

Chapter 9

NOW WHAT?

If you are a reporter who wants to persuade your editor to give way to more constructive news, try the argument of experiment:

- Try to add a constructive angle on your next story, and monitor the reactions from your readers, viewers, and listeners. Share the experience.
- Find a likeminded person inside (or outside) the newsroom.
- Conduct a workshop where you look at the stories you have made today. How many of them deal with conflicts, drama, crooks or victims? Ask: would you read/watch it yourself if you were not paid to do so? Will your children or neighbours? Look at the stories again: How could you add constructive angles by looking for ways out, best practice or facilitate a debate on how to deal with the problem? How could you involve your audience?
- Suggest to your editor and colleagues that you try just to publish one constructive story. Next week suggest that you try for one day or in one section to look for solutions and not only problems, just to learn.
- Praise: Editors are human too. They would love to be told that they have guts and vision. And they in fact need to be reminded that they are journalists as well, who can deal with important stories to the benefit of society instead of all the budget cuts, union meetings and management-rhetoric that steal their time and engagement.

If you are an editor trying to motivate your reporters to be more constructive:

- Show them the declining circulation figures/ratings. Again. But this time, ask them the question: Don't you think that we probably will end up with more of the same result if we continue doing what we have always done?
- Show them the principles of constructive news and quote former skeptical and skilled reporters who have realised that it is possible to be both critical and constructive. Invite speakers, or visit other newsrooms who have tried this.
- Experiment: Workshops, The Day of Yes, a Good News Section, a series involving the community to come up with ideas to solve the problem your reporters have documented.
- Praise behaviour, ideas and stories you want more of. Give rewards to the best constructive angle.
- Tell your audience about your plans. And invite them to give feedback along the way.
- Post all the positive reactions you begin to receive from readers, viewers and neighbours. And don't forget to share when your daughter suddenly voluntarily spends time reading/watching one of your stories.
- Think about why your audience loves your daily weather report. You might hate it as much as your hard-hitting newsroom thinking it's not really journalism. But what makes the weather forecast different and so relevant for people? It's not only about today or yesterday: It deals with the weather tomorrow and in the weekend. What if you also used data and experts to do stories on tomorrow on other areas in your community: Demographics, schools, traffic, crime, health, etc.
- Make your own version of the new BBC program "My Perfect Country", where listeners share ideas on how the community can improve and three experts debate, which of the ideas of improvement would make most sense.

If you are a politician hoping for reporters to begin to change their behaviour and give you more airtime.

- Don't bother. Concentrate on yourself. What about saying what you really mean, instead of what your spin doctor tells you would be smart to say? What about spending time on coming up with good ideas to solve the problems facing society, instead of looking for weak arguments from your opponent.
- Send this book to a newsroom near you. Anonymously.

Be constructive.

Share your experience.

Good luck.

Takeaway

Constructive Journalism is

- critical, objective, and balanced
- tackling important issues facing society, not trivial
- unbiased
- calm in its tone and does not give in to scandals and outrage
- bridging, not polarising
- forward-looking and future-oriented
- nuanced and contextualised
- based on facts
- facilitating well-informed debate around solutions to well documented
- problems

Constructive Journalism is Not

- promoting a specific agenda, crossing the line between journalism and politics
- uncritical or naive
- promoting heroes, governments or civil society organisations
- obscuring critical viewpoints
- activism in any shape or form
- dumbed-down, trivial or happy news
- giving in to false equivalence/balance
- proposing solutions to problems or advocating one solution over another
- over-simplifying complex problems or solutions to complex problems

Chapter 10

JOIN THE GLOBAL MOVEMENT

“Nothing is as powerful, as an idea whose time has come.”

Victor Hugo, Author

Ignaz Semmelweis was not a popular man among his fellow doctors.

In the mid-19th century, before the germ theory of disease was confirmed, it was not unusual for doctors to go directly from an autopsy procedure to the maternity ward to deliver babies, and the new mothers were dying from childbed fever.

While working at an Obstetrical Clinic in Vienna, Semmelweis noticed that doctors' wards had three times the mortality compared to the midwives' wards, and tried to convince doctors they were killing their own patients because they were not washing their hands. Some doctors were offended at the suggestion that they themselves were causing their patients' deaths. Dr. Semmelweis' ideas were rejected, he became severely depressed, had a breakdown, was admitted to a mental asylum, and died only 14 days later, aged 47, after a particularly bad beating by the guards.

A journalist admitting that news people are not doing our job well enough and in fact are doing harm to democracy, does not win popularity contests among peers either.

Isn't it a betrayal of the profession and destroying the credibility of professional men and women having a hard time already and doing their best?

Isn't it in fact better for the public if this criticism could take place behind closed doors, as people do need someone to trust, and an open debate on the fact that we can improve will destroy that trust?

Sir Martyn Lewis is well aware of how controversial it is to speak out about journalism.

In the 1980s, he was the most respected and well-known news anchor at the BBC in London. But he became increasingly frustrated with the news he was presenting to the British public evening after evening. Not that it was fake news, but the news anchor just didn't feel that the picture he presented was right.

"We told so many negative stories, though the world was much more nuanced," Sir Martyn Lewis recalls. He tried to talk with his editors and colleagues, but they refused to listen. News was news.

In 1993, he was invited to give a talk in Los Angeles, and he decided to speak out, far away from London. But to make sure he was on the safe side, he had the communications director of the BBC go through his speech before he left.

"It was not easy. I could not mention that I thought that we journalists and also the BBC were not giving a fair and accurate picture of the world. But in the end, we agreed that instead of mentioning the BBC, I could say "a TV station close to my heart."

When Lewis landed in LAX airport in Los Angeles, he was being asked by the ground personnel to contact his bosses at home.

"On the phone I was being told, if I held that speech, I would be fired. I got so mad, that I said that they couldn't fire me, because I felt I no longer worked at the BBC, which normally fought for freedom of expression and public good."

Lewis did his speech, which was reported by CNN and international media, and when he returned days later, he thought he should clear his desk at the BBC. Instead he was invited for coffee by his bosses, who didn't dare fire him: Thousands of viewers had contacted the BBC to tell that they fully supported their news anchor. They too found that their evening news was far too negative.

Lewis stayed in his job through most of the 90s.

But he left without seeing a change in the news culture and news content.

Sir Martyn, who has chaired the National Council for Voluntary Organisations in Great Britain, told me his story the day after I had



Source: Constructive Institute 2017

made a talk at the BBC Newsroom in 2016. The fact that the BBC now listened and even now has decided to include so called “Solution-Focused Journalism” in its core news strategy gives him hope:

“It came late, but I do hope there is now more awareness of the fact that we do need to change our negative culture in the news business.”

So, the diagnosis that news culture is ill is not new. What is new is that more and more agree, and that the idea of constructive news as a medicine with the potential to cure the patient, now spreads around the world. And more and more newsrooms find that constructive news does not cripple any of the virtues on which great journalism must stand. The key elements of good journalism as expressed by the great American editors Tom Rosenstiel and Bill Kovach, whose work on journalism and leadership I enjoyed during my year at Stanford University in the early 90s are as follows:

1. Journalism’s first **obligation** is to the **truth**.
2. Its first **loyalty** is to **citizens**
3. Its essence is a **discipline** of **verification**.
4. Its practitioners must maintain an **independence** from those they cover.
5. It must serve as an **independent monitor** of **power**.

6. It must provide a forum for public **criticism** and **compromise**.
7. It must strive to make the **significant interesting** and **relevant**.
8. It must keep the news **comprehensive** and **proportional**.
9. Its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their **personal conscience**.

Constructive journalism builds exactly on those old principles. Not on activism. Not on subjectivity. Not on journalists taking the roles of politicians.

Commit Yourself

On March 1st, 2017, I had been heading DR News for ten years and enjoying every moment of it. A better mission, a better newsroom, better journalists and a more important task as an editor-in-chief you cannot get in Denmark – or maybe elsewhere.

But the vision of constructive journalism is to me so important for not only journalism and news media, but also for democracy itself, that I just had to commit myself to it.

On September 1st, 2017, we launched Constructive Institute as an independent non-profit organisation placed right on campus of Aarhus University. On our board serves the former EU commissioner Connie Hedegaard, media director of the European Broadcasting Union in Geneva Jean Philip De Tender, the chairman of UN Live and former CEO of Huffington post Jimmy Maymann, Aarhus University representative Head of Communication Anders Correll, the former editor-in-chief and now member of the board of the regional media house Fynske Media, Per Westergård, myself and lawyer Steffen Ebdrup of the press foundation, Aarhus Stiftstidendes Fond.

We have an advisory board with equally fantastic people like:

- Michael Moeller, director general at the United Nations Office at Geneva, Switzerland
- Peter Bro, professor of journalism at the Centre for Journalism in University of Southern Denmark, Denmark

- Dawn Garcia, director of the John S. Knight Fellowships Program at Stanford University, United States
- Espen Egil Hansen, editor-in-chief at Aftenposten, Norway
- Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, associate professor at Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, United Kingdom
- Jesper Højberg, executive director of International Media Support
- Anne Lagercrantz, director of news at SVT, Sweden
- Trine Nielsen, director of education and knowledge at the Danish School of Media and Journalism, Denmark
- Johann Oberauer, CEO of Oberauer Publishing, Austria
- Erik Rasmussen, founder of Global Think Tank Sustainia, Denmark
- Richard Sambrook, director of the Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies at Cardiff University, and former director of BBC News, United Kingdom

Based on philanthropy, and supported so far by TrygFonden, Bestseller, Den Fynske Bladfond, Aarhus Stiftstidendes Fond and Helsinki Sanomat, the idea is to use Denmark and media in Northern Europe as a showcase and spread best practice to the rest of the world.

We follow three roads:

1. **New knowledge**, which is why we are placed at Aarhus University, where Rector Brian Bech Nielsen heads his university of 40,000 students based on the vision that a university serves not only its students, but also society with new knowledge, which can lead to solutions of the challenges faced by civilisation. We want to interact with independent researchers at Aarhus University and elsewhere to find evidence on how news media influence not only democracy and politics, but also the human mind – and if we do it differently, what is the impact? We want to help future journalists with new educational material on constructive journalism. We want to invent new creative constructive media formats and share it with the news industry.

2. **New inspiration.** We want to share ideas, best practices and motivational insights at conferences, seminars, keynotes, master classes, workshops and give out global constructive prizes. We will help boards of media companies find new strategies and help editors implement new culture and new storytelling. We will build a database with best practice examples and share information and be part of the growing constructive movement via social media, our own website and partnerships. In five years, we aim to be – alone or with partners – present with hubs in Europe, North America, Asia and Africa.

3. **New role models.** Six Constructive Fellows started at the end of August 2017 as journalistic talents to broaden their minds at Aarhus University, where they not only can update their knowledge and in depth understanding of the challenges facing society on their beat, but also look for possible solutions for society. Meanwhile, we give them training in constructive journalism. After a full academic year of 10 months they return to their news organisations as role models and agents of change for better journalism at Politiken, Fyens Stiftstidende, Kristeligt Dagblad, Jysk-Fynsk Medier and DR News. The fellowship program, which is inspired by the John S. Knight Fellowship Program at Stanford University and the Nieman Fellowship at Harvard, has English as its working language and will, from 2018, consist of 6 Danish and 6-8 international journalists and editors.

Yes, we need help to do all this. Partners and funders to supplement our partners like the United Nations, the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA), the International News Media Association, the European Broadcasting Union, all three Danish Journalism education institutions, media organisations like Politiken, TV2, Kristeligt Dagblad, Mediehusene Midtjylland, Deutsche Welle, Google, Facebook, and our early funders like Aarhus Stiftstidende Foundation, Den Fynske Bladfond, TrygFonden and Bestseller.

The experienced investigative Danish reporter Orla Borg, the Oxford educated Maarja Kadajane who who has been working with international media – at the EBU and elsewhere – for over ten years, and political scientist Peter Damgaard Kristensen heading our small staff at Constructive Institute look forward to hearing from you, if you have ideas, want to support us, or be part of the global movement. Go to our website for more information at constructiveinstitute.org.

Why do we think, we can do this?

- The crisis in the media business is now so obvious that no company can stone wall constructive criticism any longer.
- More and more young reporters want a change in journalism.
- This criticism does not come from the outside; from politicians, big business or interest groups, which makes it easy to ignore for an independent press used to fighting any outside pressure. It comes from editors, publishers and journalists out of a worry and love for journalism and with the ambition to make journalism great again.
- New constructive groups of reporters or networks for solutions focused journalism are spreading, and the demand for common standards, definitions and vocabulary is only growing.
- Invitations to Constructive Institute to do keynotes, seminars and workshops come from news organisations from all over the world.
- And media owners find the vision of constructive news meaningful. When I made a keynote at “The INMA Global News Media Congress” in New York in May 2017, 424 CEOs from news media from 42 countries rose from their seats and applauded – most likely because they were so happy that I finally stopped talking. But maybe also because they understood after just another conference about the future of news and depressing demands of investment in data analyses, new platforms, new apps, and new distribution channels, that constructive news is a cheap strategy which is more about changing mindset and changing bad habits of just running faster, instead of agreeing to where to run to.

The time is right. The time is now. We need to experiment. We need to share ideas. We need to generate new knowledge. We need a global movement of opportunity, hope and courage to think differently. And we cannot wait any longer for *somebody* to do *something sometime*.

We are the change, we are waiting for.