

## Danish University Colleges

### Dialogue IO3

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## DIALOGUE.

Enhancing constructive journalism on social media through dialogue-based storytelling.



### Teaching constructive and dialogue-based journalism to B.A. students Learning from each other, learning together

March 2022



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## 1. Introduction

DIALOGUE is a three-year Erasmus+ project, a strategic partnership of DMJX in Aarhus (Denmark), Windesheim University of Applied Sciences in Zwolle (Netherlands) and Stuttgart Media University (Germany). It is designated to develop curricula for teaching constructive and dialogue-based journalism as well as audience development and engagement to students and professionals. It was launched in October 2019 and is led by DMJX.

In the first Intellectual Output (2020) we – the project partners – endeavoured to synthesize research and best-practice examples on our topics and translate this knowledge into prototype curriculum modules and didactic concepts for teaching students on B.A. level.

In the second Intellectual Output published after the project's second year, we improved and tested our modules and concepts and arranged them as building-blocks components in journalism education. These building blocks served as the backbone to an online Inspirational Guide on Dialogue journalism for teachers, which we are finalizing June 2022.

In the second Intellectual Output we also had a first look at job and market perspectives for Audience Development, Dialogue-Based Journalism and Constructive Journalism as permanent components in journalism education in Europe.

With this third Intellectual Output we aim to go deeper into the need for new skills and competencies among journalists and in the media houses and we include an outline for prototype curricula components and didactic concepts.

### 1.1 Project partners

The **Danish School of Media and Journalism** (Danmarks Medie- og Journalisthøjskole, DMJX) is a higher education institution focused on journalism, communication and design. The school offers both 4-year courses at BA-level and midcareer training programmes at various lengths. We have worked with dialogue-based journalism since 2014 as a vital part of constructive journalism and we have close ties to Constructive Institute founded by Ulrik Haagerup. Annette Holm has spent her past year as a fellow at Constructive Institute. As our students are familiar with focusing on solutions and covering nuances from their first semesters, our advanced 20 ECTS course on dialogue-based journalism concentrates on promoting a democratic conversation. We think that dialogue is characterized by parties seeking mutual understanding. Dialogue-based journalism operates in the same field as engagement journalism, civic journalism, participatory journalism and affiliated conversational approaches.

**Windesheim University of Applied Sciences** (Hogeschool Windesheim) has embraced constructive journalism since 2016 as an intellectual and practical guideline for designing the curriculum of the department of journalism. In the first two years, Cathrine Gyldensted, one of the initiators of this

movement, has trained students as well as teachers in the theory and the practical implications of constructive journalism. She has advised a task force of the institute on how to incorporate constructive journalism into the education programme. In 2017, our Media Research Centre was strengthened with a research group called Constructive Journalism. Liesbeth Hermans was assigned as professor to further develop theoretical conceptualization and to substantiate the principles of constructive journalism with empirical research (Hermans & Drok 2018; Hermans & Gyldensted 2017; Hermans & Prins 2020). Using the public oriented approach is in line with the tradition of the Media Research Centre, where Professor Nico Drok (Media & Civil Society) has been conducting research on civic journalism for almost a decade. The public oriented approach attaches much value to social responsibility and incorporates a more engaged form of journalism in which journalists understand, connect and collaborate with their public (Bro 2019; Hermans & Drok 2018). Today, Windesheim offers a 25 ECTS major BA course in Public Oriented Journalism.

**Stuttgart Media University** (Hochschule der Medien, HdM) is a university of applied science dedicated to all trades of the media business. It offers a bachelor programme on Journalism & Public Relations with a combination of hands-on training in multimedia productions and lectures on the science of communication. Part of this curriculum is an international minor programme on Journalism & Communication Management. In this programme, where German students of journalism and public relations collaborate with incoming international students, constructive and dialogue-based journalism is taught in a mandatory 8 ECTS course. Students publish content in cooperation with media partners.

## 1.2 Shared understanding and terminology

The three universities have come together for this project because we share an understanding of the current difficult state of journalism and have coinciding ideas on how to improve the situation. (See IO1 and IO2).

Constructive Journalism is the common ground of the three overlapping approaches in this project. Specifically, it focuses on the importance of facilitating and engaging dialogue by including the voices of the audience. It can be seen as an important elaboration of one of the principles of constructive journalism and ties in with the third pillar in Figure 1.

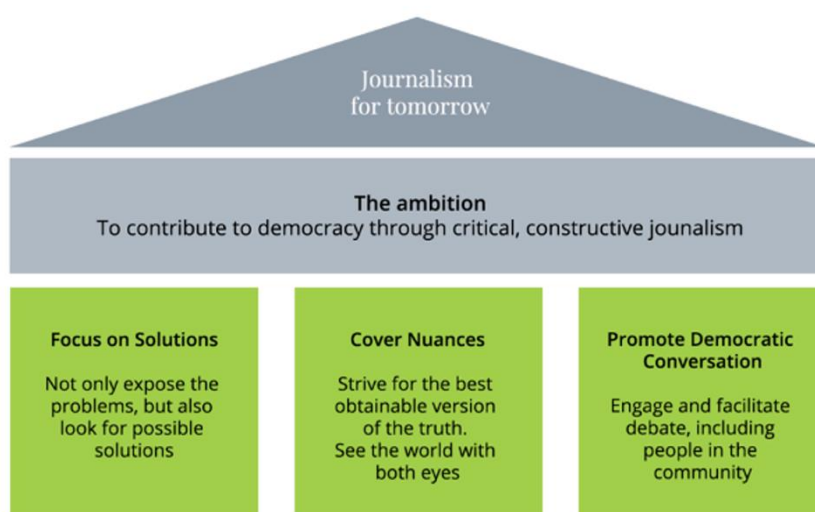


Figure 1: Source: Constructive Institute

We treat the fostering of dialogue as one of the important tenets to engage audiences. The most important step in teaching this is creating the right mindset: getting used to and accepting the journalistic role of taking the audience into account by 1) listening to and communicating with the audience to get inspiration for journalistic productions and 2) facilitate and stimulate the democratic debate in and between different layers of society.

By doing so, journalism wants to empower and engage citizens to overcome feelings of hopelessness and of alienation from society.

A constructive approach is an addition and hopefully an improvement to the traditional ways of practicing journalism, not a total reform. Our constructive approach to journalism underlines traditional standards of reporting but questions them when they result in an unreal and one-sided picture of the world. Constructive Journalism stresses the importance of including other more hopeful and inspiring perspectives, including context with different perspectives for nuanced reporting and engaging in and facilitating an open dialogue.

In that respect our common understanding is to some extent aligned with the recommendations from the report “Styrk demokratiet” (Strengthen democracy, 2021), in which local politicians in Aarhus, DK, set up an act tank to find ways to sustain and strengthen local democracy.

As a starting point for the democracy project a researcher from DMJX made a quantitative and qualitative survey asking the citizens how they looked at and participated in the local democracy. Generally, the citizens wanted to get involved in political decisions and they had several ideas about how to make involvement better and easier. Even though the report is made for the city council the recommendations match to a high degree the shared understanding from the Dialogue project.

Especially the marked recommendations are aligned with the focal points of this project.

1 Speak and write in an understandable way

**2 Be responsible for the debate on social media**

3 Strengthen local media

4 Give citizens more direct access to the city council

**5 Meet the people where they are**

**6 Listen to all people**

**7 Reach out to make all people get heard**

8 Let volunteers be volunteers

9 Remember that local democracy needs physical meeting places

10 Motivate more people to become volunteers

11 Strengthen local party associations

**12 Open for new communities**

Apart from the fact that citizens want to be involved in political decisions, the report concluded that the media play an important role as role models. Media should support respectful intercourse the

good form on social media and generally reduce the focus on conflicts, as people are interested in nuances and context This is also an obligation for journalism educators according to the report.

## 2. Analysis of need for new skills and competences

When we wrote the application for this project almost three years ago, we were not aware of how huge a task we set ourselves in IO3. With the time and the working hours available for this project it is not realistic to hand in a solid and comprehensive analysis of the need for new skills and competencies in the media houses and among working journalists regarding constructive and dialogue-based journalism in The Netherlands, Germany and Denmark. That would by itself be a major project, also because of the fact that the penetration and the implementation of these journalistic approaches may differ from country to country.

In order to carry out the mission we have used the possibilities at hand. We have asked our students about their experiences from internships to get an idea about the prevalence and application of constructive and dialogue-based journalism.

We have also detected needed skills and mindsets from the journalists and editors, we have interviewed to our Inspirational Guide. Finally, we have asked representatives from mid-career training institutions about the demand for new competencies in this field and looked into studies to find out how broad the need for new skills and competencies is.

Put together the perspectives from students, media houses, mid-career training institutions and studies may give some indications about the need for new skills and competencies in this kind of journalism.

### 2.1. Student perspectives

#### 2.1.1. Students from HdM: Survey on constructive and dialogue-oriented methods in internships

##### *Student's feedback from winter term 2021/2022 and summer term 2022*

The intention of the survey is to gain insights into whether students have had any contact with constructive and dialogue-oriented journalism in their internships, and thereby to draw conclusions about the prevalence of constructive and dialogue-oriented practices in the field in Germany.

Participants of the survey are attendees of the course "International Content Production" in the sixth semester at the Stuttgart Media University, who are journalism, communications and digital media students with a German or international background.

The survey is composed of three questions with free text field (answer required). The survey was conducted twice by using the free tool my.surveymonkey.com. On October 15, 2021 we collected 17 answers. Two people indicated that they never had an internship before. As a conclusion, there are 15 students giving feedback on their work experience from winter term.

In the second survey conducted on March 18, 2022, we asked one additional question regarding the professional background of the students. We collected 14 answers, out of which ten people come from the field of communication sciences and only four from journalism.



Since the questions remained unchanged, both surveys are summarized below. So we have a total of 29 people evaluating their impressions from the internship.

### *Results*

1<sup>st</sup> question: Did you come into contact with approaches of constructive journalism during your internship and if so, to what extent?

A significant majority of 26 out of 29 people answered didn't have any experience with elements of constructive journalism in their internships, which suggests that the approaches are not yet widespread in editorial and communications departments. How she experiences the current status of reporting is described by one student as follows: "I don't think there were real approaches, the team and I tried to, but at the end we still emphasized the negative. Although, during an internship at my local national TV news media, they did cut the sensationalism from their reporters".

Only three people did experience constructive elements of journalism in their internships. One of them indicated: "In our fact checking organization we aimed all of our content to be similar to constructive journalism approach". Another criticized that the approach had not received the attention it needed: "I wrote a few articles on rather positive topics. However, these did not get the same space as reports from court".

2<sup>nd</sup> question: Did you engage in dialogue with the audience (readers, followers et cetera) of your medium during your internship, and if so, to what extent?

For 16 out of 29 people answered, dialogue with the audience didn't happen during their internship. 13 students – which is almost the half of respondents – had a basic experience in dialogue with the audience of their organization. They came in contact with dialogic elements mainly in the areas of customer service and community management in social media. Mentionable quotes are: "I was able to read and analyse the user comments on Instagram" – "Only commenting on the Instagram channel and on Google reviews" – "We answered a lot of comments on social media" – "I did parts of the customer service" – "I answered some reader's e-Mails when they had questions about an article". Only one person explicitly mentions that dialogue events was part of their work. Another person describes her task as asking for the audience's perspective and bringing it to the newsroom: "I talked about the content and editorial of the TV news media with other people to explain certain stuff that was criticised, as well as taking their perspective into understanding".

3<sup>rd</sup> question: What do you think: Are the editorial staff aware of the existence and possibilities of constructive and dialogue-oriented journalism and how important is it in their work?

A minority of 12 out of 29 students don't think that editorial staff is aware of the existence and possibilities of constructive and dialogue-oriented journalism. Mentionable quotes are: "I don't think that many editors are aware of the possibilities of constructive journalism" – "I think constructive journalism isn't as present as it could or should be". Two students agree that journalists need to adapt their methods to be future-proof: "It's not that important just now but it will become more important for the journalists to secure their future" – "I don't think that a lot of people are aware of the topic as it's just coming up now. I'm sure that it'll get more and more attention in the next years and therefore gets important for every journalist who also wants to be taken as a serious journalist". One student describes why he has experienced that dialog is not desired: "It seemed as if dialogue was too bothersome to engage with the audience".

A majority of 17 students think that constructive and dialogue-oriented elements play an important role in current journalism work. Here are their reasons: "I think so, yes. It might take effort to

include new trends in their work, therefore I guess it's going to take time until it will be seen more often" – "It is important because like that they could have a good relationship to the audience and they are getting familiar in this way" – "They think about what interests their audience" – Very important as everyone should feel like their voice is heard" – "Editorial Staff should and are most likely always aware of the possibilities of constructive and dialogue-oriented journalism. When editors have to adapt to constant criticism from audiences regarding credibility, an editor's job becomes even more important because then they have to ensure they don't put out the audience may find misleading".

Two statements in particular regarding the utilized potential of dialogue-oriented journalism stand out. The thing they have in common is that the students have experienced that journalists are aware of dialogic methods but use them insufficiently: "I think they are aware of the existence but they don't use it the best" – "I think some of them are but the journalists I encountered seemed like they have a way of doing their work that they are not questioning. Especially local newspapers seemed to be very traditional and not really open for constructive and dialogue-oriented journalism".

### *Conclusion*

Students witnessed significantly more approaches to dialogue with the audience than constructive methods in their internships. Most dialogue between organizations and audiences seems to take place on social media. The most relevant role for this seems to be the Community Manager position that was mentioned often. Four students explicitly held this role or name this as their main task during the internship. Only two students out of 29 have experienced that media actively search for dialogue with the audience, for example at specially organized events, or that the opinion of the users is actively requested in order to take it up in the editorial process.

Just about half of the respondents believe that constructive and dialogue-oriented elements are highly valued in the work journalists and media professionals. A slight minority sees these methods either not yet represented or only just emerging. It can be said that the question of how far constructive and dialogue-oriented elements are represented in editorial offices and media outlets cannot be answered unequivocally. It seems to depend strongly on the organization. Social media seems to be an easy way to start a low-barrier dialogue, but the students also emphasize that this must also be intended by the editors in order for the dialogue to work. Some students do not yet see this as a given.

## 2.1.2. Students from DMJX: Survey on constructive and dialogue-oriented methods in internships

### *Student's feedback from internship autumn 2020 – spring 2022*

Participants in the survey are attendees of the course "Dialogue-based journalism" in the fourth semester at DMJX. During the 4<sup>th</sup> semester at DMJX the students apply for their internships. The internships last from 12 to 18 months.

In the autumn of 2020, we decided to survey the students who participated in the course in Dialogue Based Journalism during their 4<sup>th</sup> semester right after they signed the contract for their internships. The goal was to get a sense of how valuable the methods and mindset of dialogue-based journalism had been when applying for their first job as a journalist. Did the students even mention it, and if so, how was the reaction from the media? And did the students at that time expect to use the methods and mindset of dialogue based and constructive journalism in their internships?

The design of the survey has been to survey them three times: before they start their internships, after 6 months internships after internship, when they returned to school, which they did February 2022.

The entire class of 29 students answered the survey in autumn of 2020, but less than one third of class answered the two last questions. It doesn't make sense to conclude anything on behalf of the entire class, therefore we look at the answers as strictly qualitative.

#### *Results from the first survey: Before starting internships*

Out of 29 students, 24 students mentioned dialogue-based journalism when applying for internships, either in interviews with media, applications or portfolio websites. The students mention different kind of skills, they gained from the course, with the most common being:

- Moderating the debate on social media
- Involving and engaging the audience through social media channels
- Involving the target group, to whom you are producing the journalism for

The majority answers, when they had talked about it in the interviews, the response was positive:

*"It was received extremely well. They think it would be a huge plus if I had knowledge of just constructive and dialogue-based journalism. [A specific regional newspaper] in particular was impressed, and they also ended up offering me a place right after the interview"*

*"They thought it was really good that the school was thinking along those lines"*

Even though we didn't ask for it in the survey, students mentioned several media by name, who had responded very positively to the concept of dialogue-based journalism. And there is no obvious pattern in the kinds of media, but some indications that regional and local media responded more positively towards the ideas of dialogue-based journalism, than the big national ones, as this student answer indicated:

*"When I was at an interview at a national newspaper, I could feel that they knew less about dialogue-based journalism than with radio and regional media."*

#### *Results from second and third survey: During and after internships*

The second and third survey both examine how the methods and mindset of dialogue-based journalism have survived meeting the real world in news production and day to day journalism. A total of eleven students answers the two surveys, some only one of them, some both. But since both surveys have the same aim and a lot of the same patterns; we sum up the conclusions in the same section.

But first, a little perspective on how much they have used the methods. Out of the eight students, who answered the survey after six months internship, only two said they didn't use the method or mindset at all since the beginning of their internship. One of them explains it with time being an issue, and the other one the type of media production.

And for the eight students who answered after finalizing their internships, four had consciously used the methods every month. One had used it every week.

It is obvious that, the students, who answered, all wanted to apply the methods in their daily work, but that they only did so to a limited extent. The biggest obstacles here being lack of time, and the media's lack of knowledge and therefore no access to help from editors and colleagues.

It is also noticeable, that there is a difference in how the general mindset of constructive journalism was used, compared to dialogue-based journalism. The constructive focus on nuances and solutions seems easier to keep in mind in the everyday work, while involving the audience and focus of facilitating good dialogue seem much more time consuming and therefore hard to fit into daily routines.

#### *Which skills and methods have the students used?*

Here are some quotes from the students demonstrating how they have used their skills from the DBJ course:

*"I have used it in my idea development, where I have tried to go directly to those in question and ask what is relevant to talk about. "*

*"I have adapted the involvement of sources in the work process. I think that made really good sense in relation to my internship. It has not been possible to go full on wheel of engagement - the "business as usual"-thinking still dominates too much for that on the editorial board. But I have involved our community in the development of several stories. It was a success."*

*"I can feel that I relate differently to the comment tracks on the web, where the media themselves interact. I have a much more qualified attitude to it."*

*"I feel like I'm bringing quite a lot to the table, that they do not really know about at all. And it is always great to be able to share new knowledge."*

#### *What were the obstacles?*

As mentioned above in the introduction, time and lack of culture and due to that access to help are the main obstacles the students have met in order to do dialogue-based journalism

*"When it comes to dialogue and civic engagement, our speed and our working methods are clearly an issue for how to work with it."*

*"It is often a little more demanding - and thus takes longer. You can feel that it is something relatively new in the education, as there are many of the old ones out there, who have not tried it yet."*

*"When they posted things on Facebook, we often asked the users a question about something, but it's mostly just left at that. So, a real dialogue never really happens, which is probably connected to the fact, that there isn't time to answer everyone and get involved in the debate."*

Sometimes culture and conflict as ruling news criteria hinder working more dialogue-based:

*"It is rarely dialogue-based, and more just a debate where the fronts are drawn up in separate articles and without bridging or exchanging thoughts as such."*

*"This mindset and these movements are not really present at [the regional newspaper], so although I could probably get time and space to work more dialogue-based, I am not sure that I could get the necessary help and guidance from my colleagues."*

#### *Conclusion*

In total, these surveys give three pretty clear indications, despite the small percentage of answers. First of all, there is a will among students to make use of the methods and mindset taught in the course – all though few have found ways to incorporate this into their working routines. Second of all, there is still a mixed landscape in the business, where some media welcome the dialoguebased

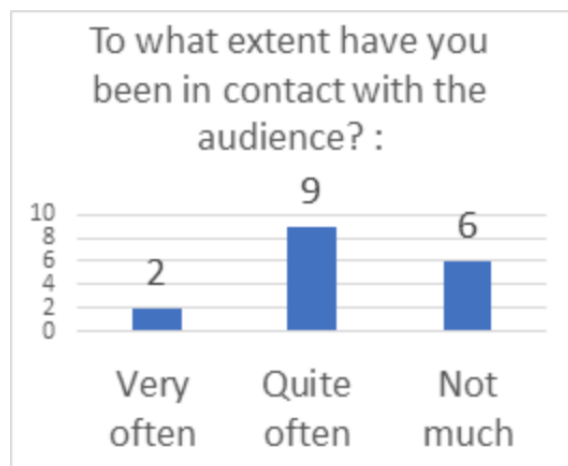
approach (at least in theory), while others don't have a focus on it at all. And lastly, it is clear, that lack of time and high pace in the news and editorial rooms are perceived as obstacles to integrating a dialogue-based approach in their reporting.

### 2.1.3. Students from Windesheim: Survey on constructive and dialogue-oriented methods in internships.

*Student's feedback from internship 2021 – 2022* Most of the students that participate in the course 'Public Oriented Journalism' at Windesheim have just returned from their internship or have had other practical experience in Journalism. We asked the entrants of the second semester of the year 2012-2022 about their relevant experiences in journalistic practice to get some indication of the market perspectives for Public Oriented Journalism. The survey was carried out in class using Mentimeter, which offered the opportunity to discuss the answers with the students immediately afterwards.

Seven questions were asked of which two were open ended question. Out of 26 students 18 (69%) reported to have participated in editorial rooms. They worked with a wide range of media including newspapers, national television background programmes, national television infotainment programmes, radio programmes and online and offline magazines.

The questions below were answered by the 18 students reporting practical experience. Two thirds of these students had been in regular contact with audience members. Six of them had been in contact very little.

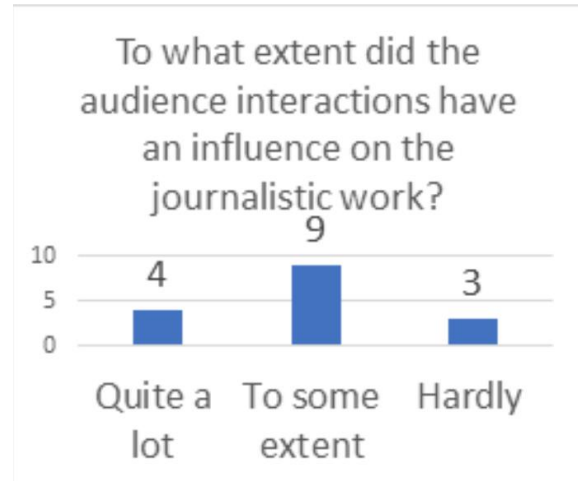


When asked how they had been in contact with the audience, with multiple answers possible, they gave 35 answers in total. The most given answer was: via reactions on published content (n=12) and via e-mail (n=11). Less often they mentioned online metrics (n=8) and other audience research (n=4). One of them had been in touch with the public at a meet-up. In the open answers a number of them answered that the interaction with the audience gave them ideas for stories. They also received feedback on which they could evaluate their stories. Some of them answered they received negative or even hostile reactions. For instance: "I was in contact via social media, e-mail and telephone. I interviewed readers who shared

*their stories. The media company wanted to create a community to get readers involved. So, the interactions certainly influenced my work.'* Another student wrote: "Via mails and social media. For example, we had contact with the audience everyday via WhatsApp. This helped us to find stories and showed us how are stories were evaluated."

Only three of the students answered that the interactions with the audience hardly had an influence on the journalistic work. Most of the experienced an influence to some extent (n=9) and some experienced them as influencing quite a lot (4).

Finally, when asked to what extent the editorial room worked according to the principles of constructive journalism 4 answered: 'Often'. The largest number of the answered: 'Sometimes' (n=7). A minority answered that the editorial room didn't work in a constructive way at all (n=3) or hardly did so (n=1). As a consequence of the small number of cases these results can only be considered as a first indication. We also asked an open ended question on how constructive journalism was discussed in the editorial rooms. Here the majority reported that constructive journalism was not (much) discussed. Two answered that it was discussed in a positive way and another gave a more nuanced view: *"A lot of them called it whining of the new generation, but there are also a lot of younger reporters most of whom feel more positive about it."*



### Conclusion

This survey amongst the participating students at Windesheim clearly indicates that audience interactions are quite common in the journalistic work they carried out in practice. They used a wide variety of methods and the majority experienced and impact of audience interactions on their work. The majority of the interactions took place in a digital form but dialogue in real life was also mentioned a number of times. The results also indicate that they recognize constructive practices being used in professional journalism, but only in a minority of the editorial rooms constructive journalism is discussed explicitly and positively.

#### 2.1.4. Overall conclusion

The surveys indicate some national differences in the application of dialogue- and constructive methods.

Students from Windesheim and Stuttgart report about dialogue and audience interactions as quite commonly used, especially in digital forms, while students from DMJX in Aarhus report about a very mixed media landscape, with lack of time, high pace and lack of professional DBJ-knowledge being obstacles for audience interactions.

Just about half of the respondents from Stuttgart believe that constructive and dialogue-oriented elements are highly valued in the work of journalists and media professionals. The results from the Windesheim survey indicate that students recognize constructive practices being used in professional journalism, but only in a minority of the editorial rooms constructive journalism is discussed explicitly and positively.

## 2.2 Media perspectives

For this part of the Intellectual Output, we have interviewed journalists and editors from best-practice media, that in different ways are working with dialogue-based and constructive journalism. We have asked them which new skills and competencies are needed to do a good job from their point of view.

Some of them see a new mindset for journalists as a crucial factor, where people are seen not as sources but as resources and emphasize that journalist and editors should climb down from the top of the tree and realize that they don't know everything and collaborate with audiences to learn from them.

Others stress the need for specific skills. Below we have gathered examples of the need for new mindset and the need for some of the specific competencies mentioned.

### 2.2.1. Denmark

*Media perspectives on skills and competencies from the point of view of three Danish editors*

**Tobias Heede Niebuhr is a managing editor at Aarhus Stiftstidende**, a 230 years old regional newspaper. Tobias has been involved in developing a strategy on how to use Facebook better and has learned a new approach to input from citizens.

At first, the paper pushed content to social media, today Facebook is more regarded as a huge focus group, where you can find out what people from Aarhus are talking about and what they don't know and would like to know. "Instead of pushing content to them we pass a microphone to them and ask what they don't understand", Tobias explains and emphasizes the change in mindset that also made the paper reframe a central question: "Two years ago, we asked ourselves how we could make people pay for our journalism. Today we ask how we can make journalism that people are willing to pay for".

Tobias Heede Niebuhr exemplifies: "We realized that people from Aarhus wanted a place to discuss urban development in the city of Aarhus and we set up a niche site on that and experienced that people are much more nuanced and reflective in small communities. We offered a place to the quiet voices and made stories, that we wouldn't have been aware of, hadn't we listened to the people in the niche group."

Tobias has experienced that the input and discussions in the niche groups often resulted in new ideas and co-creation. As an example, he mentions that the newspaper asked the people at the urban development site to review new buildings in the city and afterwards vote for the most successful building. The articles were some of the most read and the people involved felt a closer connection to the newspaper.

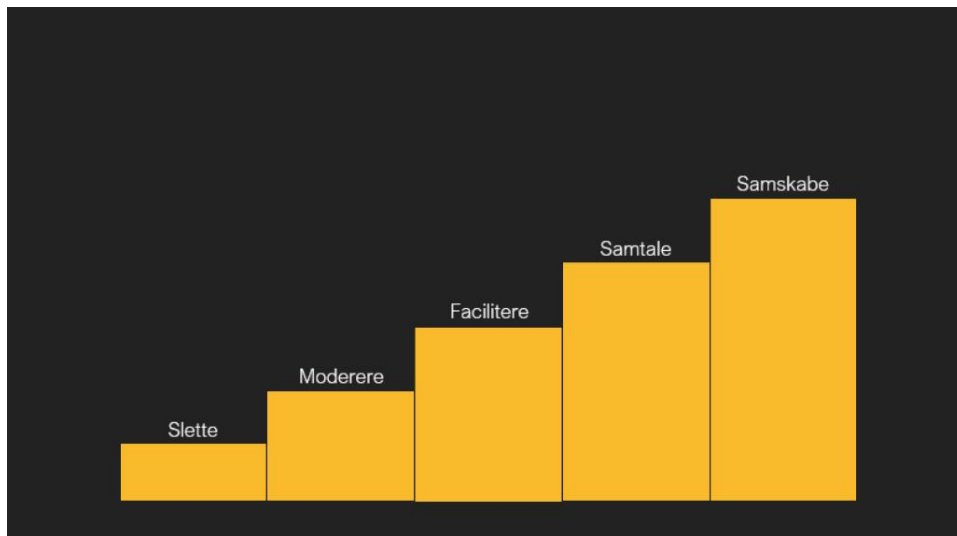
**Inga Vind, executive director for TV2 Østjylland**, a regional TV station, echoes the same point about moving closer to the citizens on social media as in the physical world. In the process of doing so TV2 Østjylland has turned into a media house with presence on channels as Youtube, Facebook and Instagram instead of solely being a TV station:

"Now we know the different target groups better and we have become much better at detecting content relevant for the users. We have found out that the target groups are very diverse, and we listen curiously to find out what is important to them."

The local reporters use their private profiles on SoMe to show personality and not only professionalism. The aim is to create confidence and get acquainted with the citizens in their area and to get closer to what is important: "You could say that classic journalism in a substantially important story would use a case to prove affects to ordinary people, in our approach it is the other way around. The story begins with a person or people, who has had an experience, they want to share or to clarify. That kind of stories are more authentic".

TV2 Østjylland has experienced with and developed tools to listen better and to keep a good form on social media for the station's SoMe hosts. New employees are trained to this specific journalistic function. In short, the keywords for a professional SoMe host is: Behaves like a host for a dinner party, dialogue oriented, community, eye level and personality, gives something of oneself.

As shown in the graphic below the job of the SoMe host is to delete, moderate, facilitate, converse and co-create. The aim is to move as far as possible towards the right where the contact with the users becomes more and more inclusive by facilitating, conversation and co-creation.



**Ida Ebbensgaard, editor in chief of Zetland**, a medium with 28000 members, regards input from the members as the most central part in the media, since they help the journalists make stories. The members are engaged on all levels from the idea to articles, to finding sources, in the editorial process and to give feedback. Ida Ebbensgaard thinks that listening to the members is needed and may help people regain trust in media: “We have to acknowledge that the audience know more than we do, doing that we can start building up trust”. She recommends see members (or subscribers) as a pool of brains. On a broad level you can ask what many people know, or you can be very specific and ask what very few people know. But you must be sincere and spend time building up confidence. It takes time, but it’s worth the time, because you get better journalism.

### 2.2.2. Germany

*Media perspectives on skills and competencies from the point of view of two German journalists and editors*

We asked two interviewees for the Inspirational Guide what skills they think are needed to do dialogue-oriented journalism successfully in today's world.

#### **Marc-Stefan Andres from RUMS about local journalism**

Marc-Stefan Andres from the digital local journalism outlet RUMS in the German city of Münster clearly states that a lot of additional skills are needed (e.g. in teamwork, product management and marketing, more about it below), but that the market prospects for dialogue-oriented journalism are great at the same time: He is convinced that good journalism will prevail but emphasizes that the challenge is to find the right target group that values the product and is willing to pay for it. By that, he means that as a journalist, you have to understand your audience in order to develop relevant content for them.

In Marc-Stefan Andres' view, there are only two effective options for (aspiring) journalists, being 1): If one is working alone on a dialogue project, for example, it is advisable to start a newsletter on a



specific niche topic, for example via the Steady platform. 2): Better dialogue-oriented (local) journalism can be done when journalists work as a team, says Marc-Stefan Andres. Because to be successful with it, you also need knowledge about the business, product marketing, and a network. Many journalists are very good at their craft, he says, but can't handle the other subject areas on their own. Andres therefore recommends staffing a medium-sized team with product managers, marketing experts and journalists who can work together on the dialogue with the audience and divide up the tasks according to knowledge.

### Leo Braun on journalism for young people on Instagram

Leo Braun is a senior strategic editor at Funk, the content network of the public service broadcasters in Germany. He looks after Funk's Instagram channel, which is aimed at 14 to 29 year-olds and is supposed to convey the public broadcasters' news offerings to a young target group; namely, where this age group is on the move in the social networks. When asked how to do successful dialogue-oriented journalism on social media, he replies that the most important thing is to get involved with the Instagram platform. Since the currency on Instagram is reactions, says Leo Braun, as an editor you have to ask yourself the question: How do I build a post that people respond to? The challenge, he says, is to break down a topic so that you can answer its underlying question in one single post.

### Examples:



The question of how to sit ergonomically correct at the desk was answered in one image and was liked over 97 thousand times. Source: funk [@funk]. (March 11, 2022). "So sitzt du richtig am Schreibtisch" [graphic]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ca9Q45dNT2t/>.

This is an info post about the sand and the illegal trade of the coveted raw material. The topic was requested by the community and prepared by the funk team in four keywords that address the current situation, the problem and sustainable alternatives. Source: funk [@funk]. (March 13, 2022). "Das Problem mit Sand" [graphic]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CbDE1A8KVgi/>

This is an infographic of the account @how.to.deutschland belonging to funk. It was created to explain the basic facts about Germany to refugees from Ukraine and other countries. Here, for example, that tap water is drinkable. Other topics include waste separation, how to get a work permit and where pregnant women can get help free of charge. Source: how.to.deutschland [how.to.deutschland]. (March 23, 2022). "German tap water is drinkable" [graphic]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/how.to.deutschland/>

Still, Leo Braun doesn't think the work of editors who create content for Instagram is fundamentally different from work with conventional news formats. He thinks that the guidelines for what a conventional radio or TV report has to look like and what length it has to be, for example, are much more rigid than for online formats. On YouTube, it's partly the algorithm that determines how long a video should be so that it gets clicked on. And on Instagram? The post has to evoke a reaction and people have to be able to quickly like it, says Leo Braun. The way it's made differs in terms of technique, but not in terms of the journalistic way of working.

### 2.2.3. The Netherlands

*Media perspectives on skills and competencies from the point of view of three journalists and editors of a national, a regional and a local news platform.*

**Fleur de Weerd is a research journalist working for the national newspaper De Volkskrant.** For 2,5 years this newspaper is working with a panel of readers to stimulate audience participation.

“We realized that we have a lot of readers – in the weekends more than a million – who have knowledge about topics because they are working in certain fields of expertise and are living in different parts of the Netherlands, where they observe developments that we as journalist just don't see. So, we think at De Volkskrant that readers have potential for stories we can use”. To acquire this input, the newspaper has set up a readers panel of about 7.000 active participants.

“This panel is used as a thinktank which can contribute ideas about subject choice but can also draw our attention to subjects that we may have overlooked. Or make us aware of things we forget to explain in depth in our articles that are also important.”

When they started this panel De Volkskrant asked the members why they joined. The surprising answer was that they participate not because it is fun or educational, but they wanted to contribute if it is of added journalistic value. For the newspaper, working with a panel is a time investment that pays off. Fleur de Weerd: “We see that with articles that have been created with the help of our audience, those pieces are also read more frequently. Also, because they are high-quality productions from a journalistic point of view. Using the audience really helps adding value.” De Weerd notes that for a long time the public was seen as consumers and with the upswing of social media, the image has arisen among journalists that the public is a bit of a burden. According to her, that's because those who criticize the newspaper are those who shout the loudest and are most prominent on social media; they are the ones who complain on Twitter or send angry letters. But readers who wanted to contribute constructively didn't get a chance. De Volkskrant's answer to this was therefore to set up the reader's panel.

According to De Weerd, the readers panel has also achieved that journalists at her newspaper have also started to think more mildly about their audience: “They see good suggestions coming from the panel members, they give very thoughtful feedback and they are being very respectful. Working with a panel has a very bonding effect between journalist and reader.”

**Henk Ruijl is editor-in-chief of the Dutch regional public broadcaster Omroep West and the local station Den Haag FM.** For two years, Omroep West operated a weekly open editorial meeting by use of Facebook Live. Now they work with 'Right Questions' through the Hearken method. “With the open editorial meeting every Friday morning,” Ruijl explains, “our editors had to open up themselves

to the audience. On the one hand, they had to argue their story ideas more strongly and explain it better. On the other hand, they had to be open to questions of the audience.” Ruijl noticed that it led to a more modest attitude with his journalists. “You think that you know the best what your public is expecting, but every time we were surprised by just a bit different questions and subjects they came up with.”

However, after a while it became clear that usually the same faces turned up at the FB Live meetings. “This resulted in a dynamic that made us less enthusiastic,” Ruijl admits. And the Facebook algorithm didn't help, as it seemed to push the live meetings aside. So that's where the editor-in-chief decided to pull the plug and start working with the Hearken method. “We could continue our conversation with the audience by letting them pose questions online. And then we went in search for answer together with the person who asked the question.” According to Ruijl, this is new and different from what journalists did before: “Instead of the journalist asking the questions, you listen to your audience asking questions. You open up to them and learn to make yourself vulnerable and modest.”

The broadcaster broadened the scope by asking its audience in the local elections of 2022 what problems it thinks the new city coalition of The Hague should tackle. This resulted in thousands of reactions with which they went to the local council, and the lawmakers took these all very serious. The connection with their audience has strongly improved. “It's not only looking at what stories are successful in terms of clicks, but it is also knowing what goes on in your audience, what concerns them.”

**Henk ten Harkel is editor-in-chief of the Dutch local broadcaster 1Twente in the eastern cities of Enschede and Hengelo.** He works with a method that has been dubbed ‘serial investigative journalism’. “Before anything else, we consult the population,” Ten Harkel explains. The method entails not just doing one or a couple of interviews on an issue that affects a community, but doing dozens of these, as a series. “In this way,” Ten Harkel explains, “you generate impact. A city council can no longer ignore the problem by saying: oh, it's only a few people who are troubled by this.” Twice a year, they pick on a big issue.

Before elections, 1Twente went into the neighbourhoods with a mobile studio, called the fishbowl, to meet citizens and ask them about what's bothering them. At the same time, they put out questionnaires on themes such as sustainability, poverty, livability, energy transition, etc. “From these results, we come up with a top-5 of issues and we bring these to light with videos and podcasts and make ourselves visible.” Ten Harkel even works with script stories and actors when the people they interview do not dare to go public themselves. “The translations of these issues we bring to the political arena.”

#### 2.2.4. Overall conclusion:

The editors and journalists generally stress that working with audience engagement influences the mindset of the journalist. You, as journalist, must expand your interpretation of the role of the journalist and realize that the audience knows more than you do. Doing so, you connect better to audiences and you can start building trust and create and/or co-create relevant high-quality journalism.

The partners in this project would like to add a broader view on engagement. In the model of The Constructive House the headline for column three is ‘Promote democratic conversation’. The purpose is more than listening and producing journalism about what the audience want. Of course,

that is relevant, but democratic conversation also has a broader perspective, for instance by making people debate in constructive ways and make people meet and listen in and across communities.

Dialogue and constructive journalism also call for a range of new professional skills of which the interviewee in this section have mentioned some: How to serve as an engaging, interested, informative SoMe host; how to work with niche-groups, how to set up dialogue for specific formats and for the people whom it is made for.

## 2.3 Mid-career training institutions and studies about the demand for new skills and competencies

Since we began this project a lot of media and media houses have initiated ways to reconnect with the people they serve. In this section the partner institutions in this project will give an overview of the how broad the need is for new competences in dialogue-based constructive journalism in Germany, the Netherlands and Denmark.

### 2.3.1. Denmark:

The report, "[Fagenes fremtid](#)" (meaning the future of the (media)profession) from The Danish Journalist Association was published in 2019 and written by an expert group of journalists, editors, entrepreneurs and media scientists and pointed out that journalists must move closer to the citizens to gain relevance. The report claimed that peoples' trust in media is not only nourished by the quality of the content and correctness of the facts, but also based on whether people feel seen, heard, understood and represented.

In other words, the distance between the everyday life of the citizen and the stuff journalists are covering must not be too wide. A long list of major events that has taken place the recent years show that media's feeling with the population is too weak: Brexit in Great Britain, the yellow vests in France, the support to extreme parties many places in Europe, none of these trends have been detected by the media before they came out as voter slaps to the established parties.

Once a year the newsletter [Medietrends](#) points out trends that impact journalism, and in the years 2020 and 2021 user involvement was detected as an important trend.

According to Medietrends, the media are aware that content becomes better and is easier to sell if it addresses what users find relevant. Furthermore, it can be a way to improve the bond of loyalty between users and media.

Another aspect is that media focus on retaining subscribers instead of drawing in new people as a result of the drop in advertisements.

In a time where media struggle to get audience attention, it is vital to reach the users with content they can relate and respond to, and they feel affected by. This is one of the conclusions in a [new DMJX report](#) on how Danish media work with audience engagement to reach their audiences (2021).

Twelve professionals (informants) from four media (two local, two national) are interviewed about their professional approach to audience engagement and stress that an important role for journalists is to be a kind of seismograph that detects, registers, perceives and documents what is happening in various communities and in the society in general. In other words, they all think it's important to get closer to peoples' lives. The interviewed professionals use different tools to do that. Some use data to count clicks and reading time and to detect which articles are most popular, and to some extent future reporting is adjusted to meet what is wanted. Others use dialogue, co-operation and presence in communities to gain relevance, but they all want to build up a more intimate relation to their audiences.

In the effort to reconnect with the people, new kinds of jobs have emerged such as editor for audience development, editor for data and analysis, journalists who specifically produces for YouTube-audiences, but it is difficult to make up the market share of these type of jobs. In job-databases they are not categorized in searchable ways. A current study at DMJX is looking into job advertisements for the journalistic market since 2008, approximately 4000 job adverts. The aim is to look at the demanded qualifications and competences for journalists such as technical skills, human characteristics and skills in presentation. The report with deadline spring 2022 is delayed, but the report may shed a light on which new skills are looked for.

In general, media have found different ways to move closer to the citizens, but that doesn't reflect the interest in courses about dialogue or constructive approaches.

The mid- career training section at DMJX, which is the largest provider of media mid-career training in Denmark, turns over 50 million a year and courses on dialogue and constructive journalism only made up three million from 2017-2019. We have looked into this period, pre-Corona, because Covid 19 affected the market for mid-career training heavily and almost all courses were cancelled during the pandemic.

In the period DMJX offered 15 courses with titles as "In interaction with the audience", "New media in the Netherlands," "Involve the users" or "Constructive Journalism - add nuances to your stories", and three of the courses were cancelled due to lack of interest. Only 142 people attended one of the offered courses during the three years. The most popular courses are and were traditional methodology courses in video production, podcasting and how to write better, and in general most of the participants have other professional backgrounds than journalism.

Michael Aage Jensen, manager of the national provider of media courses in Denmark, Mediernes Efteruddannelse, informs that the mid-career training institution has offered courses in constructive journalism and public-oriented journalism during the recent 2-3-4 years, but without overwhelming success. Nevertheless, Jensen has experienced, that with time more media professionals show interest for courses in this field. It is also a fact that media houses, especially those with local and regional audiences, arranges in-houses courses about building closer relations to their audiences.

### 2.3.2. Germany:

In a study for the Otto Brenner Foundation, journalism scholars Leif Kramp and Stephan Weichert have surveyed the constructive journalism landscape in Germany. Their report "[Nachrichten mit Perspektive](#)" (News with Perspective) is based on 12 professional interviews. It shows that the ideas of constructive journalism have not yet entered German newsrooms systematically. But there are encouraging examples in various media as, some of them in the context of science journalism.

In a [follow-up study](#) published in October 2021, Kramp and Weichert presented 10 journalistic projects during the Covid-19 crisis which tried to find a non-negative approach. They conclude that during the pandemic, newsrooms have become more aware of the need for constructive journalism and that they offer more training opportunities for their writers and editors. The researchers do, however, warn that there is a thin line between empowerment and paternalism, and recommend that the self-critical debate on journalistic attitudes and commitments should continue. They argue that it takes “patience, creativity, and courage” to counter news avoidance.

Networking seems to be the key, and this strategy is used by many proponents of constructive journalism to foster constructive approaches in newsrooms. The public broadcaster “Norddeutscher Rundfunk (NDR)” continues to host its “[Constructive Journalism Day](#)” once a year. Constructive journalism has also been a topic at the “[Medien Zukunft Festival](#)” in 2020. And a new [network of climate journalists](#) is setting up a working group on constructive climate journalism. Recently, former fellow at the Constructive Institute Ellen Heinrichs has founded the [Bonn Institute](#) with colleagues and media partners which wants to make journalism “more solutions-oriented, richer in perspective and increasingly dialogue-based.” So, for the first time, constructive journalism will get an institutional basis in Germany.

In the last couple of years, several journalistic projects dedicated to constructive reporting and/or dialogue with their communities have been launched and have gained attention, as e.g. the magazine “[enorm](#)”. Some of these projects address local communities as “[RUMS](#)” in Münster and “[Relevanzreporter](#)” in Nürnberg. Others are extensions of large newsrooms as “[Die 49](#)”, a mini-public created by “Die Zeit”, or “[Werkstatt Demokratie](#)” (Democracy Lab) of “Süddeutsche Zeitung”. And one start-up, “[tactile news](#)”, supports and consults editorial offices by offering a software that helps newsrooms to listen to their audiences. These examples show that German newsrooms not only engage with their audiences in more meaningful ways, but that they also begin to look for professionals who bring a new mindset with them.

### 2.3.3. Netherlands:

Based on her PhD study for the University of Utrecht researcher Renée van der Nat remarks [on the website of Journalismlab](#) that ‘Journalists and news media are looking for new ways to engage the public. The behavior of that audience therefore plays an increasingly important role in the journalistic process’. The *stimuleringsfonds voor de journalistiek* (Dutch Journalism Fund) detects in its [online trendreport 2021](#) also a shift in de Dutch media toward a bigger role for the audience in the journalistic process: ‘Citizens can contribute ideas during a news production and help unravel an item. They may be able to propose their own topics to editorial boards more often. Examples include facilitating dialogue.’ This need for connection is also a point Irene Costera Meijers addresses in her recent study ‘[What is Valuable Journalism](#)’ (Costera Meijer, 2021). She calls this ‘mutual understanding’. In her meta-analysis of multiple research projects, she shows that valuable journalism has three key factors: Learning something new, getting recognition and increasing mutual understanding. In another article Costera Meijer (2020) describes the debate around the gradual turn towards the audience that Dutch media have been making from 1995 until 2000. In the discussion the concept of ‘quality’ that had been blocking a shift towards the audience has been replaced by the concept of ‘innovation’ has ‘become so powerful that it appeared to overrule any resistance to reckon with audiences’ (Costera Meijer, 2020, p 2337).

Mijke Slot of Erasmus University is investigating the digital interactions between news media and their audiences. In an article about her recent study she reports that "to involve the audience and to establish a relationship with them is an important topic in all (Dutch) news organisations I have visited". Although there are large differences audience interaction and participation are not yet part of daily practice in most news organisations, though. But she also reports that a growing number of news organisation are experimenting with audience interaction.

Taking a closer look at the news media in the Netherlands, you can detect this trend already. Previously we saw news media mainly present their public statements on social media, where a short reaction was the only possibility for a contribution from the public, you now see news media increasingly asking for direct input for stories. Even sites like the online news site NU.nl- a site which was focused on bringing fast-news, now ask their readers if they have further questions they need to get answered ([see the online appeal](#) and the [online follow-up article with the answers](#)).

But also a quality newspaper *De Volkskrant* have organized a special department to engage their audience in their production process in a more organized manner via '[de Open Redactie](#)' ([the open newsdesk](#)), where registered readers are regularly asked for input for an article or their opinion about a production. Dutch pioneer of constructive journalism, Bas Mesters, also mentions the *Volkskrant* as one of the important examples, as well as recent national public television series like 'Sander en de Kloof (Sander and the gap)' and 'Scheefgroei' (Skewed Growth) that explicitly incorporate audience participation. According to him this is part of a wider development in journalism, which doesn't (even) operate under the flag of constructive journalism most of the time. One media outlet [Pointer](#) takes it a step further and although they do not formulate their approach as constructive journalism per se, if you look at their basic principles their starting point is clearly a public-oriented approach matching with to the principles of constructive journalism. In their '[about us](#)' on their website they state that: 'For you, with you. Investigative journalism that starts with you. Solutions to Today's Issues. Always transparent about our approach'. *Pointer* is also one of the six media organisations that serve as clients to the students of the course Public Oriented Journalism at Windesheim University. All of them participate because they want to learn from the experiments of the students and sometimes implement methods of audience interaction in their own journalistic practice.

[Pointer](#): For you, with you. Investigative journalism that starts with you. Solutions to Today's Issues. Always transparent about our approach'

#### 2.3.4. Conclusion:

Studies from all partner institutions indicate a shift in journalism towards a more dialoguebased constructive kind of journalism. Although the idea of constructive journalism has not entered the German newsrooms systematically, there are encouraging examples in various media. In The Netherlands a PhD study and a trendreport from 2021 detect a shift in de Dutch media toward a bigger role for the audience in the journalistic process and the same trend goes for Denmark.

We have interviewed some of the frontrunning journalists and editors in this new approach to journalism. They stress that audience engagement qualifies journalism and also force them to rethink they role as journalists and editors and act in a more modest way and listen to what is relevant to people. They also point out the need for new skills to make dialogue-based and constructive journalism professionally.

Our students eye witnessed the application of dialoguebased and constructive journalism during their internships. Especially the Dutch and the German students reported that media were in interaction with their audiences. If different degrees and in different amount of ways and mostly digitally. Danish students reported that lack of time and media culture were obstacles for using dialogue-methods. That result may be erratic, since only a small amount of the Danish students had answered the survey.

All in all interviews, surveys, studies and reports indicate that there is a market for dialoguebased and constructive journalism, and that market is growing slowly. Probably because this approach also implicates a new role for journalism and new ways to think of yourself as a journalist.

### 3. Midcareer training perspectives

In the application for the Dialogue Erasmus+ project we promised to include an outline of prototypes for curricula components and didactic concepts to be implemented by mid-career training institutions in Intellectual Output 3.

In this project our primary effort has been to make a catalogue of skills and competencies needed for dialogue-based and constructive journalism. We are still working on descriptions of the methods and the ambition is to present them in an Inspirational Guide (a website) for journalism teachers and journalists, who want to work professionally with dialogue-based journalism. We call the elements building blocks and we arrange them in in two major sections, respectively mindset and methods.

It's our conviction that our building blocks could make up the backbone for mid-career courses. We have indications that at least some professionals even more than students are in lack of skills and competences to conduct dialogue-journalism professionally and in the entire journalistic process from idea to comment.

You can choose and combine the blocks in several ways to meet the required needs and competencies. One course could emphasize the expanded role of the journalist and dive into the mindset part of the building blocks, other courses could focus on the different methods to involve the public at different stages in the journalistic process (idea, focus, research, co-creation, feedback) and others again could focus on professional SoMe work or on setting up and conducting constructive debates. These ideas are all from the building block catalogue.

Consequently, we haven't made special components or curricula for mid-career training. In fact we did combine some of the blocks in a mid-career training course that DMJX offered twice. Unfortunately, the course was cancelled due to few participants. The course was a general introduction to dialogue-based journalism:

#### ***Renew journalism by means of dialogue***

*"Only few people are willing to pay for journalism. The money from advertisement disappears in limited media budgets.*

*News desserts scatter in Denmark and the rest of the world and confidence in media is under pressure.*

*Luckily a growing number of media and organisations have started listening to citizens to do journalism, that is relevant and important to the citizens.*

*Focus on this course is methods to listen better as a stepping stone to improve journalism. Better listening is the key to create engaging journalism and to make parties in a debate disagree in a more fruitful way.*



*You will meet Danish and international journalists, that have succeeded in involving citizens in the editorial proces. The newspaper Fyns Stiftstidende and the online media Zetland have opened editorial meetings for the readers and the result is other stories, new perspectives and angles.*

*Every week The Radioshow, Public Service, asks listeners for solutions to problems and experiences that listeners prefer 2+2 instead of 4.*

*Aarhus Stiftstidende and TV2 Østjylland facilitate Facebook communities for mothers, AGF fans (sucer) and urban development and the users repay with ideas, qualified debate and loyalty.*

*It turns out that new angles and overlooked stories emerges, if journalists dare to see people outside the editorial office as resources and collaborators and not only as sources, cases and trolls in the comment sections.*

*This course presents concrete methods and practical tools to strengten the dialogue between citizens and journalists and takes a step further and introduces a new method to bridgebuilding between contending parties.*

*The course is developed in cooperation between DMJX, Kaas og Mulvad and Constructive Institute.”*

The first day the course would present the mindset and an overview of the models from the building blocks focusing on what media gain by involving the users in the journalistic process and how it expands your role as a journalist.

The second day would present best practice examples from news media and, depending on the participants’ skills and experiences with public powered journalism, have a closer look at one of the building blocks in the journalistic wheel. And the third day were dedicated to methods to more constructive debates.

#### Building blocks in a Diploma

DMJX has for years offered a diploma “In collaboration with the users” (I samspil med brugerne). The diploma focus on community centered engagement and the provider wants us to present the journalistic wheel and our very concrete engagement methods in the autumn module, which to us is good news, since we are keen to let our methods come to work also in mid-career training institutions.

## 4. Outline for curriculum components – building blocks

We have decided to launch the components for curriculum in an Inspirational Guide, when we finalize the project September 2022. We are working on the Inspirational Guide at the moment, and we untill we launch it, you can have a look at the building blocks in IO 2 page 20-29.