

How to save the media and democracy  
with journalism of tomorrow

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Revised Second Edition

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Ulrik Haagerup

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AARHUS UNIVERSITY PRESS

NEWS

**Preface by Helmut Schmidt**

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

**Epilogue by Michael Møller**

Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva

Ulrik Haagerup

# CONSTRUCTIVE NEWS

AARHUS UNIVERSITY PRESS 

*Constructive News*

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# PREFACE

*By Helmut Schmidt (1918-2015)*

Former publisher of *Die Zeit* and Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany

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

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

2,500 years ago, the ancient Greeks did not have media, nor did the ancient Romans 2,000 years ago. However, they had leaders. Arguably, the best political leaders in Europe in the last 100 years were Winston Churchill and Charles de Gaulle. They both came to power before democracy turned into media-democracy, where the constant media focus of exposure is on any politician who wants to attract votes and the attention of the masses to earn their seats.



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

This superficiality and negativity in the media has influenced politics. The lack of political leadership in the West will diminish its global influence. A change in the way in which the press operates, and a stronger focus of playing a more constructive role in our societies, is welcome.

I will soon be 95 and I am a has-been in all aspects of life, but my age makes me a realist. Ulrik Haagerup is half my age. He has the right to be an optimist, believing that it is possible to change journalism to be more inspirational and to benefit global society. I wish him the best of luck with this book. There is certainly a need for more constructive news.

October 2014

# INTRODUCTION

## Why This Book?

*“When you change the way, you look at things...  
the things you look at change.”*

Max Planck, Scientist

I am a journalist. I went into the profession of news with a very young and blurry idea of wanting to do good for society: Something like telling important stories to people to help them make up their own mind.

Slowly I became part of the news culture. On my first day at journalism school our teacher said with that voice you only get from a life of bad whisky, cigarettes and tough deadlines: “A good story is a bad story. If nobody gets mad, it’s advertising.” It runs in my veins.

Later I got a job as a news reporter and tried cover stories that would please my editors and colleagues, stories that could fit in a fast headline, generate quotes in other media and could win me prizes. I became part of the news culture. And I loved it.

But sometimes you happen to stand in front of the mirror, and then you must take the consequence for what you see: Either break the glass or shape up a little.

Not that I ever told lies. But at some point, I had to ask myself: Did I still work as a journalist, editor-in-chief, and news director for the biggest news organisation in my country in order to do good for society, or had my ambition in reality slowly changed into pleasing the news culture? And what good did it do?

Not that nobody before had told me and the rest of the news

business that we were on the wrong track. But we – journalists and editors – are not very good at being criticised. We are used to stonewalling anyone trying to influence our reporting. So when politicians criticise us for focusing too much on the negative sides of society and haunt their every mistake, we know that they just want to avoid our critical questions and attack our independent watchdog reporting.

When CEOs and interest groups ask us also to report on their successes and not only their failures, we say “buy an ad”, which is also intended to embarrass them. What do they take us for, PR agents or advertising sales people?

When professors write reports on the negative bias of the press and warn of the consequences, we ignore them, because what do those intellectuals from the elite in their ivory towers know about real journalism anyway?

And when our neighbour explains that she has now stopped buying the newspaper and quit watching the late-night news, we start explaining to this stupid woman that it’s an obligation of any adult and good citizen to follow the news.

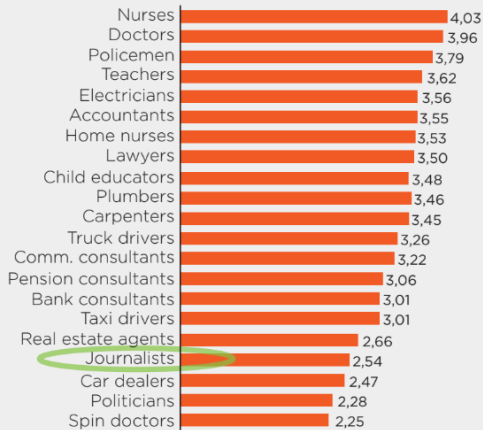
People say that you hear the truth from children and drunk people: “Dad, sometimes you need to listen louder,” my youngest teenage daughter told me one evening, as I spent my time as a father telling her were not to go, which drinks not to drink, when to be home and which boys not to kiss.

Listen louder? I had never heard that expression before. Fathers – just like journalists and editors – are much better at talking than at listening.

But if we had paid attention outside the newsroom, what would we have heard years ago?

When being asked about the trust in different professions, people in my country (and probably yours too) place journalists just between used-car sales people and real estate agents, which is an annual surprise to us, because we normally tell each other at our news conferences that we are in the “trust business”. But we usually find comfort in the fact that politicians are even further down on the list. And then we talk about that instead.

## TRUST MELTDOWN PUBLIC TRUST IN DIFFERENT PROFESSIONS



If you do what you have always done, you'll probably end up with the same result you have always gotten. And by now most news people must have found out that our results are not good. As my group of news people, who were gathered in Dubai at World Economic Forum Global Council on the Future of Journalism, concluded back in 2008:

“The revolution in information and communication technology has probably hit no other sector harder than the news media itself. Hardly any other industry is finding its role challenged so fundamentally, its values and worth being eroded and its business model threatened to a point of extinction.” To put it bluntly: Houston, we have a problem.

It is time to remember that the word “crisis” is an old Greek word for turning point. Before the discovery of antibiotics, a patient with infection would probably get well, if the fever dropped after five days. If the temperature continued to rise after day five, the patient most likely would die. That point on day five was called “crisis”. So crises are good if you survive them. And we have now come to a turning point in the media world. And the cure is not new apps, faster deadlines and more of the same with less money.

People do not need more news. They need better news. Our road to success in the news business is not to beat Twitter and the competitor by 8 seconds. It is to be relevant and meaningful in people's lives. It is to become a friend, a guide and a trusted authority in our communities. And you can only become an authority if you know what you are talking about and put the common good above your own self-interest.

And no: As journalists, we really don't know enough. And yes: Too many publishers have been affected by business-school logic arguing, that journalism is just a product to be sold. So, if people click on reality celebrity Kim Kardashian, they'll get more Kim Kardashian. If they watch crime, terror, wars and hurricanes, we'll serve them more. That's news. This is our world. Or is it?

Is the planet, with its 195 countries, getting more evil, poorer and more terrifying? Or does the public miss the big picture, because we – the news media – focus only on the few important trouble spots?

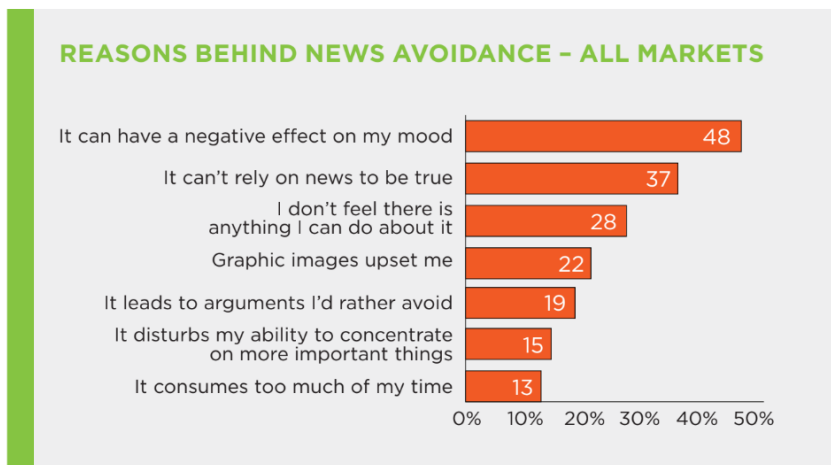
Journalism is not stenography – it is the best obtainable version of the truth, as Watergate reporter Carl Bernstein once told me. Since then I have made a habit of evaluating the journalistic material in the in-flight magazines on the plane to a new country. In these magazines, the sky is always blue, the snow is new, the sun is bright, the food fantastic, the investments promising, and the girls beautiful and smiling just as much as the air hostesses and the president of the airline. It might not all be a lie, but does this kind of journalism provide a true picture of life there?

Not if I compare it with the newspapers I routinely buy at the airport, or the news I watch at the hotel on national TV. Death, murders, accidents, wars, demonstrations, political fights, accusations of corruption, wrongdoing, and all kinds of problems welcome me and normally make me regret that I came in the first place. Does this kind of traditional news journalism really provide the best obtainable version of the truth? Or is the picture we in the news media industry pass on to readers, listeners, viewers, and to our societies just as short sighted and false as the glossy magazines full of commercial journalism disguised as reporting?

Why is the news media so negative? What are the consequences? Does it do society any good? Does a good story have to be a bad story? Can we save journalism by helping it save the world? How can we improve before it is too late? These questions have fascinated me for most of my 35-year long journalism career in the news industry.

This book is the search for answers. It argues that good reporting is seeing the world with both eyes. Not missing the important stories about Ebola in West Africa, hunger, bombings in Gaza and Ukraine and millions on the run from terror and war in Syria. But also seeing stories that can inspire and engage because they show the opposite; things that work, people doing something extraordinary to solve important problems. The big picture.

Readers, listeners and viewers turn their backs on traditional media in their millions, and one of the reasons for the fundamental crisis is that people are sick and tired of the negative picture of the world presented to them by the press. Most news stories in traditional media are focused on conflict, drama, crooks and victims, and the result is neither to the benefit of the press, journalism nor the societies that we – the men and women of the press – claim to serve.



Source: Reuter's Institute for the Studies of Journalism at Oxford University: Digital News Report 2017

Reuters Institute for the Studies of Journalism at Oxford University published a new world-wide study in the summer of 2017 on the reasons why millions of people turn their backs on traditional news media.

The number one reason – 48 percent of all answers in all countries surveyed – was this: “News can have a negative effect on my mood.”

Number two was that people didn’t trust the news to be true, and the third reason was “I don’t feel there is anything I can do about it.”

So if I and my colleagues in the news business think that our hard work is to the benefit of society, but in contrast we create depression, distrust and apathy, who should change?

The old newsroom saying: ‘If it bleeds, it leads’, is outdated. Tabloidisation of news, even in so-called serious print media, online and television news shows, has gone too far.

Thomas Patterson, Bradlee Professor of The Government & the Press at Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government, puts the problem like this: “The real bias of the press is not that it’s liberal. The bias is a preferred preference for the negative.”

This book is a handbook of inspiration on how we can do better in the newsrooms, in the public debate and in our democracies. Constructive News is about tomorrow: News stories that inspire and engage in a public debate for a better future. And since the first edition of this book in Danish in 2012 and new versions in English and German, Constructive News is picking up momentum. More and more newsrooms around the world – from the BBC, to The Guardian, the Minneapolis Star Tribune, the Huffington Post in the United States, Danish TV2, Swedish Radio and TV, NRK in Norway, RUV in Iceland, VRT in Belgium and Yle in Finland now follow the example of DR News and experiment with constructive news formats.

## CONSTRUCTIVE JOURNALISM IN COMPARISON

|                   | Breaking        | Investigative   | Constructive             |
|-------------------|-----------------|-----------------|--------------------------|
| <b>Time:</b>      | Now             | Yesterday       | Tomorrow                 |
| <b>Goals:</b>     | Speed           | Blame           | Inspiration              |
| <b>Questions:</b> | What? When?     | Who? Why?       | What now? How?           |
| <b>Style:</b>     | Dramatic        | Critical        | Curious                  |
| <b>Role:</b>      | Police          | Judge           | Facilitator              |
| <b>Focus:</b>     | Drama, conflict | Crooks, victims | Solutions, Best practice |

Source: Constructive Institute 2017

Our democracies are now facing the largest trust meltdown on a global scale since World War II. And the public sense of failed systems is not mainly found in Russia, China or India, as most of us would like to think: Surveys on public trust in the democratic institutions by the British-based global opinion poll company Ipsos Mori found in 2017 the lowest scores in the United States, Western Europe, Brazil, South Africa and Australia.

In societies with no authorities left, the rudest, the loudest and the one with most likes will become president.

The Director General of the United Nations, Michael Moeller, who serves on the advisory board of Constructive Institute, is alarmed by the situation and calls for action:

“We live in a world where the flow of information and the possibilities for citizen participation have never been greater. Yet, many feel disempowered by the news, are disappointed in their political leadership and disengaged from decision-making. This generates a democratic deficit through apathy and indifference. It is often said that we get the media and the political leaders we deserve. It is our



shared responsibility to ensure that we get the best. Because that is how we are all empowered. “Constructive News” is a welcome call for a more profound reflection about priorities and choices, not just among media professionals and political leaders, but for all of us.”

Another global leader, Pope Francis, looks at the global challenge in this way:

“We have to break the vicious circle of anxiety and stem the spiral of fear resulting from a constant focus on “bad news”. This has nothing to do with spreading misinformation that would ignore the tragedy of human suffering, nor is it about a naive optimism blind to the scandal of evil.”

In a powerfully worded message in the beginning of 2017, the Pope said he wanted to encourage media professionals to engage in “constructive forms of communication that reject prejudice” and help create a world of “realism and trust.”

## Enough is Enough

Jodie Jackson would agree. She was a young woman selling perfume in her town in the Midlands, UK, when she got frustrated with the constant negative bombardment from news media surrounding her.

She wrote down her feelings in a poem, and her boyfriend helped her turn it into a video rap, which she sent to me, as she had heard that I was a media professional sharing her frustrations. I watched it at work at DR, and right after I knew what I needed to do. Jodie Jackson’s poetic news consumer outcry went like this:

*The purpose of the news is to engage and inform,  
empower people and bring about reform,  
but their words are being lost by the noise of the storm.*

*We hear about disaster, murder, conflict and violence,  
And after a while this becomes white noise, like silence.  
But when there is a bias for the negative, we lose becoming sensitive  
And instead we become emotionally dead.*

*You see*

*this negativity has been shown to be destructively informing me  
Dividing me from society by creating this fear and anxiety,  
For many they watch helplessly as if we are damned to be,  
but that's not the only story of the fate of our humanity.*

*Let's hear about progress, acknowledge solutions,  
This excess of negativity it's like mental pollution.  
When we see good news, it's misrepresented:  
We hear cats being saved from trees and the conversation is ended.  
Saved instead for "and finally".*

*But finally, these  
stories of possibility are shown to be a vital story for society.  
We need to know about how problems are being solved, issues resolved  
For the sake of our souls,  
Not for ignorant bliss, but because we are better than this.*

*We don't need sugar coating or positive spins.  
Again, that's the cynical view that this conversation underpins.  
And don't get it confused with entertainment, PR or fluff.  
Enough is enough.*

*It's rigorous journalism reporting on progress.  
Reporting on problems, but not ignoring success.  
We publicise failure, corruption and shame,  
But when it comes to human potential it's not treated the same,  
And the hypocrisy is killing me.*

*Are you kidding me?  
They point the finger at every other industry, but leave them be  
As this excess of negativity  
increases velocity, atrocity, chasing more controversy.  
But where is the nobility in preying on morbid curiosity?*

*I feel cheated,  
defeated by newspaper allegiance to profits and click baits  
Regardless if it generates hate and drums up the nation  
into a fearful state.  
Some people find it too much to take.  
And then the stories become lost, because people switch off.*

*But if we want a nation that's engaged and informed  
it's time to reform.  
Make a new norm, empower, inspire.  
Help us achieve higher, report the good in other people.  
Not just replay their evil.*

*If we witness the unbelievable, it makes it more achievable,  
A solution seems more feasible, the only option now is to freeze or fall.  
After all the truth of the world includes the good and the sad  
The happy and sad.  
So why would you just tell one half of the story?*

*It leaves us in mourning unable to see that the new day is dawning.  
The power lies in us becoming aware,  
To ensure they can take more care about the stories they tell  
when we look at the world out there.  
And why should we care?*

*Because the truth is that the news is an organisation  
that's intrusive of our minds  
And it's a matter of time before their words become our thoughts  
Shaping our opinions more and more.*

*So what we are asking for, as I said before,  
Is rigorous journalism reporting on progress  
Reporting on problems, but not ignoring success.*

*It may sound idealistic. It's been labelled naïve.  
But let me assure you this is not an ignorant plea.  
The research says it's obvious, and to ignore it is preposterous.*

*So it's time for the consumers to take a stand  
Because the industry will listen to us ...*

Jodie Jackson, 2016

You can watch the powerful video on YouTube, if you search for Jodie Jackson and “Publish the Positive”. When I had seen it, I knew I had to quit my job as news director after 10 years to try to change myself and my own profession. It was not enough to change the news culture of the Danish public broadcasting, DR, do talks and write books in my spare time.

We need a global constructive movement. We need a wakeup call to a paralysed media industry infected by cynicism. We need to understand that constructive news is neither an alternative to critical watchdog journalism nor is it an argument for harmless positive news. We need good reporting, which can inspire to possible solutions to the problems facing society, giving way to a new and more meaningful role for journalism: Not only documenting problems and finding who is to blame for them, but also facilitating dialogues in our communities on how they might be solved.

That's why we have created Constructive Institute, which opened in the summer of 2017 as an independent non-profit organisation located on the campus of the modern Aarhus University in Denmark's second biggest city. Coincidentally, in the same year, Aarhus hosted the European Capital of Culture 2017 with the theme “Rethink”. And the goal of Constructive Institute is indeed to help rethink journalism.

The mission is as simple as it is naïve: We want to change the global news culture in five years. Funded by philanthropy, Constructive Institute will follow three roads to that global change:

1. **New Knowledge:** research in partnership with respected scientists on political science, psychology and media, educational material for future journalists, and innovation of new constructive media concepts, so that not only the entertainment industry is successful in creating global concepts for the mass audience (X-Factor, Britain's Got Talent, Dancing with the Stars), but serious issues facing society can also become engaging and solution focused.
2. **New Inspiration:** keynotes, conferences, seminars, masterclasses, global prizes and helping boards revise strategies and assisting editors and journalists implement a more constructive news culture.
3. **New Role Models:** giving the best talents in the news business a year as Constructive Fellows at Aarhus University – like the John S. Knight Fellowship at Stanford University and The Nieman Fellowship at Harvard. In Aarhus, six Danish and (from 2018) hopefully six international fellows not only have access to the newest scientific knowledge on their beat, but they can also explore possible solutions to the major challenges facing society while they get a year-long education on constructive storytelling.

You might not be successful in changing everybody else. But one thing you can do: Change your own mindset and behaviour. Be a role model for others to follow. And if you ask better questions, you might get better answers.

I'm convinced that just as journalism is partly responsible for some of the problems facing democracy, journalism must also be a major part of the solution. Who else should people turn to get the best obtainable version of the truth? But then we must dare to change.

I thank talented editors, CEOs, politicians, reporters, scholars, present and lost media users for sharing their frustrations, ideas and hopes. I'm proud to have had Jakob Vestergaard from Aarhus University Press and journalist Johanne Haagerup as editors for this revised edition with a professional eye on both structure and details. I'm grateful to my friends, family and the great people around Constructive

Institute and Aarhus University for inspiration and for believing in better media to the benefit of society.

This is Constructive News. Let's make journalism great again.

Aarhus, October 2017

Ulrik Haagerup

Journalist, founder and CEO

Constructive Institute



## PART 1

# IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM

[← INDHOLD](#)

Dette materiale er ophavsretsligt beskyttet og må ikke videregives.





## Chapter 1

# WHAT'S WRONG?

*You better start swimmin'  
Or you'll sink like a stone.  
For the times  
they are a-changin'.*

Bob Dylan, Singer-songwriter

Fake news is not the real problem. News is. Misinformation and false stories from state supported hackers, immoral interest groups and teenagers finding cynical ways to make a living online is indeed Roundup for public trust. The new thing is mainly the speed at which these stories can spread in the digital world. But it is not really new.

When the American president John F. Kennedy visited Dallas in Texas in 1963, he had a speech in his inner pocket. But before he had a chance to read it, he was assassinated. What did we miss? What would he have said?

The manuscript was later found in the president's blood-stained jacket. So here is the warning Kennedy never had the chance to give to the world:

“Ignorance and misinformation can handicap this country's security. In a world of complex and continuing problems, in a world full of frustrations and irritations, America's leadership must be guided by the lights of learning and reason — or else those who confuse rhetoric with reality and the plausible with the possible will gain the popular ascendancy with their seemingly swift and simple solutions to every world problem.”

54 years later, the world is still trying to understand how the most powerful democracy in the world elected a politically inexperienced, boastful construction billionaire into the White House.

The three most important stories in my more than 35 years in journalism are the fall of the Berlin Wall, 9/11, and the election of Donald Trump. A lot of analysis has been made on the historic event which brought communism to a peaceful end in 1989, and on why Islamic terrorists brought down the symbol of capitalism, as they did when they flew passenger planes into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in 2001. But the election of Donald Trump in 2016 is still a puzzle.

What happened? Was he brighter than the other candidates? Was his policy coherent, clearly demonstrating an alternative approach? Or was this multi-billionaire simply riding on the crest of a wave because of a tremendous campaign budget?

Had German statesman and former Federal Chancellor of West Germany, Helmut Schmidt, still been with us, he would probably have emphasised an even scarier answer. To the very last, Schmidt, who died in November 2015, was the publisher at the successful German weekly, *Die Zeit*. This was where I met him in 2014 in connection with research for the first edition of this book on the relationship between media and politics.

Helmut Schmidt spent most of his life on the observation and description of, and participation in, democracy. And he received me in the same office, crammed with books and yellow-tinged press cuttings, as he did when I last visited him in the late 1980s, putting what became the end of the cold war into words for an article in my newspaper. 25 years later, his wrinkles deepened a little, the brushed-back hair considerably greyer, and the walls of the Hamburg office grown more tar-brown after another couple of decades of chain smoking. Thus, considering the long pause after my first question, I feared for a moment that my long drive south on the E45 from Denmark to Germany had been in vain. But then the 95-year-old sucked the life out of yet another Reyno Menthol, exhaled, and answered:

“Democracy is a European invention. So is the very idea of media. And we have exported democracy as well as media to the rest of the world. This ought to be a good thing. But it isn’t,” Helmut Schmidt said.

“Because today the western democracies have developed into

media democracies, and the media's influence is stronger than ever before in the history of mankind. The media are setting the agenda, deciding how populations perceive themselves and the world. Often, our main focus is on the negative and the shallow – maybe because media people believe this to be what people want, and where the money is. But the consequences are many, and they are serious. Primarily, because populations get a false picture of reality. Secondly, because the West is now suffering from lack of leadership,” Schmidt continued, before playing his trump card:

“Media democracies do not create leaders, they create populists.”

Schmidt mentioned another construction billionaire, the now scandalised former Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi, who epitomises the type of populist who will be elected in media democracies. I cannot help wondering who he would have mentioned had he lived long enough to follow the 2016 American presidential campaign.

## “The media loves me”

Certainly, Schmidt's analysis was razor sharp: In our modern media democracies, we run the risk that politicians become more focused on securing their own election or re-election than on providing solutions to societal challenges 5 or 10 years ahead. And spin doctors and media consultants will advise anyone chasing election to target their speech at the media's news criteria. So, when the media angle their content towards conflicts, drama, victims and villains, the headlines will go to the candidate who is best at creating conflict and drama, and who divides the world into easily recognisable villains and victims.

Muslims are terrorists, my opponents are morons, Mexicans are rapists, you are losers, but I'll make you into winners. Vote for me.

As Trump himself declared during his campaign: “The media loves me.”

According to a count performed by The Tyndall Report, the Trump campaign did indeed attract more media exposure all through the year 2015 than all the democratic candidates combined. And in 2016 Trump averaged a quarter of the overall political coverage by the

major newscasts of the three television networks – ABC, CBS and NBC – combined.

According to evaluations by the independent Swiss media research institute, Media Tenor, which processes statistical data of news-media content, the marketing value of the media coverage ran into 1.9 billion USD during 2015 – an amount which by far exceeded Trump’s direct campaign fund and gave him a gargantuan commercial advantage in his race against the other republican presidential candidates.

When even so-called serious media applies a tabloid journalism approach, the tendency is that the political debate will be shaped accordingly. In early 2016 the American TV network CBS was criticised for overexposing Donald Trump broadcasting live TV from almost all his campaign meetings. The answer from CEO Leslie Moonves highlights what has gone wrong with journalism:

“It may not be good for America, but it’s damn good for CBS. ... The money is rolling in. Bring it on, Donald. Go ahead. Keep going.”

And so he did.

The question remains as to whether journalism has been abducted by business-school logic, claiming that journalism is nothing but a product to be marketed. That the “customer” is always right. That what is measurable will be measured. The risk is that when important matters are not measurable, the measurable will then become important. Because it is much easier to measure market share, readership, page exposures and listening time than it is to determine whether the journalism we provide is to the benefit of society, makes people wiser and provides them with a better opportunity to make choices of their own.

It is not only in American newsrooms that the need for self-examination appears. As a news trade, we now need to ask ourselves whether we have created an internal culture to promote media democracy, which will again engender political populism and citizens left with a warped picture of reality.

We need to bring journalism back to its publicist roots. To a journalistic approach intent on creating understanding more than helping people to kill time. Where money is earned for providing

journalism – not the other way around. Where you care about the society you serve – and not just say so. And where you remember that responsible journalism is not just about whom to blame, and looking with one eye aimed only at confirming the angle you started with in your research.

## Embarrassing questions

There are some embarrassing questions to my beloved, yet distressed profession, which urgently require answers:

- Are we the ones who created Trump and others like him?
- Is this because populism speaks directly into our news criteria that love the crude and the rude, the attacking, the non-conforming, the outrageous approach? Because to a media trade under pressure, an entertaining fight is faster, cheaper and easier to cover than content which requires things as old-fashioned as documentation, the checking of facts and, not forgetting, research?
- Is serious journalism lost on an ever-increasing part of the voters who have ceased to trust traditional media and instead seek confirmation of their world view through friends and acquaintances on social media?

The secret algorithms of social media giants have proved to favour posts which talk to the heart rather than the head. A post on Facebook that generates pure joy or hate spreads much faster and wider than nuances and balanced reporting – changing news media into views media.

## Global mental obesity pandemic

Why do more and more people become fat? Because the empty calories are so easy to find: There are french fries on every street corner, Coca-Cola in the vending machines in the public schools and aisles after aisles of chips, candy and chocolates in the supermarket.

Now we are also moving towards a global mental obesity pandemic because the “empty calories” of content have become so easily accessible, and because it requires true effort on the part of the individual to digest in-depth articles, watch television documentaries, let alone read a book. It is much easier to kill time on a series on Netflix, check updates on Facebook, and play violent games on the PlayStation.

Trump and others like him are the result of the credibility meltdown that strikes when large parts of the population no longer have faith in the political elite. Either because they experience that there is a difference between what politicians promise to do and what they actually do. Or because visions and political content are replaced by rhetorical dodging, tactics and positioning.

Daniel Korski was advisor to the then British Prime Minister David Cameron during the Brexit vote. Korski has explained exactly when 10 Downing Street realised that “Remain” would lose the referendum to “Leave”. It was when they understood how the news media was covering the debates on for the decision that lay before Britain: to keep the status quo and stay with the EU, or to take a risk, stepping out onto the potentially thin ice on the journey towards independence.

In one corner, 90 professors and ice experts, who all said that with their expertise, science and research on the breakpoint of ice, it would not be advisable for the nation to go out there. The ice was too thin and would break. In the other corner, and with equal airtime, was a 51-year-old crystal healer from Sheffield, who knitted her own tampons, and who told the media and the voters that she could feel that it was right and safe for Britain to walk out on that ice. And she also thought that those professors and politicians were very elitist. (My interpretation and exaggeration).

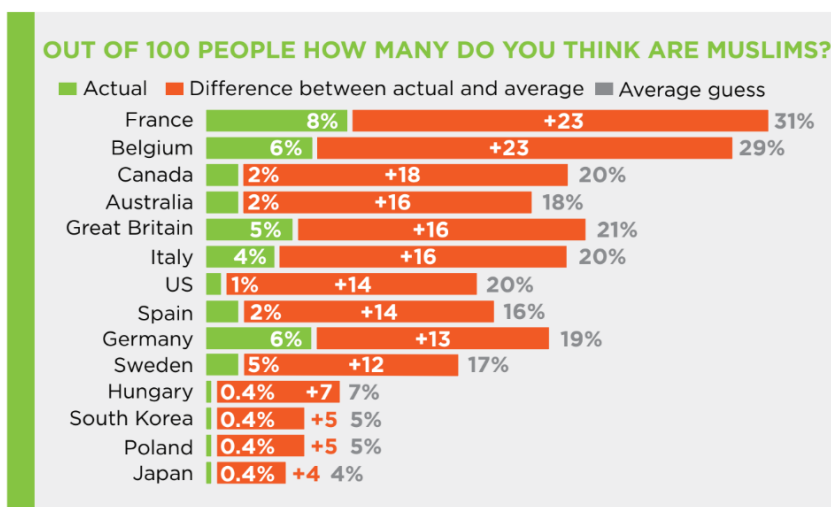
“When facts and feelings are presented as equal, facts will lose,” Daniel Korski said to Danish media Zetland. This comes as no surprise for the experienced Danish member of parliament, Peter Skaarup, from the successful and powerful Danish People’s Party. He publicly announced in August 2017, that “in politics there is no correct answer – only feelings and attitudes.”

“I think that facts are not as important as our attitudes and feelings. It can be useful to know the facts. But in a political debate, how we choose to act depends more on our feelings and our perception of the problems,” Peter Skaarup, who is also the chairman of the Legal Affairs Committee, explained to the Danish daily Politiken.

At the political festival Folkemødet in the summer of 2017, Peter Skaarup participated in a debate with the CEO of a security company, and they explained how they worked to fight crime with expensive security systems for private homes and with being “tough on crime” respectively – without once mentioning the fact that the risk of being a victim of a criminal act in Denmark has rapidly declined in recent years.

## Perception of reality

Journalism is the filter between reality and the perception of reality. How are we doing, then? Comprehensive surveys demonstrate a huge gap between facts and populations’ perception of facts:



Source: Ipsos Mori and The Guardian 2015



In 2015, global analysis company Ipsos Mori found a huge gap between reality and the public perception of reality. Italians believe almost half of the Italian population to be unemployed. Unemployment rates for 2014 equalled 12 percent. Americans read and watch so many stories about teenage pregnancies that they believe every fourth woman aged between 13 and 19 become pregnant. The factual statistic is three in a hundred.

The fact is that people – and among them our leaders – make decisions based not on facts, but what they believe to be the facts. Or what they want the facts to be. Just before the United States presidential election between Trump and Clinton in November 2016, the American unemployment rate dropped to 4.9 percent, which was the lowest in 9 years and an indication of fast American economic growth. But the average American – democrat and republican – thought that the unemployment rate was 31 percent. If you think that almost one third of your countrymen are unemployed, who do you vote for? She who claims it's going better, or he promising to Make America Great Again?

In France, the average Frenchman believes that 31 percent of the French population are now Muslims. The actual figure is below 9 percent. But if you believe that one third of the people in your country are Muslims, and the only Muslims you know are those blowing themselves and others up in the news all the time, who do you vote for?

In Denmark, crime rates are falling and have been doing so for years. But people feel more and more insecure in their lives. When we ask them why, they answer:

“Because of all the murders, the terror, the home robberies, the shootings and it's getting worse and worse!”

“Do you mean in your town?”

“No,” they say, “in the news. On my 24-hour news channel, on the internet, on my phone, on the front pages, the billboards, it's everywhere.”

The Danish Ministry of Justice published in the late summer of 2017 a survey among 900 Danes, who were asked if they thought that recent years had shown more or fewer car thefts, burglaries, robberies and crimes by the young. 80 percent – and mainly women – gave the

wrong answer, as they were sure crime was getting worse or stayed the same.

Police inspector Michael Kjelgaard from the National Investigation Center explained in the Danish newspaper Politiken:

“The stream of information is now so huge that almost every crime is being mentioned on social media or in the news media. We do try to create a balance by reporting on the facts of the drop in crime. But it just doesn’t have such a big impact, as it is not being covered in the media as much as the few spectacular crime events, which take up time and space in the news. Therefore, many get the impression that things are getting worse, even though the opposite is the case.”

Recently, Kristeligt Dagblad – a Danish daily – covered a national survey, demonstrating that Danes believe over a third of the world population to be without access to clean drinking water, whereas the accurate figure is 9 percent. The truth is this: Never before in human history have so few people lost their lives in warfare as is the case right now, in spite of the calamitous situation in Syria. Nonetheless, most surveys show that never before have we felt so unsettled. Could it be that the media are under the misapprehension that a good story can only be an unhappy one, forgetting the nuances and the overall picture?

As Bill Gates, former CEO of Microsoft and now a philanthropist once put it:

“The world is steadily becoming a better place to be. But this is not covered by the media, as no one will call a press conference about those children who did NOT die from malaria.”

## Don’t Panic

Close your eyes and think for a moment of the word Africa. What do you see? People starving, children dying from diseases, mothers infected with HIV, endless wars, depression and little hope will be the answer to many. Because this is what is being reported by our news media supported by help organisations and NGO campaigns trying to get our attention, our sympathy and our money. Not that it is wrong

that hunger is still a problem in areas when harvest fails. Not that it is false that malaria and AIDS still kill thousands. Not that it is wrong that civil wars in Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic are terrifying and seem to go on and on. But is that the full picture of a continent of one billion people?

Hans Rosling, a Swedish professor who devoted his statistical skills to get the facts of the world straight, spent his last years explaining to the world, that they have the wrong idea about Africa. Few people know that East African countries, such as Rwanda, experience a growth rate of their GNP similar to China's. That the middle class has doubled in Africa south of the Sahara. That more and more governments of African countries now change not due to revolution, but due to the results of democratic elections. And that diabetes is becoming a bigger problem than AIDS in many African countries, where obesity is more widespread than starvation.

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

As a professor at the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, Rosling began to test his students and fellow professors' knowledge on the basic facts of the world. And it turned out that they performed worse than a test group of chimpanzees, which means worse than random. "Such wrong answers could not be the results of guessing. They must be due to preconceived ideas that in a systematic way create and maintain ignorance. Only preconceived ideas can make us perform worse than random," explained the professor.

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

The population in all three countries turn out to be sure, that the