

## DIALOGUE.

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



Erasmus+

Teaching constructive and dialogue-based journalism to B.A. students

Learning from each other, learning together

September 2021

**DMJX**  
Danmarks Medie-  
og Journalisthøjskole

hogeschool  
**Windesheim**

**HOCHSCHULE  
DER MEDIEN**

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# 1. Introduction

DIALOGUE is a three-year Erasmus+ project, a strategic partnership of DMJX in Aarhus (Denmark), Windesheim University in Zwolle (Netherlands) and Hochschule der Medien in Stuttgart (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 B.A. students.

With this second Output, published after the project's second year, we have tried to improve and test our modules and concepts. We take a first look at market perspectives and potentials for audience development, dialogue-based journalism and constructive journalism as permanent components in journalism education in Europe. It contains an outline of pilot curriculum components and didactic concepts and methods, building knowledge and competencies in teaching in these areas. These components and concepts have a considerable transferability potential as the developed modules are validated by ECTS. The report will also look ahead at the third Output, which will include an outline of prototypes for curricula components and didactic concepts to be implemented by mid-career training institutions. This will consist of a handbook of building blocks.

## 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 mid-career 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 the Constructive Institute founded by Ulrik Haagerup. Annette Holm has spent her past year as a fellow at the 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's 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 usually publish content in cooperation with media partners, sometimes an overarching topic as 'liveable cities' or 'life after Covid-19' is set.

## 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.

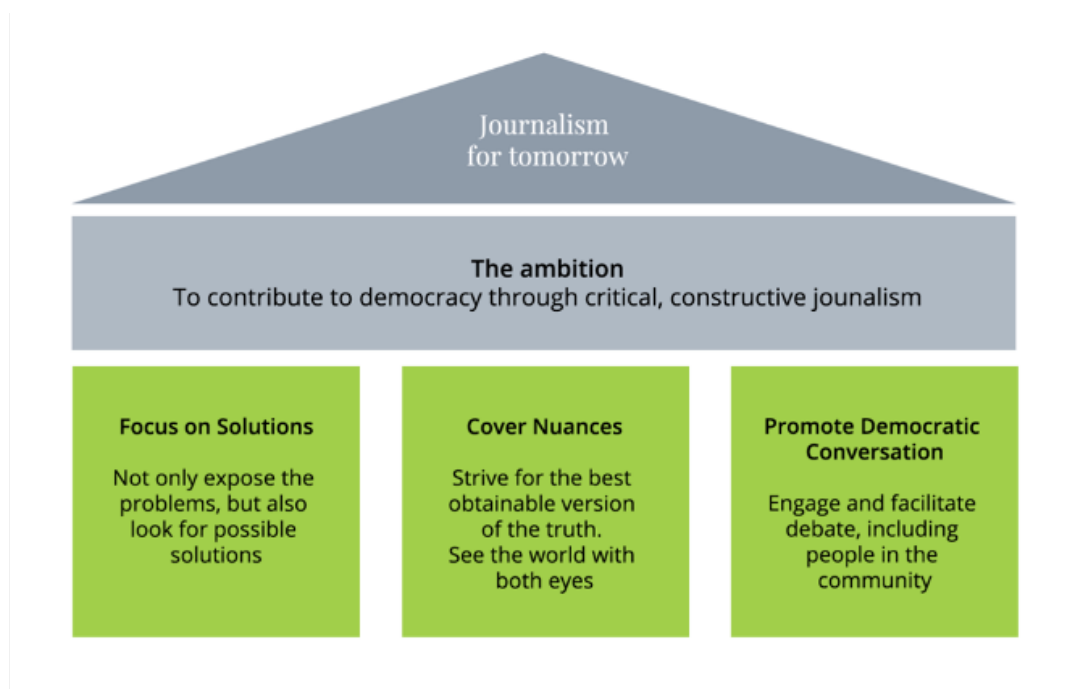
The age of mass communication is dwindling and gradually replaced by a new age in which a network communication model is replacing the mass communication model central in the pre-digital 20<sup>th</sup> century (e.g. Peters & Broersma, 2017; Hermans & Drok, 2018). The news media have lost their dominant position as information disseminators and thereby the power to define what is news. They share their gatekeeper's function with many competitors in the public realm. Their audience has more possibilities to gather and select information on their own terms. People still want to be informed about important issues in society, but there is also a need for relevance, context and diversity. Furthermore, people seem to appreciate it when news also includes possible answers to problems and when news is helpful to find answers to questions they have.

Journalism has difficulty to maintain trust; especially with the younger generation trust is not taken for granted and needs to be earned. Journalism has to face the challenge to improve its relationship with the audience and reconnect with citizens in society. This asks for journalists who include a more public oriented approach in their work such as constructive journalism.

In addition, journalism has to cope with some threats to democracy such as the rise of social divides and turmoil, sources spreading misinformation, and upcoming polarization. It is our contention that journalistic services are important for a well-functioning democracy – albeit in a somewhat different way than before. In this line, we believe that constructive journalism could serve as a basis to develop innovations that meet the current need for relevant journalism.

Despite the fact that there are some differences in the definition of concepts the three institutions agree on the basic assumptions as shown in the model developed by the Constructive Institute in Aarhus (Figure 1).

Constructive journalism expands mainstream media by focusing more on the public agenda rather than the official/institutional agenda (Gyldensted, 2015; Haagerup, 2017). In the news production process, a constructive approach is used to report on events including solution-oriented, future-oriented and action-oriented perspectives instead of a conflict frame in which problems and contradictions are central. An important principle in the constructive approach is that journalists should empower and engage their audience and produce news that stimulates citizen's consciousness and self-sustainability and incorporates cooperation with them.



*Figure 1. The Constructive House. Source: Constructive Institute (<https://constructiveinstitute.org/what/the-three-pillars/>)*

In this project we believe that journalists should focus on communities and facilitate a dialogue in which an open public debate is stimulated. 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 (pillar 1), strives for inclusive context with different perspectives for nuanced reporting (pillar 2) and engages in and facilitates an open dialogue (pillar 3).

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.

The participants consider constructive journalism to be a mindset more than a set of tools for the journalist. It is only natural that such a mindset can lead to different concrete outcomes in journalism courses just as it is practiced in different ways by media who feel inspired by the discourse around constructive journalism. There is not one perfect way of doing constructive journalism.

In this project we treat the fostering of dialogue as one of the important tenets to engage the audience, which is one of the core principles of constructive journalism. 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.

The three institutes in this project each experiment in their own way with dialogue as an innovative journalistic approach. In the project the approaches used within the courses of the three journalism education institutes represent the practical core: public oriented production (Zwolle), dialogue-based journalism (Aarhus), audience development and engagement (Stuttgart).

In discussing the three respective courses we have come to the understanding that in Aarhus this dialogue is approached in a very practical and concrete manner. It involves a production process in which the public, or the community they belong to, is engaged in a direct manner. The experience is that journalists working in this way discover that being in dialogue with the community almost naturally moves them towards constructive ways of reporting when they reflect on it afterwards. The Institute in Zwolle enriched its course with dialogue practices from Aarhus and adds more formal audience research to inspire journalistic practices and to give student journalists insight about what impact their productions have on the audience. In Stuttgart, next to theoretical aspects of constructive journalism, audience engagement with journalism is the focus in the journalistic process. Audience engagement is conceptualized as an important consequence of constructive reporting.

Dialogue needs to have a purpose. Both to make it relevant for journalists and editors, and to make people feel truly heard, taken seriously and - through that - engaged in the democratic conversation.

The participants of the dialogue project have also come to the understanding that it is important to distinguish between the community that media can create, serve and help sustaining, and the target audience of the medium they use. However, the community and the target audience can overlap or be the same.

This understanding of the common ground and the basic similarities within the different practical approaches is a learning result of discussing the content and the principles of our courses. Integration especially took place within the joint workshops with teachers and students of the three institutes as well as guest lectures and the exchange of literature and course materials.

## 2. Adaptations in our curricula

In the course of the DIALOGUE project, the three schools have developed and updated their related courses in which they teach dialogue-based journalism, public oriented journalism and audience engagement. In this process, they have adopted, adapted and integrated elements of each other's courses. Also, guest lectures have been held at each other's schools, and new elements to all three courses have been introduced and experimented with in the common workshops.

In this chapter the three schools describe the improvements they have tried to make as well as their evaluations of these, starting with a description of their course and subsequently looking back and forward.

## 2.1 Dialogue-based journalism in Aarhus

When working with constructive journalism in general – and dialogue-based journalism in particular – it is inevitable to reconsider the journalistic role and through that the journalistic mindset. So, when teaching the dialogue-based approach to students it is a very important component to work with the mindset of the student. Doing this through class discussions is of course one way of getting the idea of how the students are juggling and perceiving the ideas of constructive journalism. But to get a deeper understanding of each individual student's mindset, and how the course developed, aligned with, or perhaps challenged the student's own understanding of journalism and the journalistic role, we have introduced a new, extra assignment since the spring semester 2020: An essay written by each student individually aimed for schoolmates, colleagues and others engaged in the discussion about the future of journalism.

And since then, we have been able to measure two new things when evaluating both the projects and our own teaching:

- 1) Do the students actually understand what we have been trying to teach them? Do they understand theory, models, methods and the higher purpose so well, that they can form their own opinion about it, juggle it and explain it to a third party?
- 2) Do they in the end of it all see a purpose of what we have taught them?

If we start with the second question, the safe conclusion is, that they generally all see the purpose of dialogue-based journalism. After having taken a class in dialogue journalism, all of them without exception see it as a part of journalism in the future. Some of them say, that it has changed their mindset and how they perceive their role as a journalist, some have just adapted some new tools to do some more relevant journalism – or just smarter research – in the everyday production. Either way, we believe we have succeeded. We believe constructive journalism to be an expansion of journalism and the journalistic role and toolbox, not a revolution. Over the semesters the quality of these reflections on the purpose of constructive journalism have gradually increased.

But when it came to the first aspect we could now measure – did they actually understand, what we have been trying to teach them – we could not be as satisfied with our own teachings. Last year they were clearly still confused about *what exactly dialogue-based journalism is*, and at the same time, they we're having a hard time telling *which new methods and tools they had been taught* in order to do dialogue-based journalism.

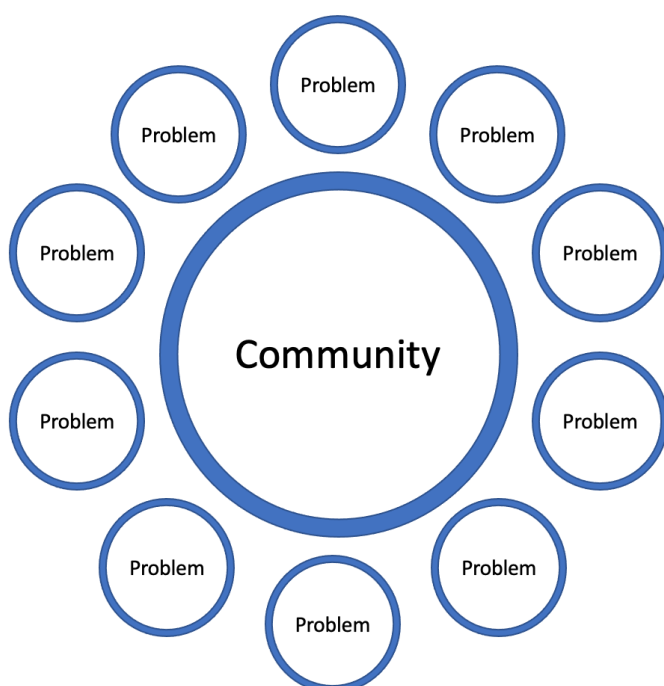
Since we saw this pattern, these two things have been our focus points when developing the course and curriculum for the past year. And when reading the latest evaluation and essays for the spring semester '21, we have definitely made improvements, but we are still not quite there yet. Within this DIALOGUE-project we have come a long way in defining what dialogue-based journalism is, and the methods and tools specifically needed to do DBJ are becoming clearer. So, in the coming semesters (21-22) our focus will be on how to teach these tools and methods, and on being clearer on how we present the definition of dialogue-based journalism to the students.

In the next sections we will in more detail firstly explain, what we tried to change to move in this direction the past year and how it went, and secondly, we will look ahead and describe our plans for the next semester A21.

### 2.1.1 What we did (fall semester 2020 and spring semester 2021)

First, a short introduction of the course. It is a fulltime, 20 ECTS course placed on the fourth semester, just before 1,5-year of internship. It is not a mandatory course, since the students can either choose a course in dialogue-based journalism, investigative journalism, data journalism, or strategic communication. Each semester 30-40 students have attended the dialogue-based course. This course has been the most applied for, alongside the course in investigative journalism. This shows that it is a popular course that resonates with the new generation of journalists.

In the course the students have worked with two larger assignments, practicing two different starting points for dialogue-based journalism: Either starting with a community, or starting with a problem. The first assignment is called 'Listen to X' and starts on the very first day of the course. It has expanded from lasting just a few days three semesters ago till lasting six weeks in the spring semester 2021. No matter the timeframe, the starting point of this task is a specific community – in this case united by geography. We have worked with both small neighborhoods in Aarhus and entire municipalities on the brink of becoming news deserts. Either way, when starting with a community, the task for the journalist is to leave one's own agenda and angles behind and in a structured way listen to the community to figure out the relevant problems, dilemmas, questions or needs this community is facing, and let this set the agenda of the journalistic work. The students work in larger groups (6-8 students) on building a new, dialogue-based local media, where they publish their journalistic productions. The main goal is that the students practice showing up without agenda and collaborate with a community to transform their – sometimes – small, personal experiences into relevant, engaging stories covering societal issues.



*Figure 2. The flower-model Starting with a community.*

The second assignment is the final exam, and it has lasted from 4-6 weeks. Here the starting point is different, since the students – now in groups of three – begin by choosing a well-known societal problem or dilemma to cover. The task is now to identify relevant communities affected by or with influence on this problem, and afterwards choose one of these communities to collaborate with and engage in the further journalistic work on this societal problem in order to bring forward more nuances, possible solutions and democratic conversation (the three pillars of the journalistic house, figure 1). This starting point allows the students to set the agenda and make the dialogue more focused from the beginning, and the goal is then staying open in the process and collaborating with the community from idea, over production to interactions after publication. Basically, seeing the community as resources and not just sources.



Figure 3. The flower-model Starting with a problem.

## MODELS AND MINDSET

In order to teach the *mindset* needed no matter the starting point of the dialogue, we have introduced two main models as the framework for our teaching:

- 1) the constructive house;
- 2) the journalistic wheel.

The constructive house as described in the terminology chapter (1.2) sets dialogue-based journalism in relation to the constructive journalism movement by placing it within the third pillar of the constructive house. This has helped a lot to clear up the terminology confusion among the students. Constructive journalism is the umbrella term, dialogue-based journalism is one approach in working constructively.

But we also needed to be clearer in *how and when* to work dialogue-based. And for this we adapted the *circle of engagement* (Figure 4.1 and 4.2), which was first used as a term by executive emerging media editor at Wall Street Journal Carla Zanoni, but introduced to us in the book *The Journalistic Connection* written in 2018 by the two Danish journalists Søren Shultz Jørgensen and Per Westergård.

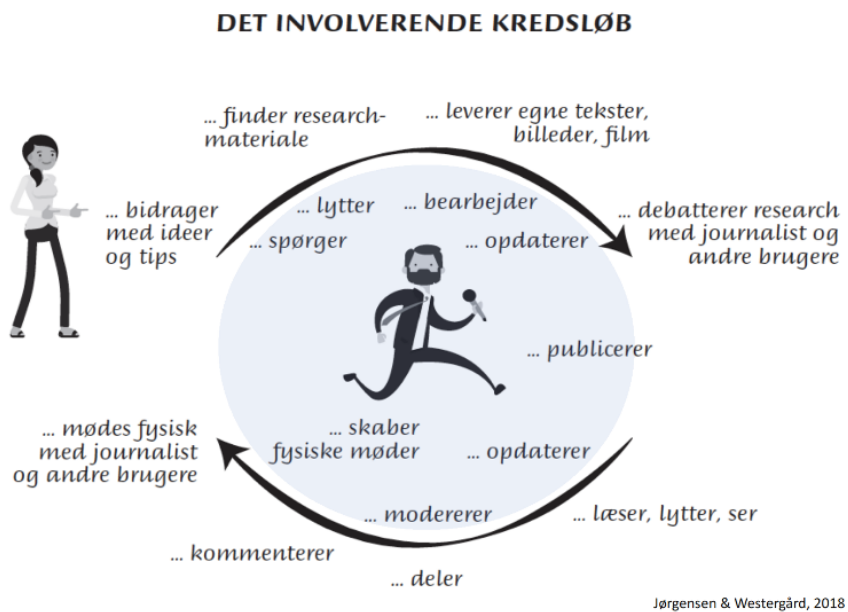


Figure 4.1. The circle of engagement (original version in Danish).

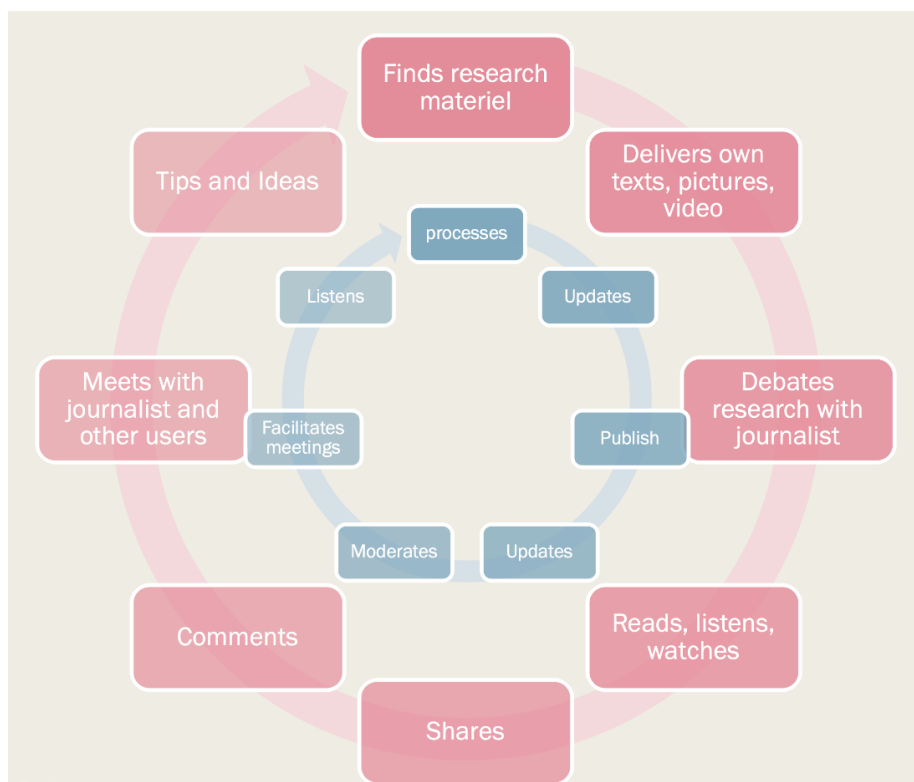


Figure 4.2. The circle of engagement (translated version).

We had shown this model in lectures on previous semesters, but in autumn 2020 it became the step-by-step guide the students had to follow through the journalistic process. Involving the audience in all the different parts of the journalistic process requires a clear understanding of the chronology of the journalistic process – and different methods to engage depending on where you are in that process.



Figure 5. *The Wheel of Journalism.*

In order to make the different steps of the process clearer, we stripped off the engagement layer and tried to make a very simple model, that just described the attempted chronological order of events in the life for a journalistic production. The result was *The Wheel of Journalism*, which serves two purposes. First, making it obvious to the students that the overall process of making great journalism is the same, whether you make breaking news, TV documentaries, investigative articles, a live radio-show – dialogue-based or not. The only thing that changes are the methods used along the way, and the amount of time needed and prioritized in the different phases. This emphasizes the idea of this type of journalism not being a revolution of journalism, but a widening of the journalistic role and toolbox.

In a course focused on doing dialogue-based journalism – meaning involving audience and communities in all the phases of the journalistic process with the purpose of making more relevant and engaging journalism – it requires even more tools on how to find people, how to build trust, how to ask, how to collaborate with non-journalists, how to reach people on relevant platforms, how to moderate, how to facilitate conversation etc. than usual. And this is the second purpose of the wheel: making it clear and concrete which tools are relevant when being dialogue-based in the different phases of the journalistic process – step by step.

## TOOLS AND METHODS

There are different tools for working dialogue-based and involving the public in our journalism depending on where you are in the process. But while story-telling and investigative research have plenty of tool-kits and books to lean on when teaching the methods, the teaching in dialogue-based journalism is fairly new, and we are building the car by driving it. To stay in this picture, we are not inventing the car or even the parts, and many of the following tools and methods will most likely seem familiar from other journalistic work. But a gathering of all the different ways journalists can involve audience/communities in the journalistic process is a new kind of car.

When teaching different methods of involvement, we have since the spring semester 2021 used the Wheel of Journalism pretty consistently in the communication with the students – and we will do the same here to give you a clearer understanding of what we mean by working dialogue-based in the different phases and give examples of how students have done it in their projects.

A more detailed plan for the continuing work, with a list of the tools and methods and inspiration, is presented in section 3. *Building blocks for a curriculum* (p. 23).

## **Knowledge**

*Listening to conversations to gain knowledge about a topic – not just experts and reports*

Example: One group of students worked with the issue of sexism and tough language in gaming. A topic where experts, reports and other news coverage wouldn't give the students the required knowledge. To know how this affected young gamers and how bad the issue actually was, the students needed to listen to the ongoing conversation. Through already existing Facebook-groups, sub-reddits and by gaming themselves, the students learned that the toxic language was not only an issue for female gamers, but a general issue in the gaming community.

## **Idea**

*Letting audience/community influence the agenda by collecting their ideas for stories*

Example: In September 2020 the class had to create a new local, dialogue-based media platform for the city of Aarhus, called 'Listen to Aarhus'. The first task was to figure out what to write about, and instead of coming up with their own ideas, the students were sent out into the streets to gather the questions of people living and working there. Asking "What don't you know, that I can find out for you?" was their only task for the day, and the groups freestyled and made signs and coffee. During one day the students collected 180 questions that citizens wanted an answer to. The questions ranged from: "What is going to happen in the area now that the ferry berth is moving?" over "How is a double-diagnosed person (abuse + mental illness) handled in the psychiatric system in Aarhus?" to "How will the new EU rules for colors affect tattoo artists in Aarhus?". And the students were in general happily surprised with the relevance of the ideas they had gotten from asking the community.



Picture 1. 'Come and talk to three journalists', said the sign at Aarhus Harbor.

## **Research**

*Cooperating with audience/community by seeing them as resources – not just sources*

Example: Another group of students chose the issue with gender inequality in the health system for their final project. They set up a questionnaire for doctors and medical researchers, and asked them for their experiences with this issue, what the core of this issue was, and to point the students in the direction on experts and reports on the matter. And through all the response they got from the community, they were made aware of several issues, such as new medicine only being tested on males leaving it less effective on women, that symptoms of a stroke can be different for men and women and because of that, strokes are sometimes overlooked with women – and they were made aware of research, it would have taken them much longer to find themselves, had they not asked the community this openly.

## **Angle**

*Giving audience/community a say in what to angle on for the story to be most relevant to them*

Example: A group of students on the spring semester worked on the topic of urban development and the tearing down of old buildings to make room for new, taller ones in Aarhus. A tendency that was meeting a lot of resistance and uproar from a community of citizens who believed the new, modern building to be hideous and the development therefor slowly destroying the city. The group of students had planned to focus on the possible solution to save and renovate old buildings instead of tearing them down, but when they asked the community, they were more curious to know how on earth the hated buildings had been built in the first place. The students listen and changed the angle, and made a series of portraits of some of the most discussed new buildings (of course chosen by vote by the community on Facebook). Not to criticize the buildings (which local papers had printed plenty of articles that did already), but to explain the process of how it came to exactly that building ending up there.

## **Targeting**

*Listening to/understanding the target audience, so the story can be told with the most relevant format, timing and platform*

One group of students in the autumn class focused on how the pandemic had changed work conditions for caretakers in the elder care, and learned that some things had actually changed for the better. The community (the caretakers) really wanted their bosses at the municipal office to hear their inputs and ideas for the future, so the group of students spent some time getting in dialogue with the managers in the elder care's administration departments in different municipalities, after they had figured out what the story was. Through dialogue with the intended target group, they needed input on what was most important to focus on in order to get them to listen and also, were these busy managers would actually read it. These inputs helped with the structure of the story – and also pointed the students in direction of a relevant digital niche magazine, that all the managers got the weekly newsletter from. In the end, the students reached a relevant audience with a relevant format on a relevant platform.

## **(Story)telling**

*Listening to/understanding target audience and adjusting the storytelling to their consumption conditions and preferences*

Storytelling is one of the core skills in the journalistic toolbox and maybe also a major part of the journalistic self-understanding. So, to give up role of being center stage, presenting a scoop, is hard. But opening the journalistic process may also include opening the storytelling process to get viewpoints on the most appropriate storytelling. But the storytelling models are more or less universal, and it is not something we have prioritized to spend a lot of the teaching time on at this course.

## **Production**

*Letting the community/audience be directly involved in the production*

The group of students working with the issue of toxicity in gaming, chose to host a workshop for 15-year-old E-sport talents at a boarding school as their final project, with the goal of coming up with a list of rules and guidelines for keeping the online games a good environment. These should not be dictated by the adults or experts, but by the young gamers themselves. In the end, it was their product. The journalists facilitated the talk and helped with the layout in the end. But the community made it themselves, after a great deal of discussion facilitated by the journalists.

Another example is a few years old. Here a group of students worked with the community of a small town in a rural area, that had no news coverage anymore which the community saw as a problem. So the students created a local, digital news media alongside a pop-up journalism school, where they taught volunteers from the town the basics of journalistic storytelling, ethics and working methods, so they could be empowered and tell the town's stories even after our students had left.

## **Distribution**

*Taking responsibility for reaching the relevant audience on relevant platforms*

Example: Last autumn a group of students had cooperated with a community of students at university living with dyslexia – a disability not often talked about in relation to the adult education system. The final product was a web doc (which was of course also read aloud) and a short documentary portraying the life of university students with reading problems to try to raise awareness – among other students with and without dyslexia. To distribute it, they got access to all the different Facebook groups for students on the seven different universities in Denmark and posted a short version of the video there with link to the web doc. They also got in contact with a dyslexia youth organization and asked them to share the short doc, which they happily did, and the video got 14.000 views. A number, the students would never have reached themselves, if they had not asked for help to share their journalism with the target audience through relevant channels.

## **Reaction**

*Being present in comments sections after publication – listening, responding and moderating*

Example: One group of students chose to focus on the issue of gender bias in playing musical instruments, and they invited kid's music teachers into a Facebook group to facilitate a conversation about which the role of the early music education plays in this issue, and on possible solutions. They published all their journalistic productions in this FB-group to qualify the conversation along the way, and used the comment section under each publication as a starting point for new inputs and perspectives by continuing the dialogue here; asking questions and moderating is the tone got too harsh. By taking reactions to their journalism seriously, they got a very engaged audience and a flow of new ideas for the next stories adding new angles on the issue.

## **Reflection**

*Facilitating dialogue about the published journalism and the issue/solutions covered*

Example: As a part of the January 2021-workshop of this DIALOGUE-project, the task for the attending groups of students from the three schools was to prepare an online debate on the basis of their final projects done in their respective courses. The audience was international, and the purpose of the debate was to have people with different views on and experiences with the specific topics engage in a dialogue after being presented with the same 'facts' in the student's productions, which were shown at the beginning of the debate. The debate lasted 1,5 hours and was moderated by the students with the purpose of bringing forward nuances and dilemmas and leaving room for disagreement without it turning into a fight of right and wrong.

### 2.1.2 What we will change (improvements for next semester)

So how did it go the past year? Overall, we have gotten far in getting the students to understand, how dialogue journalism is a part of constructive journalism. Getting the terminology and purpose right, is not only important for the students' own sake. It has proved an important thing when working dialogue-based, that the journalist is able to explain to community and audience, what this approach is, and what they can expect from us, and what is expected from them in the collaboration. So, this transparency is a thing to practice as well.

When it comes to concrete methods, the students are still asking for more. They have gotten far in thinking outside the box in *where* to reach people and where to allow them into the journalistic process. But when it comes to *how* to do it in a fruitful way, they are still lacking tools. How to change the conversation? Both between journalists and communities and within the community itself? Therefore, the focus on next semester will be more on the following:

1) An even clearer presentation of dialogue-based journalism, which we have come a long way in defining (see section 1.2), but we still need a clearer and more theoretical definition of a dialogue in general. We will try to implement the principles described below (Madsen 2012):

- Dialogue is a special version of conversation with the intent to understand, clarify or uncover something or somebody.
- In a dialogue the purpose is not to approve or agree, but to understand.
- You are open to change your mind, you are curious and want to explore without assessing or denouncing the other part.
- You can put yourself in the other person's place.
- Clarification can lead to mutual understanding. It can prevent conflict or conflict escalation and open for reflections and exchange of experiences.
- Dialogue is contagious as its way of communication appeals to the other person involved.

Integrating dialogue in this form in the journalistic work process develops both the relationship and conversation journalists have with sources in general, and the conversations they facilitate between people with different opinions.

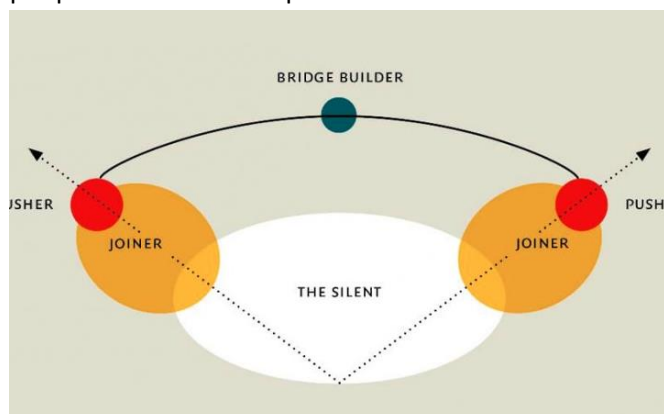


Figure 6. Journalists should focus on the silent middle. © Bart Brandsma

2) Use this model illustrating the framework of the Dutch philosopher and journalist Bart Brandsma and include the aspects of polarization dynamics, as we were introduced to at the workshop in June '21. It is a dialogue-based approach that tries to facilitate a conversation/debate without pushing to the poles. Polarization in itself doesn't have to be negative, since it may help to clarify issues and viewpoints, but when both sides don't treat each other respectfully anymore, Brandsma argues that journalists need to stop focusing on the poles and stop trying to be bridgebuilders. Instead they should focus on the silent middle in order to depolarize and add in more nuances, instead of adding fuel to the polarization by focusing on those who disagree the most. This we plan to explore much

more in the next semester by making a journalist-facilitated conversation about a polarized topic be a part of the assignment.

3) Bring in more concrete methods and tools not only focusing on who we ask, but also how we ask. In other words: interview techniques on how to interview in a more constructive way. We consider inviting other occupations such as anthropologists to give input. Also, two former fellows at the Constructive Institute have just this August published a new handbook on constructive journalism based on the structure of the three pillars. This book provides concrete tools – also on interview technique and will be part of the curriculum at the following semester.

4) Give more time for final assignment: Getting a good dialogue with a community needs trust. Trust needs time to build. Therefore, the students will choose one societal problem or dilemma at the start of the course, which they will work on the entire time. This was some of the feedback we received from our students after the workshop in June '21, where they had been inspired by the course at Windesheim, which was 10 weeks on the same topic.

## 2.2 Audience engagement in Stuttgart

At the beginning of the DIALOGUE project in 2019, we have adapted the course 'International Content Production' to exploring the benefits of constructive and dialogue-based journalism. About 30 students attend this mandatory course every semester, roughly a third of them come from universities abroad. All students are in their third year and have a background in journalism, public relations or communication science. Many of them have completed at least a six months internship. So, we can build on some professional experience, but this experience can be in fields other than journalism.

From April 2020 on, the course has been fully digital. International students were allowed to attend from their respective home countries. This has been an extra challenge for the students who are required to work in fixed teams, in which different competences are combined. In the winter term 2020/21, we collaborated with the young journalistic platform RiffReporter.de and published multimedia content on the topic of liveable cities there. In the summer term of 2021, we took over the Instagram channel of a student magazine of our university called @edit.magazin and looked at how life might emerge after Covid-19. Working with media partners underscores the importance of the projects for future jobs, and addressing a pre-existing audience gives students the opportunity to explore audience engagement.

We use some of the exercises that our DIALOGUE partners use as, e.g., the train crash exercise which helps to understand how an event can be described in more or less constructive ways (see our first Interim Report of September 2020). We also require all teams to record and analyse an interview with a person from their target audience on the topic they want to cover during the semester. Of course, we present and discuss the three pillars of constructive journalism and the circle of engagement as described in the previous sections 1.2 and 2.1.1. Reading assignments include writings of Cathrine Gyldensted and Ulrik Haagerup. In addition to their content production, students have to hand in a reflective essay analysing the ways in which their production has been constructive and explaining how a dialogue with the audience has helped them in their reporting.

Students are generally sympathetic to the ideas of constructive and dialogue-based journalism. In surveys conducted at the end of the lecture terms, their comments show well-founded, but also differentiated views. Some students emphasise that they do not see the elements of constructive and dialogue-based journalism as a separate form of journalism, but as a crucial part of successful

cross-media journalistic projects and, to some extent, they made use of the approaches quite naturally. There is a high consensus that constructive journalism is essential for the future. Several students, however, believe that these approaches are not yet sufficiently considered in editorial offices.

Some additions to the curriculum were evaluated positively: Students found the guest lectures by our project partners, newly implemented tasks and discussions of example formats of constructive media particularly valuable. As an outlook, two wishes came up from the students: Firstly, they thought it would be useful to come into contact with constructive and dialogue-based journalism at the beginning of their studies in order to be able to integrate the approaches into all future projects. And secondly, it is important to them to get the chance to write solution-oriented reports and to extend the project to learn more.

### 2.2.1 What we did (winter semester 2020/21 and summer semester 2021)

In the past two semesters, we have devoted ourselves to **grasping the concepts of constructive and dialogue-based journalism** more firmly as we felt there is a need for clarification: How do constructive reporting, audience engagement in general and dialogue in particular work together? Our work with students has been informed and motivated by lively discussions with our partners from Aarhus and Windesheim. In the course, we start with Ulrik Haagerup's succinct phrase: "We keep [conflicts] alive and make them grow." In this short quote, he claims that journalists not only inform their audience on conflicts but also influence the way these conflicts evolve. We then discuss with our students that the professional responsibility of journalists does not end with a good report that explains what has happened and why. When readers consume a large number of negative reports about a certain conflict – which, individually, meet journalistic standards – they may hold the conflict to be unsolvable, for example. This may make readers feel hopeless and turn away from the news.

Later in the course of the semester, we ask students whether constructive and dialogue-based journalism can be seen as a response to recent developments in journalism. Some students may connect it to a faster pace in journalism or a deterioration of quality standards and regard it as a remedy for those harmful trends. We point out that we do not want to introduce new standards to journalism but highlight useful methods to keep it going.

After having introduced the general idea of constructive journalism, we move on to **explore the tools it recommends for reporting**. An important exercise is taking a common news article and editing it to become more constructive. Using original journalistic material which students choose themselves, we try to apply alternative ways of reporting, as proponents of constructive journalism have suggested. One of the new tools we explore is avoiding what Gyldensted calls a 'negative explanatory style': explaining an event by referring to internal, stable and global causes. This might make readers feel helpless because, even if they know a solution, they also 'know' that it is not going to work. So, we recommend writing in a way that leaves it open how things will develop and suggest that the future depends on the actions of those involved.

In the end, we test both versions of the article – original and edited – on a small number of survey participants because this also requires us to discuss what we want to achieve in the editing process. Do we want to make our readers more optimistic or do we want to motivate them to act, or both? In other words, we conduct a rough version of **an experiment to study the effects of constructive**

**reporting**, which also helps to prepare students for their scientific BA thesis which they will write in the following semester.

When producing their content, student teams have to **develop a concept on how to approach their audience and use this input**. We stress that it should be easy for the audience to respond and that people should realize that their contribution is valued. In every semester, we see cases that work and those that don't. Asking the audience to send in a picture of their favourite spot in town allows journalists to tell stories on how a city may become more liveable, for example. Asking for comments on a new proposal of city developers, however, may be too abstract and too distant from the daily experiences of the audience.

Audience development is usually associated with meeting specific goals like increasing the subscription rate. Seen as an instrument of marketing, it does not help with the goals of constructive or dialogue-based journalism. But we argue that when checking the viability of solutions and political compromise, journalists need an audience that is willing to discuss these topics, and journalists need tools to manage this discussion among many participants. Building trust and creating a shared feeling of belonging to the same community are important goals in this respect. We encourage students to be transparent about their work – explaining to their audience what they expect from them and why – and warn students not to ask too much of their audience at the beginning of the dialogue.

In the course of the semester, we **revisit the tenets and tools of constructive and dialogue-based journalism** and discuss objections raised against them. The goal is to acquire a more differentiated and convincing view. We start by addressing the common critique that constructive journalism is too optimistic and uncritical, and we look for ways to avoid this pitfall (see our first Interim Report of September 2020 on this topic). Later, we discuss cases in which there are no working solutions (e.g., festival organizers have told our students that they could not imagine festivals without large crowds) or too many potential solutions (e.g., when considering the many options on how to give children and teenagers a good education during the pandemic). Coming to terms with challenges like these requires students to be clear about their journalistic stance: What do they see as the problem to be covered and what do they want to achieve with their reporting? Do they want to present a working solution or criticize a proposed solution or reframe the problem as to be addressed in a more promising way?

So, over the course of the semester, students repeatedly examine the first two pillars of constructive journalism: nuanced reporting and focus on solutions. Until now, we have treated the third pillar – fostering democratic debate – as a subject of its own (see section 2.2.2 on how we want to change this). But we think it is more than just one approach in constructive journalism; we regard it as an indispensable pillar.

Finally, we also discuss the **relationship of constructive and dialogue-based journalism to similar developments in the field of public relations**. This, of course, goes back to the fact that some of our students want to pursue a career in public relations. Public relation officers, too, listen to relevant communities, learn to understand them and work with them to find solutions. They analyse their target groups, use storytelling techniques to convey information and messages, and they aim at generating or maintaining trust. This makes it seem like some tools could be shared among the two disciplines. However, this should not mask the important differences: most notably journalistic independence and transparency.

Students need to understand that journalists should not 'sell' a specific solution to their audience. And even if they want to move their audience in a certain direction, as some proponents of

constructive journalism would allow, they have to make transparent that they are not themselves moved by anything but their convictions. This implies that journalists have to explain to their audience why they are reaching out to them: The dialogue should enrich the reporting and enable readers to make up their mind and, perhaps, find a solution. It should not have a specific outcome set in advance. The community will feel that it is being heard, and the many voices and perspectives included should add nuance to the reporting.

### 2.2.2 What we will change (improvements for next semester)

While it seems clear to most teachers and students that a fair and inclusive dialogue with the audience is likely to be constructive, the link in the other direction is more difficult to see. In the final year of the DIALOGUE project, we will work with students to establish dialogue as a necessary element of constructive journalism. We will start with a distinction we have adopted from our partners in the DIALOGUE project: the audience that consumes our journalistic product is not necessarily identical with the community that is the object of the reporting (see section 1.2). This means that there are two possible types of dialogue: a dialogue with the target audience and a dialogue with the community.

Interacting with the target group has become a common practice in newsrooms in the last couple of years. Journalists track the interests of their readers and may adjust their reporting priorities accordingly. They also review and respond to comments and pose direct questions to their readers about the topics covered: ‘What’s your opinion on this matter, what are your questions to the experts?’ Students are aware of these journalistic tasks and succeed in integrating them into their semester projects. They see the value of getting some new ideas from their audience and of capturing the attention of their audience with low-level interaction.

We argue, however, that this can only be seen as a start for constructive reporting. It clearly relates to the first element of our definition of dialogue as explained in section 1.2: ‘Listening to and communicating with the audience to get inspiration for journalistic productions.’ But it does less to meet the second requirement: ‘Facilitate and stimulate the democratic debate.’

What also needs to be intensified is a dialogue with the community at the centre of the reporting. We regard this dialogue as an essential aspect of constructive journalism because every potential solution has to be critically examined from the perspective of all stakeholders in the conflict. If a part of the community involved does not have a fair chance of commenting on a proposal, they are not likely to accept it as a solution. For example, important decisions on schooling during the pandemic should be made only after hearing out students, parents and teachers. We therefore believe that it is an important task for journalists to identify and approach the relevant representatives of a community.

John Dewey (1927) has used his shoe analogy to make a similar point: “The man who wears the shoe knows best that it pinches and where it pinches, even if the expert shoemaker is the best judge of how the trouble is to be remedied” (p. 224). Dewey directs this argument against a government run by experts: They cannot fully know what The People actually want and have to ask them. But the argument can be applied to any public decision making: a dialogue with a diverse set of members of the community is necessary to find an acceptable solution eventually.

In the next two semesters, we are planning to match the student teams with a diverse set of media partners interested in exploring this form of dialogue-based journalism. A project assistant will set up the collaborations so that students can start discussing ideas with the media partners right away. Media partners may suggest a broad topic but should be willing to accept further developments and changes according to input from students and from the community (see also the experiences described in section 2.3). We aim at a thorough exchange of knowledge and ideas between student teams, editorial offices and community, which will be facilitated by the project assistant. In contrast to previous semesters, students will be asked to produce their content in both German and English regardless of the media partner involved.

In the next two semesters, we will also introduce regular ‘newsroom meetings’ into our course. In these structured discussions, student teams will present progress in their semester projects and get feedback from other teams and media partners or other invited journalists. The teachers will assist students to discover the relevance of their work for constructive and dialogue-based journalism or, to the contrary, point out elements that are still missing. The meetings will focus on these topics in turn:

1. Channels and formats: What do the media partners expect from us? What kind of environment will we work in? Who will be our target audience, who will be our community?
2. Data and facts: Does our research challenge our initial beliefs? Which solutions do we have to discuss?
3. Community input: What can we learn from talking to the community? Did we get more than just tips and opinions?
4. Criteria for success: What do we want to achieve with our content production? For example, do we want to capture attention only or do we want to change people’s beliefs?

The newsroom meetings will serve a second purpose as well: They should highlight the collective responsibility of journalists to work against negativity bias and news avoidance. Even though our course aims at training students in using the tools of constructive and dialogue-based journalism and critically reflecting on their usage, the aim of constructive and dialogue-based journalism itself is to make sure that the audience gets more than just an overview of all the conflicts in the world. How does this collective responsibility translate to practices on the micro level? We will start by analysing the reporting of our media partner on the chosen topic and look for biases and omissions. We will then regard it as our obligation to add some nuance or perspective to the existing picture. In the end, we will estimate the effect the dialogue has had on our journalistic work.

## 2.3 Public oriented journalism in Zwolle

Since 2016 Windesheim has embraced constructive journalism as an intellectual and practical guideline for designing the curriculum of the department of journalism. This means that from that time we have tried to incorporate the principles of constructive journalism in the varied courses. When we started with the DIALOGUE project in 2019 we linked the 30 ETCS mandatory course ‘Narrative and investigative journalism’ because in this course the students had to think about how to use the principles of constructive journalism.

The strong point of this course was that the students worked with (and partly for) a news organisation. This gave the work that students did an extra impulse because they had a real chance

of seeing their work published. For the media partners the cooperation with students gave them a chance of getting well researched in-depth stories and the partners experienced first-hand what it means to work from a 'constructive mindset' as a journalist.

The problem with the course however was that not all students had it in them to be real investigative journalists, which meant that on the one hand the students did not really get what they wanted to develop into the journalists they wanted to become, and that, on the other hand, the media partners did not always get the thoroughly researched stories they expected. But in relation to the DIALOGUE project we felt that especially the public oriented part of constructive journalism was not fully explored in this course.

### 2.3.1 What we did (winter semester 2020/21 and summer semester 2021)

As noted above in the original course 'Narrative and investigative journalism' we noticed that the public oriented side of constructive journalism was not embraced as systematically as it could. The participation in the DIALOGUE project made us aware that this was something we needed to include in our curriculum as we saw that this was a development in journalism in which our students needed more experience. And more than we expected beforehand, it was something our media partners were very much interested in. They saw a real opportunity for learning from experiments from our students with public oriented journalism and by working like that achieve greater public participation and commitment. So, in the winter semester we reworked the course and transformed it into a mandatory course 'Public oriented journalism'.

This meant a fundamentally different approach to how students work. In the former course 'Narrative and investigative journalism' the students were handed a topic or problem from their media partner to investigate. They immediately started researching and investigating and after 4 months of hard work they produced their pieces for publication. In this process they may have reached out to their public to maybe find 'victims' who would have something to add to their stories, to give their production a 'human voice'. But now in the new course the working methods are different from the start. Although the media partners still provide a topic for the students to work with, this is not as laid-out as it was before. First thing students have to do is to get into contact with members of their target audience and the specific community involved and talk about the subject.

For this purpose, each student group performed during the first four weeks of the semester an exploratory audience research to get a more structured and complete view of the knowledge, interests, opinions and interpretations of their target audience with regard to the issue they were going to publish about. As input for this research, they used literature about public oriented journalism and constructive journalism in particular, a guest lecture by professor of Constructive Journalism Liesbeth Hermans and their primary informal conversations with audience members, people of the community and members of their own informal network.

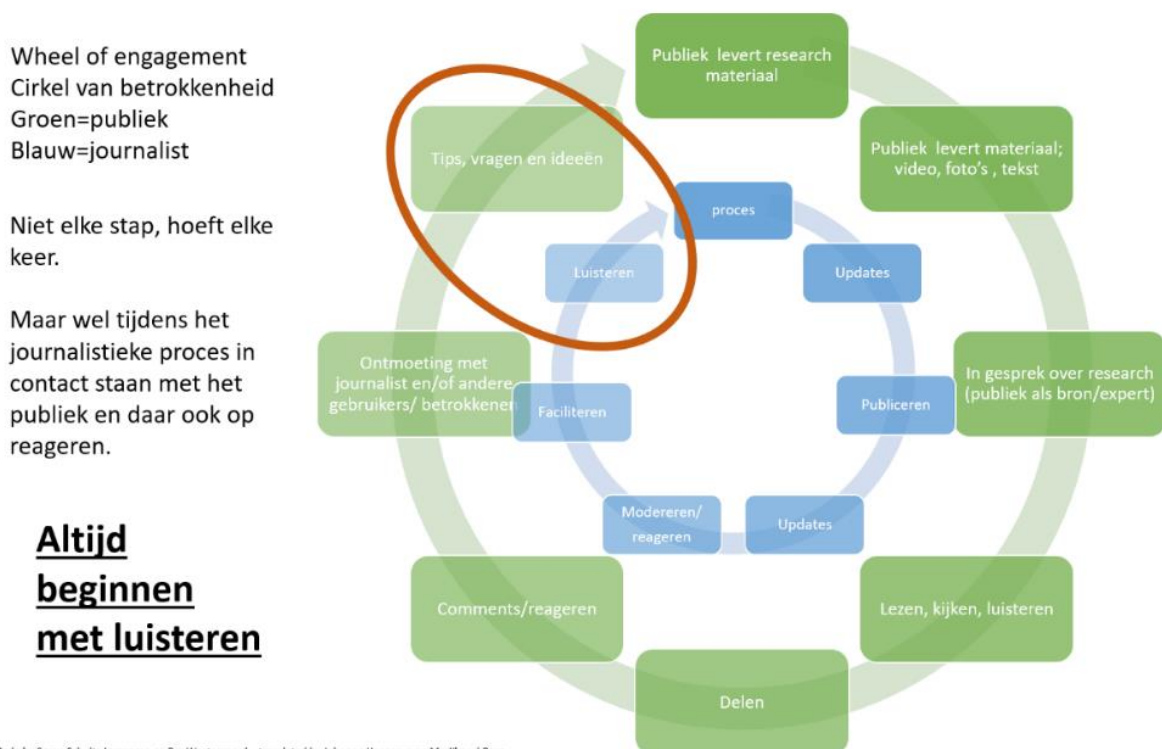
For this the students made up a topic list and conducted face-to-face in-depth interviews with representatives of their target audience and community. Students asked questions about what these representatives know about the subject, which experiences they have with the subject, what their knowledge on the subject is, what's important to know about the subject, what their questions and/or (mis)conceptions are. The students as a group wrote a report about their findings and 'lessons learned' based on the in-depth interviews. This orientation report was the starting point in formulating a focus of their research and therefore the journalistic production. The results were

incorporated in the journalistic plan of action; the issue might be reformulated or narrowed down as a result of this research.

We as teachers bolstered the knowledge of the student by providing a theoretical framework on public oriented approach as part of constructive journalism and also providing actual examples from the media. For this, just to give two examples, we invited professor Liesbeth Hermans to give a guest lecture on constructive journalism and we invited a journalist from the Dutch quality newspaper de Volkskrant to talk about their new way of interacting with their target audience.

So after the first five weeks of acquiring knowledge about Public oriented journalism and their first contact with their target audience and community, they started ten weeks of journalistic production for their media partners. They were in dialogue with the public throughout the production process. For this we adopted the 'circle of engagement' from DMJX. The aim is to get that wheel turning during their production period. We encouraged them to experiment with all kinds of ways to interact with their target audience and community. So via the more obvious ways like posting a question or statement on social media, or to have their audience respond to a news report on their website, they also actively sought out their target audience and community by for example organising a 'meet-up' between different people involved in the subject and the target audience for debate or, even better, for the exchange of information and opinions. In the future we hope that the experiments with contact with their target audience could be more diverse and more 'out-of-the-box', but due to the Corona-situation physical possibilities were limited.

After the production period the students took some time to reflect on their working methods and see what actually had been achieved by 'going into dialogue' with their target audience and what the impact of their reporting was. For this they performed a second audience research in which they evaluated part of their production with members of their audience. They did this either using in-depth interviewing techniques or focus groups. Using these results they reflected on the audience oriented approaches they used on a practical level as well as on a theoretical level.



Made by Søren Schultz Jørgensen og Per Westergaard – translated by Johanne Haagerup en Marijke vd Berg

*Figure 7. Cirkel van Betrokkenheid (Wheel of Engagement, Dutch version).*

As a result of implementing 'the Wheel of Engagement', the students become aware that their public and target audience is more than a passive consumer. The students no longer just publish at the end of their research period, but as shown in the Wheel of Engagement, they publish when they have something to share with their audience for the benefit of having a response of their audience and therefore get new input, leads, suggestions etc. from that same audience. Which triggers new research, investigations etc. thus setting the wheel in motion. This leads to interesting publications that otherwise probably would not have been made by our media partners.

For example, one of the student groups was assigned to the subject of mobile accessibility of the emergency number 112. It turned out that there are still parts of the Netherlands where there is insufficient accessibility to the emergency number, with all the consequences this entails. After some publications on the subject the students got a question from their audience how people who are communicatively impaired are able to contact the emergency number and are able to communicate in an emergency situation. The students made a story about a woman with no vocal cords. While not directly related to mobile accessibility, which has more to do with enough cell towers and the political responsibility for making sure every citizen has mobile reach, this was clearly a side story the audience was asking for, a question the media partner had not anticipated but was very pleased with.

Not that everything is easy. Media partners are a bit hesitant when it comes to experiments with different forms of reaching out to their audiences, as they sometimes have a firm belief in that 'we know best'. So experiments with reaching out to their audiences sometimes met with a 'no we don't do things that way'. The experiment could be as simple as trying a different 'tone of voice' on social media and vary in the way you ask your readers to give their opinion. For example, one group got a 'no' on an interactive explainer and another group got a 'no' on an interactive poll via social media. The argument given was that they know their audiences, and this was too modern for them.

At the same time media partners often complain that they have a hard time reaching a younger audience. The feeling arises that these two things are related. The sometimes hesitant reaction of the media partners for allowing an experiment of course led to some extent to disappointment with the students who were really looking forward to trying new things and even on a small scale, thinking 'out of the box'.

Our experience this year was that the audience research projects were very useful for finding angles, directing the students' journalistic research, choosing narrative styles and journalistic genres as well as publication platforms and the role social media play in the dialogue with their audience. On the other hand the level of the theoretical reflections and their knowledge of constructive journalism often remained rather superficial.

### 2.3.2 What we will change (improvements for next semester)

Next semester we will improve the course 'Public oriented journalism' further. The focus will be to try to get the 'Wheel of engagement' as developed by DMJX even more in the workflow of the students. Important for this is to really get our media partners to embrace this concept and get them to be less hesitant when it comes to experiments with ways to engage their audience.

On a more theoretical note; the students were sometimes so focused on 'listening' to their audience that they forgot to do their own research and remain critical to what their audience of target group

members were saying. So we need to discuss this more with our students; they need to stay journalists.

Thirdly, we will have to try to improve their theoretical knowledge and reflection. Strategies to achieve this will be a more intensive discussion about what public orientation means in constructive journalism and evaluate their own steps in the production process using the theoretical notions they were confronted with (in guest lectures or literature). Another possibility would be to adopt the exercise used in Stuttgart where students search for a non-constructive publication (about the issue at hand) and rewrite it in a more constructive manner. In the research project more emphasis will be laid on the theory of constructive journalism and similar audience-oriented approaches, making use of a reading assignment.

## 2.4 Common learning process (workshops)

In order to give students a chance to interact with an audience during the short course of a workshop, we decided to invite international audiences to public online discussions. In January 2021, we discussed problems that arose during the Covid-19 pandemic, and in June 2021, our topic was distrust in media. For each workshop, students received special training by external experts helping them prepare for the debate. In the 90 minute debates on Zoom, students talked to about 20 participants from various backgrounds.

Both debates were polite and profound. Participants liked that the discussions were open and noted that the journalism students had not made up their minds already. The debates required students to think about the right way to ask questions and to try out new ways of helping the audience find some common ground. Actively listening and giving participants room to explain themselves was key instead of quickly commenting or summarizing the points made.

At the debate in January, it was important for the students to talk to journalists from different countries and to get to know other opinions and working methods. Exemplary quotes: “I’ve learned stuff about dialogues and constructive journalism but I also learned a lot about how to moderate and arrange a debate.” – “You all heard different opinions in this, but the tone of the discussion remained pleasant. This allowed everyone to tell their story.”

Some comments made by the students in the evaluations of the debate in June on what they learned:

“To be open, not work with an agenda” (Jan Kraft, Stuttgart);

“Not bring in your opinions as a journalist” (Jesse Nijmeijer, Zwolle).

Apart from arranging and moderating the debates together, students also learned from each other’s courses. Dutch students mentioned the value of the brainstorm sessions the Danish students have, as an addition to suggestions by media partners. Whereas the Danes esteemed suggestions by media partners to be helpful.

Takeaways and lessons learned from the workshops for the teachers from have been described in the respective sections above. These also involve the insights of key note speakers such as depolarization trainer Bart Brandsma (section 2.1.2).

### 3. Building blocks to a curriculum

When working with three schools together as partners in a project like this, it is natural and unavoidable that we do things differently, even though we work with the same mission and ideas. We have different traditions, different rules, different students and different words for – more or less – the same things. But after two years of discussion and mutual inspiration within the DIALOGUE project, it has become clearer that despite our differences, our respective courses in dialogue-based journalism, audience engagement and public-oriented journalism consist to a wide extent of the same building blocks. We have come to understand that to teach the journalistic tools, methods and mindset needed to do journalism within the third pillar of the constructive house (Figure 1), there are some elements of the journalistic tradition that are necessary to look at, reconsider, and expand.

So even though the original goal of the DIALOGUE project was to develop a prototype curriculum for a bachelor level program – with suggestions on how to transfer this prototype into curriculums for a mid-career training program – we now believe that the concept of building blocks will be more applicable for others. We hope that these building blocks can serve as inspiration for institutions and media looking for ways to teach this part of constructive journalism. The idea is that the building blocks should be the same no matter the intensity, weight (ECTS) or level of the course, but the time spent on each block can easily vary depending on interest and resources.

This chapter will give a brief introduction to and argumentations for each of these building blocks, and give examples of how we teach them on the different schools. In the next and final Intellectual Output we plan to be able to present a handbook for other teachers – be it for midcareer-training or at BA-level – with concrete tools, tasks, exercises, theory, examples and models. Some of the building blocks may not be new and may be taught in other areas of a journalism education, but we included them here to give an overview over the components that we emphasize when teaching within the third pillar of the constructive house.

The first draft of the different building blocks are:

1. Teaching the mindset
2. Tools before production
3. Tools during the production
4. Tools after the production
5. Interviewing constructively
6. Constructive debate
7. Ethical dilemmas

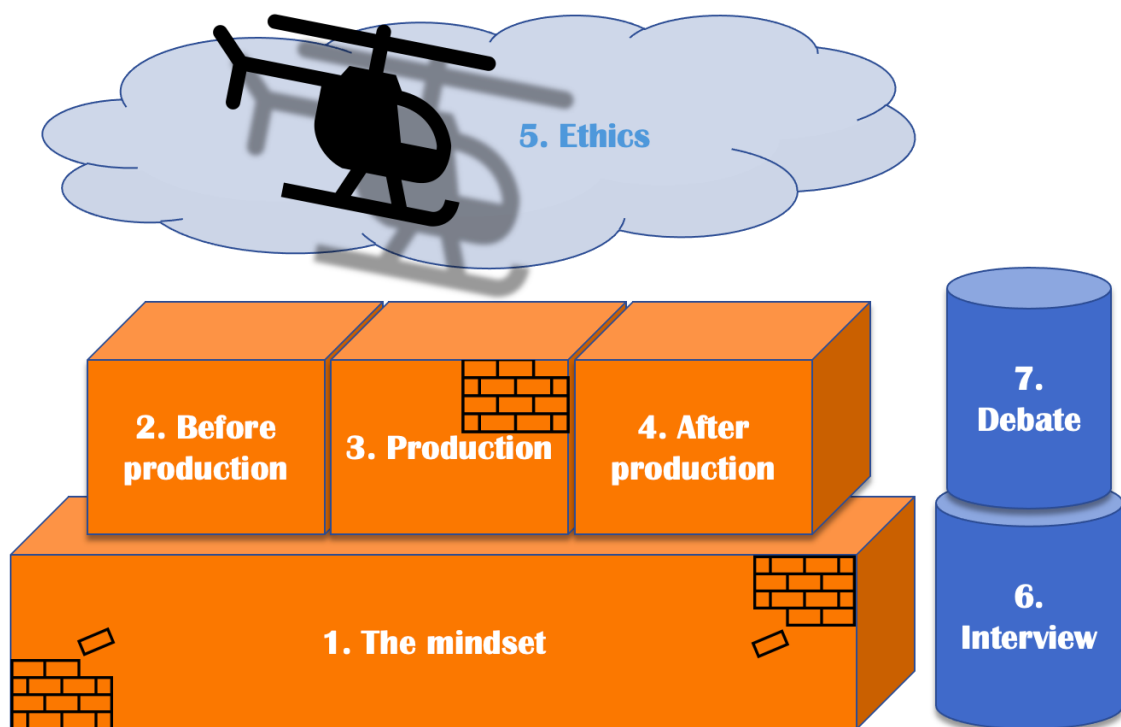


Figure 8. Visualization of building blocks.

### 3.1 Teaching the mindset

**State of the Union:** When teaching the mindset, you need to start with an understanding of the connection between media and audience, and how it is in many ways ‘lost’ or changed. This contains an introduction to concepts of distrust in media and news avoidance due to fake news, information overload, negativity bias, etc. (see for further elaboration section 1.2).

**The Constructive House:** The movement of constructive journalism is a response to these problems by pointing at a need for more nuances, more focus on solutions and a more engaging democratic conversation. This is well illustrated in the model of the constructive house (see Figure 1) made by Constructive Institute.

**The Wheel of Engagement:** After establishing why journalism needs to expand its role, the focus on how and when to engage in journalism is a natural next step. For this the Wheel of Journalism (Figure 5) and the Circle of Engagement (Figures 4 and 7) are useful models to illustrate the different phases of the journalistic process.

**Polarization dynamics:** The framework of polarization dynamics as developed by Dutch journalist and philosopher Bart Brandsma (see Figure 6) is a brilliant model to illustrate how polarization happens, and which role journalists often play in it. It also offers a solution on how we avoid pushing to polarization by changing focus when choosing whom to talk to and give airtime when covering a polarized issue.

**New news criteria:** As a result of the changing mindset in journalism as a reaction to the lost connection to the audience (financially as well as trust-wise), media all over the world are coming up with new news criteria, many of them containing criteria such as 'hope', 'solutions', 'engagement'. These examples of different news criteria can lay the foundation for important discussions about the purpose of journalism.

**The journalistic roles:** When we as journalists work with communities, our role changes. From being the supplier of a commodity (the journalistic product) to being connected to the audience/community and interacting with them to supply knowledge and storytelling on their behalf. From being a watch-, guard-, hunting-dog to being a shepherd-dog, to put it in the framework of the description of the journalistic roles developed by Peter Bro (2008) from the University of Southern Denmark SDU.

## ASSIGNMENTS

**Reflective Essay:** A small, but very beneficial assignment to make the students reflect on their own mindset, is having them write an essay on how they see their own journalism and role as a journalist being influenced during the course. The essay is personal with the target group being other journalists, students and media-interested, and it gives the students a chance to not only learn about the mindset but also internalize it.

**Discussion of common objections:** Teachers or external experts on journalism may challenge students about the benefits of constructive and dialogue-based journalism: Are journalists neglecting their critical stance when they focus on solutions? Are they overlooking problems that need to be reported? Are they actually making a difference? Addressing these objections helps students to acquire a more differentiated and well-founded view of constructive journalism.

## 3.2 Tools before production

When starting on a new story, journalists often get the idea, do the research, chose how to interview, and what the most relevant angle is (Jørgensen & Westergård, 2018). If journalism aims to be more relevant, we need to let the audience affect our stories, before we have already decided on everything; what to tell and how and where to tell it.

When talking tool before production, we talk about ways to gather and use the input from non-journalists leading up to the point, when we are set on an angle.

**Community:** One way is working with a community, and as an anthropologist without agenda trying to figure out what's going on for them.

**Facebook groups:** Inviting the community into a Facebook group for collaboration where they can follow the entire journalistic process, and maybe ask for their help and input, is a way of creating engagement.

**Listening on SoMe:** To know what's going on among your audience, you need to be able to listen to their conversation – and find them. This requires skills to use search engines, not only Google but also on the many different platforms of social media where the conversations take place. Computer programs to monitor the internet – like HootSuite and AngoraPulse – change so swiftly that you

need a constant updated knowledge in this area. Fortunately, there are websites that keep a constant lookout for what's new in this area.

**Questionnaires:** Another way of tapping into a community/audience knowledge is by using qualitative *questionnaires*. The German digital media Krautreporter has created an [entire playbook](#) on how to use questionnaires as an engagement tool.

**Open editorial meetings:** Opening up the editorial process and giving the community/audience an insight in the journalistic treatment of the topics on the agenda and tap into their experience and knowledge on the subject – either online or in real life – is another way of strengthening the connection to the community/audience and expand the idea-pool and the knowledge base at the meeting. (Read more about this trend in section 4).

**Open calls for ideas:** “What don't you know, that I can find out for you?” This is the fundamental question in the approach where media outlets collect curious questions from their audience on their own platform via different software (e.g. Hearken). But the approach can also be used without the software. On social media, via e-mail or even in real life with a sign and a microphone in the street.

**Focus group interviews:** A different kind of interview with the aim to understand a community deeper. Not directly asking them for ideas but listening to what's on their minds, what problems they have and how an issue is experienced from their seat.

**Vote for angle:** Asking the community or even having them vote on “What aspect of this problem/dilemma is the most interesting to you?” might lead to an angle that the journalist wouldn't have picked, but that turns out to be the most relevant. And it might help steering away from looking back and placing guilt to looking ahead and reaching compromise and examining solutions.

### 3.3 Tools during production

When typically producing a story, the platform and format is defined from the beginning, and the target group is predefined as the audience of the media. The journalist is the storyteller holding the microphone and doing the editing. But this part of the process also has a potential for being more engaging. Both with the community and with the target audience:

**Start with the community:** Start by asking the community: Who should actually hear this story? Who is it relevant for? Who does the community think should hear this story? Do they long for the information themselves? Or are they hoping someone else (their parents, their politicians, the neighboring town) would hear/read/see these perspectives?

**Analysis of target audience:** When figured out who is actually the (main) target audience, you need to figure out how to reach them with the story for it to have the most relevance and the greatest impact. This can be a formal analysis of the demographic group, but also to ask them directly (some of the tools for involving the community before production also apply here: questionnaires, FB-groups, focus group interviews, open editorial meetings – not about angle and idea, but about format).

**Qualitative explorative target audience research:** a more thorough investigation of the target audience using a scientifically based in-depth interviewing method would start with an analysis of relevant research literature on audience oriented journalism (e.g. Costera Meijer, 2020; Hermans &

Drok, 2018). Guided by a research question, a topic list is formulated that can be used for semi-structured in-depth interviews with a diverse group (n=10-15) of members of the target audience. On each topic the patterns in the transcribed answers of the respondents will be systematically labeled and categorized. Thus, the different interpretations of the topic that exist within the target audience can be mapped. Using this knowledge, strategies for addressing the audience regarding the subject can be formulated and used as input for the production process.

**Flexibility in platform and format:** It requires the competences to produce stories in many different formats to different platforms to reach the target audience, where they are. These production skills are required for more and more journalists today, so not specifically required for this course, but a crash course in explainers on Instagram or voluntary workshops in video production for FB might be relevant for a course like this.

**Co-creation:** Integrating text, pictures, video's etc. produced by the community/target audience. Handing over the mic and letting them ask the questions for the stakeholders.

**Be transparent:** Make it visible in the production, where the story comes from. That we as journalists don't follow our own agenda, but ask the questions and tell the story on behalf of the public exemplified by specific people from the community. Tell it, if the idea or a great question came from one from the community. Allow the audience into the editing room and all the decisions behind the scenes.

### 3.4 Tools after production

Normally, when finishing the production of one story, a journalist quickly moves on to the next. But there is an untapped potential for relevance and engagement if we stay a little longer after publication.

**Take responsibility for the distribution:** Distribute on the channels where people are. This needs an understanding of the different platforms, algorithms etc.

**Collaborate with 'ambassadors':** When communities or audiences have been engaged in the making of a journalistic story, they will most likely be more willing to share it afterwards through their own channels.

**Comments sections:** Viewing the comments sections as a continuation of the story, requires journalists to be present there as well: To moderate, to listen and respond. You have invited the community in and now it's your obligation to make them feel at home. Be attentive and give the community the feeling that you care and that you will give a reply to a question in the comments section as soon as possible. Be the guardian of a good manners on the site and decide and explain what the rules of engagement are. Another tool can be to invite one of the main sources of the story to be present in the comments sections as well to answer questions. This can also have a calming effect on the hard and hateful language.

**Evaluative research:** After production or during a live event members of the target audience can be investigated in a formal way using qualitative in-depth interviews (or a survey) much like in the aforementioned exploratory audience analysis. This time interpretations, evaluations and opinions about the journalistic productions (or the social media interactions) are systematically analyzed to assess to what extent the goals the journalists wanted to achieve with their publication were met,

and to reflect on their journalistic choices. Topic lists may encompass things like interpretations, knowledge gained, evaluations, emotions, general impressions or evaluations of specific story elements (headlines, pictures, angles, narrative styles, sources used, etc.). The analysis may be ended with a reflection on the journalistic process (what lessons are learned for the future?) and a confrontation with theoretical notions (is dialogue-based journalism or constructive journalism living up to the expectations?).

### 3.5 Ethical dilemma

Working in new ways in journalism brings out new ethical dilemmas. Partly in relation to the public perception of the role of journalist and journalism, and partly in relation to the guiding principles for quality and independence.

The new work-form raises a series of questions, that needs to be addressed in a course of this sort:

- How do we make sure that the community sees us as journalist – not as members of the community?
- How can we listen to the community/audience/market without letting the market define?
- How close can we move to the users without giving up the core value of journalism – serving the public not the individual?
- Where is the balance between being a journalist and being a friend?
- Where is the balance between being a journalist and being an activist?
- What is the difference between being constructive and being positive?

There are no right or wrong answers to these dilemmas, so the aim is to make the students reflect on the dilemmas, challenges and balances. This can be done in classroom discussions, group discussions or by writing a reflective essay (like the assignment mentioned under the block 'Teaching the Mindset').

### 3.6 Interviewing constructively

When talking about interview in this context, we talk about the dialogue taking place between journalist and a source. When the relationship between journalist and source changes, and the aim of the journalistic work shifts, we may need to update the questions we ask and how and when we ask them. So, when working constructively, we may need to expand our toolbox for interviewing techniques.

**Constructive questions:** In 1988, psychiatrist Karl Tomm talked about how the therapeutic interview was meant to drive constructive change (Gyldensted & McIntyre 2017). So to learn from this interviewing framework is highly relevant for journalists working constructively. In short, there are four types of questions: Lineal, reflexive, circular and strategic. It is argued that journalists traditionally mostly make use of the lineal and strategic questions, so by including more reflexive and circular questions to the journalistic interview can lead to new – and sometimes more constructive – questions. Cathrine Gyldensted (2015, p.98) introduced Tomm's model in constructive journalism.

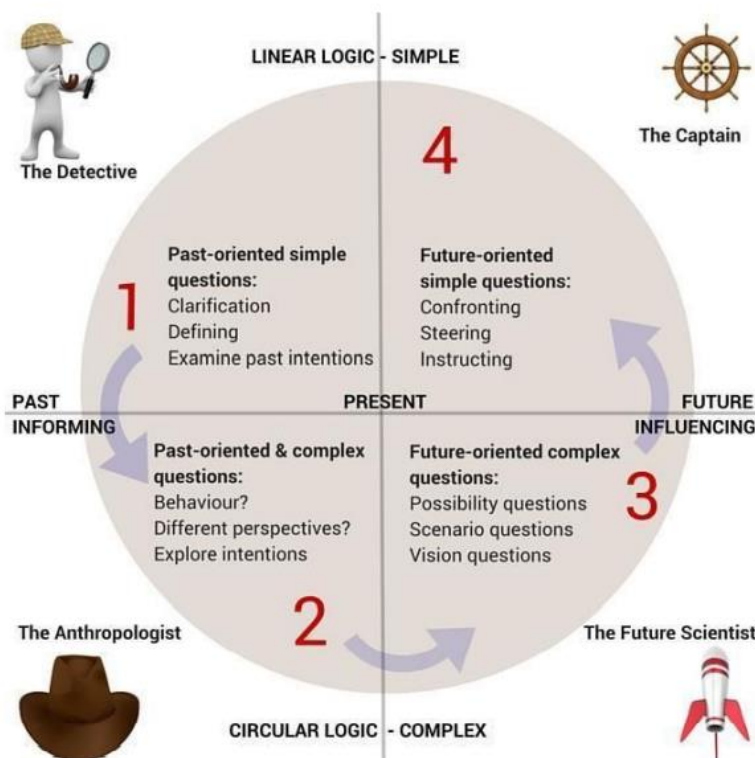


Figure 9. Model by Karl Tomm. Source: Gyldensted & McIntyre, *Visionary Debates* (2016, p.7)

In this quadrant different kinds of interviewing questions are depicted. On the basis of this model questions asked during election debates in the Netherlands were analysed. The more constructive questions were classified as follows (Ederveen, 2021):

#### Past:

Question inviting to be (self)reflective: *How do you look back on this?*

Question into explanation of motives/intentions: *Why did you do this?*

#### Present:

Question for explaining a general vision: *How do you relate to this right now?*

Question for advice: *What advice would you give in this matter?*

#### Future:

Question into ideas for the future: *What is your plan?*

Question on future scenario's: *What possible development do you foresee?*

Question about solutions: *What are you going to do about this?*

Question as an invitation to cooperate: *What can you do together?*

**Learn from other professions:** Include the theory and experience from other professions that work with questions as a professional tool. How do anthropologists ask questions to a community without imposing their own agenda?

### 3.7 Constructive debates

When talking about debate in this context, we are talking about the dialogue between two or more parties facilitated by journalists. The journalistic debate format is by many criticized for often being too focused on conflict, and because of this being too negative and not leaving the audience more engaged or more aware of the nuances of the issue. An aim to be more constructive will need an update of the way journalists facilitate debates.

**Learn from other professions:** How do mediators ask questions in a conflict? How does a couple's therapist ask questions for better understanding of the other party?

**New formats:** A lot of different media, individuals and organizations are developing new formats for organized disagreements, experimenting with the role of the moderator, the rules, the questions, the timeframe, the purpose, the invited participants etc.

## 4. Mid-career training

First of all, it is important to realize that the students at mid-career training courses in several ways differ from the bachelor students. They are older, they have a strong professional identity and as a group they are often less homogeneous when it comes to age, skills and reasons for participating. Mid-career students generally have less time than a fulltime bachelor student. They – or their employer – pay for the course. They want value for their money and have an expectation that what they learn should immediately translate into skills that they can use in their professional lives.

Being adult and professional you often have a more fixed worldview than a 20 year-old student and you will react more critically if the learning does not make enough sense to you. Ambivalence is a basic psychological trait in adults in a learning situation. They are motivated to learn but learning also challenges their cognitive schedules.

Generally speaking, mid-career students can be expected to be highly motivated but also more critical to the learning. In other words, you need to be confident that the market requests – or will soon request – the topics you decide to offer.

### 4.1. Training non-journalists

“I feel like a hell preacher.” This quote from a mid-career student indicates that we did not fully succeed in copying an element from the bachelor to the mid-career training. An explanation will follow but first a short introduction to the Diploma in Specialized Journalism at the DMJX where the first-ever module in Dialogue-based journalism was introduced to a mid-career course at the institution.

The students here are professionals but not from journalism or the media industry. In that sense they differ from most mid-career students that we work with. They have all kinds of different professional backgrounds, and the overall purpose is for them to better convey their professionalism to other target groups. The Diploma in Specialized Journalism is a 60 ECTS education. It consists of four

modules (10 ECTS each), an elective module (5 ECTS) and a graduation project (15 ECTS). Each module at the Diploma in Specialized Journalism consists of three seminars of two or three days each. The rest of the time the students work from home in editorial groups.

During the first year the students are given the basic journalistic tools and methods such as idea development, research, interview and how to angle a story. During the second year we build upon the basics and the students work with bigger productions and at the graduation exam they produce a media concept. The module focusing on dialogue-based journalism is a 10 ECTS module within the second year of the education.

To launch this module for the first time, we sought inspiration in the experiences of the dialogue-based journalism semester already in place at the bachelor-level of the journalism education at the DMJX. To get a stronger link between the two, a teacher from the mid-career training was connected to the dialogue semester at the bachelor-level.

Since a module at the specialized journalism is shorter than a semester at the bachelor-level we had to come up with a less comprehensive program and we also had to adjust it to different audiences.

In retrospect it seems fairly clear that we did not offer enough attention to this difference in our own students. The mid-career students have a strong professional identity. Many have an academic background and have high expectations to the content of the course.

The best example of this is the assignment 'Listen to Aarhus' – and later 'Listen to X' – which got a quite positive evaluation at the bachelor-level. In 'Listen to Aarhus' the students were tasked to go out on the streets of Aarhus and talk to the citizens about what they would like journalists to investigate. Inspired by this we tasked the mid-career students to do a similar exercise in the Copenhagen district Nørrebro. However, our students here found the 'Listen to Nørrebro' boring, irrelevant and long drawn-out. Since we had less time, we wanted to make sure that the students had a community and an audience. To ensure that we had an agreement with the editor of *Mit Nørrebro* – an online based local media platform focusing on Nørrebro. The agreement was that *Mit Nørrebro* could publish the final journalistic products and the students could to some extent make use of the social media platforms of *Mit Nørrebro*. The co-operation had both pros and cons.

The pros:

- *Mit Nørrebro* announced our project and the students visit to Nørrebro
- They could use the SoMe platforms to ask questions to the readers and ask them to choose between ideas to further investigate

The cons:

- Different expectations from teachers and editor: We focused on the process – the editor on the product
- Limited access to *Mit Nørrebro*. The editor has all editorial rights and did not always give our students priority

Since we only had half as much time as the semester at bachelor-level we chose primarily to focus on the user involving part of dialogue-based journalism. We only briefly touched upon the link between user involvement and constructive journalism.

We mainly focused on user involvement in the editorial process before production. We used a lot of the tools and methods from Hearken and the so-called public powered journalism. We focused our

main energy on user involvement in the idea and research phase and did not have appropriate focus on the rest of the phases outlined in the Wheel of Journalism (Figure 5).

Some of the statements and recommendations from the students in the evaluations and in a focus group:

- It was an eyeopener for me to spend a day just listening to people;
- The purpose of the 'Lyt til Nørrebro' was unclear. Most people had no clear picture of how to make use of a journalist;
- A lot of the time we did not know what we were supposed to do;
- It was a very long process;
- I am not sure I got value for what I paid for;
- More production – less process;
- I felt uncomfortable approaching people on the streets not having a specific topic to discuss.

It was in the oral feedback that one student claimed that she felt like a hell-preacher. She said with a twinkle in the eye but still with some seriousness.



Picture 2. 'Listen to Nørrebro'.

We introduced the Circle of Engagement (see Figures 4.1 and 4.2) and various Hearken-models to the students. We did not work with the Wheel of Journalism. Following the module we presented the journalistic wheel to four students participating in a focus group. Their reaction was very clear. A quite simple model like that would help understand that user involvement can take place throughout the entire editorial process. Generally there was a call for more structure to give the students an understanding of the how to operationalize the mindset and to get an overview of the entire module from beginning to end.

The overall picture in the evaluations was that user involvement should be part of the diploma for two reasons. There is a general understanding that working dialogue-based is an important journalistic tool and that it will also be a requirement from the future media market.

## 4.2. What will change

The fall semester 2021 will make use of the building blocks in a much more systematic way than we did in 2020. The intention is that the models and a clearer structure give the students – and also the teachers – a better overview of the entire module.

The consequent use of the wheels will help focusing on dialogue in the entire editorial process where in 2020 we mainly focused on the idea and research phase – in other words, the process before production.

In order to meet the expectations of the more adult and professional students in mid-career training we change the way they work with communities. The students will be asked to choose a community that is based on a certain professionalism and to work with a societal problem or a dilemma relevant for that community. This change in community reflects the way the students understand themselves as highly professionals not feeling confident in contacting people on the street with no journalistic angle or idea.

We also want to strengthen the link between dialogue-based journalism, user involvement and constructive journalism. The Wheel of Journalism and the three pillars of the Constructive House will play a prominent role during this module.

## 4.3. Three days course: Enter into a dialogue and innovate journalism

DMJX offers a midcareer course in dialogue-based journalism for trained journalists from local and national media fall 2021. The course is planned as an inspirational course on how to involve users from idea to comment section.

The first day we will present the mindset and the models from the building blocks focusing on what media gain by involving the users in the journalistic process, and how this expands your role as a journalist.

The second day we 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. The second day each of the participants also come up with a plan for how they could work with dialogue at their media.

The third day is a workshop about new ways to debate. The participants are presented to the theory and spend some hours practicing some of the more constructive debate forms.

In Attachment 1 the course description can be found as it is presented in the course catalogue.

## 5. Media trends and perspectives

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 these initiatives, trends and possible perspectives for teaching dialogue-based constructive journalism in Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands.

### 5.1. 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. It pointed out that journalists must move closer to the citizens to gain relevance. The report claimed that people's 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 have taken place in the recent years shows that the media's feeling with the population is too weak: Brexit in Great Britain, the yellow vests in France, the support to extremist parties in 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 enhanced 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 when media struggle to get audience attention, it is vital to reach the users with content they can relate and respond to, and 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 channels (two local, two national) are interviewed about their professional approach to audience engagement. They 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 produce for YouTube-audiences. It is difficult to make up the market share of these type of jobs, but 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 has deadline in the beginning of 2022, and we will come back to the results then.

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 Danish crowns a year (= 6,5 million euro) and courses on dialogue and constructive journalism only made up for 3 million crowns (390.000 euro) 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.

## 5.2. 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 twelve professional interviews. It shows that the ideas of constructive journalism have not yet entered German newsrooms systematically, even though they don't require substantial changes in journalistic routines but merely an openness to 'break the circle of negativity' according to the experts. But there are encouraging examples in various media, some of them in the context of science journalism. Ellen Heinrichs of Deutsche Welle also pointed out examples in her keynote in our workshop in January 2021.

According to the journalists Kramp and Weichert interviewed, the audience seems to spend more time with constructive reporting. The journalists see further potential in addressing young target groups. And they suggest training and networking as a good way to help establish constructive journalism. This is happening already. In November 2020, Norddeutscher Rundfunk (NDR) hosted its '[Constructive Journalism Day](#)' for the third time, which was followed by a [design-thinking workshop](#) hosted by Hamburg Media School. Constructive journalism has also been a topic at the '[Medien Zukunft Festival](#)' in 2020. And currently, a new [network of climate journalists](#) is setting up a working group on constructive climate journalism.

In the last two or three years, several journalistic projects dedicated to constructive reporting and/or dialogue with their communities have been launched and have gained attention. 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 at least one start-up, '[tactile news](#)', supports and consults editorial offices, e.g., by offering a software that enables newsrooms to listen to their audiences more easily.

### 5.3. 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* (Incentive Fund for Journalism) detects in its [online trend report 2021](#) also a shift in the 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.”

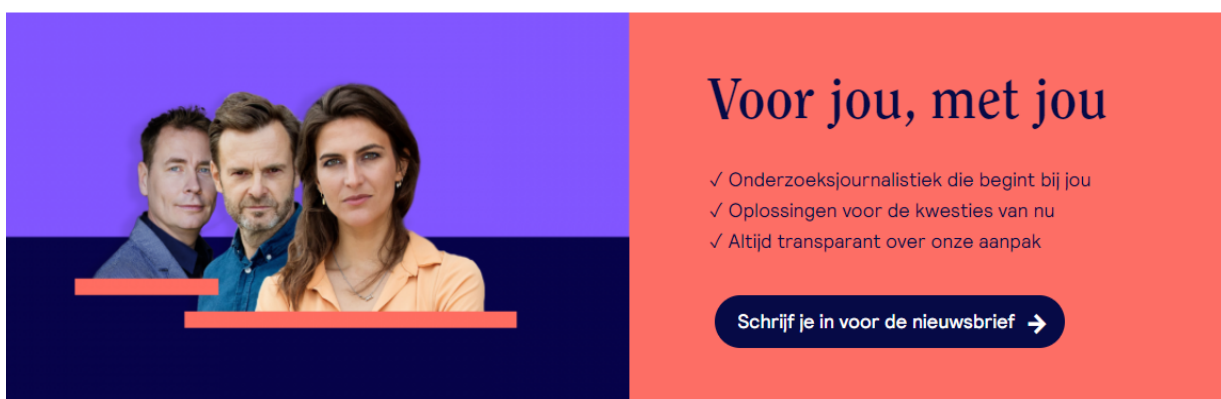
According to this trend report the public will play a greater role in the journalistic process, but it is uncertain to what extent and form. If you take a close look at the news media in the Netherlands, you can detect this trend already. Previously we saw news media mainly present their public statements on social media, where a short reaction was the only possibility for reaction from the public, nowadays news media are increasingly asking for direct input for stories. Even sites like the online news site NU.nl – a site which focuses 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](#)).

And also quality newspaper *De Volkskrant* tries to engage readers in its 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 for their opinion about a production. The investigative journalism rubric [Pointer](#) takes it a step further and although they don’t define their approach as constructive journalism per se, if you look at their basic principles the starting point is clearly a public-oriented approach matching with 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’.

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## POINTER

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Picture 3. Investigative journalism platform Pointer: ‘For you, with you. Investigative journalism that starts with you. Solutions to Today’s Issues. Always transparent about our approach.’

The quest for a greater role for the public in the journalistic process in Dutch news media, as the aforementioned 'Incentive Fund for Journalism' predicts for the future, is creating engagement of essential importance according to researcher Mijke Slot of Erasmus University in [an article about her recent study](#). Measuring clicks and likes or how often an article is shared or the reading time on a news page is insufficient, according to Slot, to really have a picture of the degree of involvement of your audience. After all, there is no evidence of emotional involvement. According to Slot reciprocity is of great importance to generate more involvement. There can be real engagement only if both parties — both the public and the journalist — feel connected.

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.

The extent to which the Dutch media succeed in applying these principles will become apparent in the future. In any case, it is needless to say that trainers of the journalists of the future must be at the forefront of this development and encourage their students to be the precursors in this field. The school of Journalism of Windesheim University of Applied Sciences is making an effort to be in the forefront by making 'constructive journalism' its basic teaching principle. The Major course Public oriented journalism is developed as a 'playground' for students in becoming familiar with the possibilities of getting the public engaged in their journalistic work. Projects such as the Dialogue project, of which this document is part, already try to be a tool in this regard.

#### 5.4. Best practices

Here we list some of the main media trends we have detected around the landscape of media and journalists working within the third pillar of the Constructive House – and examples of who does it well.

**Communities:** A way to connect is to create groups or communities for people with local or specific interests. As an example the regional Danish newspaper, Aarhus Stiftstidende, has created no less than eight niche groups on Facebook: AGF (local soccer team), second division soccer, handball, city planning and architecture in Aarhus, Culture, Food, Djursland (peninsula in the region), Faurskov (municipality in the region). According to the digital editor, the debate in these groups is more fruitful, the users of the groups serve as co-creators and the journalists have a better feeling with what the users find relevant.

**Membership:** From subscriber to member. Modern media want to connect their subscribers and users closer to the media. Krautreporter in Germany, De Correspondent in the Netherlands and Zetland in Denmark do not work with subscribers. You do not pay to become a traditional subscriber but to become a member. Zetland for instance invites its members to take part in open editorial meetings, to come to live events and to share productions with their friends for free. The members become a loyal community in itself with influence on the editorial process.

**Open editorial meetings:** This tool of engagement – as described in the section of Building blocks (3.2) – is spreading. The belief is that the stories get better by involving the users in the very beginning of the editorial process. The open meetings have various form, but in general the users contribute with angles, nuances, perspectives and knowledge.

The Danish newsletter 'Mandag Morgen' invites subscribers to open editorial meetings about major societal issues as digital transition, green transition or welfare. The meeting takes place in the morning, lasts one hour and there is only one rule: you are not allowed to ask questions, your job is to share experiences, thoughts, doubts and considerations.

The Danish media platform Zetland involves the members in many ways in the editorial process: In the beginning of process of the coverage of for example local elections by asking: 'What do you think is important or what's happening in your municipality?' Or in a story about the situation in the Middle East: 'What question do you want us to address?' During or after classic research: 'I am working on this story right now, do you have input or what do you know more?'

The Danish regional broadcaster TV2 Østjylland has set up digital hearings about current problems as debates on Facebook Live. Most recently the station involved the local citizens in a debate about nature management and animal welfare.

The Dutch regional broadcaster Omroep West organised weekly open editorial meetings on Facebook Live. These Friday sessions proved quite successful in the beginning (they started in 2016). However, the FB algorithm didn't help the broadcaster in keeping up the engagement of their audience, they [claimed](#). In September 2019 Omroep West shut down the FB Live sessions, for the time being.

**Engagement software:** Hearken is an American digital tech-service tool that systematically invites people to engage. The word Hearken means to listen, and the company is one of the market players that offers software solutions to media outlets, where users can hand in ideas and vote for the best ones directly on the media web page. The idea is to empower the public and get more in touch with what people find interesting. Hearken is the most well-known of this software used in Denmark. Regional tv-station TV2 Fyn, media outlet JyskFynske Medier and niche-magazine Djøf-bladet are some of the different media which have had use of this technology.

**Comment sections:** You can view the comment section to a journalistic piece as a virtual village house, where you can support the democratic conversation, but to do so the media must take the role as moderator serious. The moderator's task is generally to support dialogue and act as a host at a dinner party and not as policeman or a teacher on playground duty. An important aspect of moderation is reciprocity. You set up rules for a respectful tone, you listen, you respond and thereby qualify the dialogue. You also qualify what you want people to comment on, whether you are interested in their point of views or experiences. The comment section can also function as an add to programmes or articles, where users can meet sources.

TV2 Østjylland, Zetland and DR Ung are media that are very good at involving people in the comment sections. Very often the comment sections are just as interesting and informative as the journalistic products.

The Dutch regional broadcaster RTV Noord uses a private Facebook Group for their viewers and listeners, called 'Tou eem' ('take it easy'), to discuss the news of the region. They put all kinds of news related questions to their readers and encourage them to post news and reactions. Basic rules in the member group: "The aim is to exchange insights and ideas in a normal, decent way. We engage in conversation on the basis of arguments and we are open to each other's opinion. Reactions in this group add to the discussion. Every member is responsible for the open, respectful and safe atmosphere of the group."

## 6. What's next for DIALOGUE

### 6.1. Look ahead at next workshop

The next workshop in January 2022 will be hosted by Stuttgart Media University. Hopefully, it will be an event actually taking place in Stuttgart, because students have repeatedly raised this point in the workshop evaluations. As in the previous workshops, the main task for students will be to moderate a public debate on a controversial topic.

Students will be coached by the teachers involved in the DIALOGUE project as well as by invited experts. A good part of the full-week workshop will be devoted to analyzing the public debate and discussing how it could inform and perhaps, even change journalistic work.

Considering the relevance of mid-career trainings in constructive and dialogue-based journalism (see section 4), we will invite journalists to the public debate and discuss whether the audience has been neglected more than it should have. We will also invite the public via local media and allow audiences from Denmark and the Netherlands to join online as well.

Students will have to master two challenges:

1. Moderating the debate so that all perspectives are heard and brought to bear on one another. Afterwards, we will ask ourselves whether we have increased mutual understanding on the issues discussed.
2. Exploring whether participants of the debate see the benefits of dialogue-based journalism. This should be interesting because convincing mid-career journalists of these benefits is a precondition for training them in constructive and dialogue-based journalism. It will also be interesting to see how the audience responds to journalists talking about them. As Jacob L. Nelson has recently observed in his book 'Imagined Audiences. How Journalists Perceive and Pursue the Public' (2021), journalists usually act on preconceived beliefs about their audiences and do not check them systematically.

### 6.2 Focus in Intellectual Output 3

All three partner institutions agree on the proposition to turn the Building blocks (see section 3) into a handbook. This handbook should be applicable for both mid-career professionals and BA-level students.

We will also focus on surveys of students about their experiences with public orientation, audience engagement and dialogue-based journalism at their internships. Aarhus will ask its students before and after their internships. Stuttgart will ask its students about their internship experiences before the start of its course. Zwolle will ask its students as well as its media partners in the course Public oriented journalism about the value of skills needed to engage with the audience and conduct a dialogue.

We will also try to reach more in-depth knowledge on market perspectives for teaching, as well as more in-depth knowledge about the effects of working in a dialogue-based, public oriented, audience engaging way.

## 7. References

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## Attachment 1: Course description DMJX mid-career training

### ***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 deserts scatter in Denmark and the rest of the world and confidence in media is under pressure.*

*Luckily a growing number of media and organizations 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 process. 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 (soccer) 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 strengthen 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.”*