certain ideological agenda. The news media's main agenda is to sell news media. And the notion is that it's done best by reporting on possible conflicts - not if you can be accused of being sympathetic to people with power. The news culture is not so fond of solutions. We like trouble so much more".



## News for the People:

### Why a Master Class on Constructive Journalism?

I lead the Eurovision Academy which is the professional educational centre for the 74 Members of the European Broadcasting Union – the EBU. It is a place of transformation and openness to the world, where ideas are exchanged, and knowledge is created and transmitted. Our Master Classes stimulate the talents of Media professionals by providing them with the skills necessary in the digital age. They teach the must-know of tomorrow in an effective and unique manner.

Constructive Journalism is the must-know of tomorrow. Why?

The audience for News is changing, it is both more volatile and concerned at the same time.

The audience wants to know what is relevant for them. It wants to understand the context and why things are happening. Why people are behaving in the way they do?

Constructive journalism is a new way of thinking, a way to address issues facing society with inspiring stories investigating solutions and resolutions, rather than focusing only on problems and traumas.

The audience wants to understand why do Public media engage themselves into quality Journalism : what News stand for, what are our values?

Constructive Journalism answers the question of why Public Media's quality journalism matters to society. It gives our News a clear purpose.

It also takes into account the growth of public contribution. The audience wants to feel the connectivity with the other people in a global world. Constructive Journalism makes news stories richer and more detailed, leaving the audience feeling empowered to discuss and share content and maybe even get directly involved within communities.

Constructive Journalism creates value for Public media News and helps make it unique.

I organized our first Master Classes in Constructive Journalism at DR in Copenhagen in 2014. I hope this book will continue to build on the learning of its participants and others with an interest in the future of Public News.

Nathalie Labourdette, EUROVISION ACADEMY, Geneva

## The Need for Media Empowerment

Whether it is newspapers, social media or broadcast, media empower us all. They empower us by bringing us stories that matter to our daily lives, alerting us to the trends that are changing our world, engaging us in debate, and holding decision-makers to account. We need data, we need different points of view, we need to see solutions that inspire us to action. That is the bedrock of democracy and of progress.

Are we getting that?

In Ulrik Haagerup's analysis we are not. I agree. And I firmly believe it is critical that we figure out a way to ensure that we do.

We live in a world where the flow of information and the possibilities for citizen participation have never been greater. Yet, many feel disempowered by the news, are disappointed in their political leadership and disengaged from decision-making. This generates a democratic deficit through apathy and indifference.

This concerns us as individuals but is also fundamental to how we shape a better world collectively. The information we get determines our choices. And more than ever, we need to make the sustainable and long-term choices. We cannot afford a one-dimensional view of the world that ignores complexity and glosses over connections across challenges.

It is a debate of vital importance to the United Nations, and to all of us: freedom of expression and access to knowledge are essential in our efforts to promote peace, rights and well-being for all. In world of 7 billion people, with a cacophony of voices that are often ill-informed and based on narrow agendas, we need media that take seriously the responsibility to educate and serve as a counter-point to power.

Because we increasingly witness how rules are broken with impunity: ongoing and fresh conflicts, young girls kidnapped and held hostage, waste dumped into our oceans, journalists silenced, passenger planes blown out of the sky, eavesdropping and censorship, and the list goes on. Leadership entails an important level of global responsibility. But if the Security Council fails to act on breaches of international peace and security, how can we expect others to respect the rules?

There is no stability without solidarity, and no solidarity without stability. We need a return to common decency, and this will only come if our leaders set an example that we can follow. This is why we need responsible media that empower. We simply need constructive alternatives in the current stream of news.

Ulrik Haagerup is at the forefront of fresh thinking about the role of the media in today's world and how to bring us those alternatives. It is often said that we get the media and the political leaders we deserve. It is our shared responsibility to ensure that we get the best. Because that is how we are all empowered. "Constructive News" is a welcome call for a more profound reflection about priorities and choices, not just among media professionals and political leaders, but for all of us.

Mr. Michael Møller

United Nations Under-Secretary-General

Acting Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva

# Biography



Born in 1963, Ulrik Haagerup is the Executive Director of News at the Danish Broadcasting Corporation. Winning the Cavling Prize in 1990 and awarded The Order of the Dannebrog in 2012, Ulrik stays first of all a passionate journalist. He is an international public speaker on leadership and the author of the books *A Good Idea – Did You Get It?* (2004) and *Constructive News: A Confrontation with the Negative Worldview of the Press* (2012). In 2008 he was a Member of the World Economic Forum's Global Agenda Council on the Future of Journalism, and from 1994 –

2007 he was the Editor-in-Chief at Jyllands-Posten and NORDJYSKE Media. Prior to that, he was an investigative reporter and the Senior Managing Editor at Jyllands-Posten from 1986 – 1994. His education as a journalist includes being a John S. Knight Fellow at Stanford University, in addition to furthering his education at INSEAD, IMD, the Stanford Research Institute, and Wharton.

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#constructivenews

# Constructive News

Ulrik Haagerup

Conflicts, drama, crooks and victims.  
That's news. This is our world. Or is it?

This first international book on constructive news shows the consequences of media negativity: To people, to the press itself, to the public debate and to democracy. Provocative and engaging executive director of DR News, Ulrik Haagerup, demonstrates how a paradigm shift in news content has succeeded at Danish Broadcaster DR by changing bad news habits and making journalism more meaningful. Constructive News is both a wake up call to a media world struggling for a future and an inspirational handbook on the next mega trend in journalism. A good story doesn't have to be a bad story...

*"Ulrik Haagerup makes an important contribution to thinking how today's mass media can contribute more constructively to society. And unlike pure theorists, it's based on experience and achievement."*

**Prof. Richard Sambrook, former Director of Global News at the BBC**

*"Constructive journalism is a new way of thinking. It answers the question of why Public Media's quality journalism matters to society. It gives our news a clear purpose."*

**Nathalie Labourdette, Head of Eurovision Academy, EBU**

*"I am amazed what Ulrik Haagerup has already achieved. I wish him and his team all the best"*

**Prof. Marvin Kalb, former CBS Anchor and founding Director of Harvard Kennedy School Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy**

*"Why does news have to 'bleed to lead'? The excuse often given by the media is that these stories are "what the public wants"! With Constructive News Ulrik Haagerup puts focus on the missing link in news coverage today – what's inspiring, what's positive and what's working."*

**Jimmy Maymann, CEO of The Huffington Post**

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