Changing the News: Constructive Journalism

Spring 2017
Copenhagen
3 Credits

Major Disciplines: Communication, Media Studies, Psychology
Faculty Members: Iben de Neergaard, idn@dis.dk and Jesper Borup, jbu@dr.dk
Program Director: Iben de Neergaard, Vestergade 10 A23, idn@dis.dk
Assistant Program Director: Louise Bjerre Bojsen, Vestergade 10 A23, lbb@dis.dk
Program Assistant: Jenny Han, Vestergade 10 A23, yh@dis.dk

Thursdays, 13.15-16.10, V10 – D11

Course Description

“School shooter kills nine victims,” “building collapses and leaves 27 people dead,” “Congress deadlocked” - those are just a handful of headlines you might have been exposed to in the news. But when was the last time you felt engaged and truly inspired by a news story you watched, heard, or read?

A growing body of research suggests that news reporting with a “negativity bias” has the power to induce helplessness and apathy within us, and not foster engaged, informed, global citizens. At the same time, news media is clamoring for our attention with newspapers struggling for their existence and social media news outlets fighting for revenues.

Despite the strong ethical principle in journalism of minimizing harm, news reporting today is often more focused on damages and critical aspects of life and politics than on the potential for solving problems or explore positive generators in current affairs. Critical reporting has made created breaking news like the Watergate scandal which toppled a US President. But maybe not all news needs to be reported the same.

This course draws on theories and principles from communication studies, positive psychology, and the growing movement of constructive journalism and related domains. By using insights from positive psychology, we will critically analyze news stories on all platforms - radio, TV and social media - and learn to transform the news to focus more clearly on constructive journalism formats. This will not only hone our critical media literacy skills, but also enable us to reflect on our own potential in creating positive, engaging communication.

Learning Objectives

At the end of this semester, you will:

- have a solid understanding of the history and theoretical foundation of Western journalistic principles
- be able to apply positive psychology research and methods to journalism/news reporting to understand the psychological impact the news has on us and on society
- critically evaluate the ethical dilemmas of today’s media reporting
- have the skills to do interview and communicate in a manner which emphasizes growth potentials and resilience
- know the difference between traditional news reporting and different kinds of constructive journalism

More specifically, by the end of the course you should know

- how to reflect on the impact that news consumption has on you/society (media literacy)
- how to identify, create, and analyze news reporting based on positive psychology (critical application of positive psychology)
- how to develop ideas for constructive journalism/media formats
- how to interview critically with a constructive outcome
- how to apply positive psychology to create a constructive narrative
- the underpinnings of constructive vs. detrimental ways of communicating

Course Faculty

Jesper Borup:

Journalist, radio anchor and host at DR (The Danish Broadcasting Corporation) and Co-Founder of the Danish Society for Constructive Journalism. 18 years of experience as a journalist, editor and project manager. Jesper Borup has previously taught at the University of Southern Denmark, UPDATE (Danish School of Media and Journalism), DR, and at a number of Scandinavian media institutions and broadcasters. He is also a public speaker, and his publication “Problem-solving Journalism in the Newspaper,” focuses on constructive journalism in a Danish context. Jesper has contributed to several publications on constructive and problem-solving journalism. His background combines Journalism Studies at the Danish School of Journalism with DR’s highly selective Talent Programme. With DIS since 2016.

Iben de Neergaard:


Guest lecturer

Kamilla Lange:

Draft Syllabus


Required Readings

- Posts and readings on DIS Canvas and FB group: Changing the news FA16
- You are expected to actively follow the news on both traditional and social media and to bring examples on constructive journalism (and the lack of it) to class.

Approach to Teaching

Because our backgrounds are in professional news reporting, communication, investigative and constructive journalism, we will focus on examples from real life reporting and newly developed theory and experience with constructive journalism. As instructors, we are very focused on engaging you every time we have class and to balance the use of theory/readings and presentations on one side and practical application/assignments and class exercises on the other side. We are committed to raise awareness of the practical applications of Positive Psychology in journalism and media.

Disability and Resource Statement

Any student who has a need for accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact Sean Green (sg@dis.dk) to coordinate this. In order to receive accommodations, students should inform the instructor of approved DIS accommodations within the first two weeks of classes.

DIS Policies

Attendance: You are expected to attend all DIS classes when scheduled. If you miss multiple classes, the Director of Teaching and Learning, and the Director of Student Affairs, will be notified and they will follow-up with you to make sure that all is well. Absences will jeopardize your grade and your standing at DIS. Allowances will be made in cases of illness, but in the case of multiple absences you will need to provide a doctor’s note. According to DIS policy, two consecutive unexcused absences will result in a report to the Academic Registrar. Three or more absences will have a negative effect your academic standing at DIS; your home university will be notified.

Academic Honesty: Plagiarism and Violating the Rules of an Assignment
DIS expects that students abide by the highest standards of intellectual honesty in all academic work. DIS assumes that all students do their own work and credit all work or thought taken from others. Academic dishonesty will result in a final course grade of “F” and can result in dismissal. The students’ home university will be notified. DIS reserves the right to request that written student assignments be turned in electronic form for submission to plagiarism detection software. See the Academic Handbook for more information, or ask your instructor if you have questions.

Laptop Policy: You may use your laptop for note-taking, fact-checking or assignments in the classroom, but be respectful: keep off email and social media websites that are unrelated to course discussion. Phones must be turned off during class.

Possible Field studies

- Visit to Danish Broadcasting Corporation, Denmark’s largest, publicly funded news organization that is experimenting with implementing constructive news coverage in their newsroom. The
purpose is to actively assess their experience implementing this new methodology when deadlines loom.

- Albertslund Posten, local newspaper situated in the outskirts of greater Copenhagen. Two times rewarded for their work with constructive journalism.

Grading

Participation - 20%
Assignment 1 - 15%
Assignment 2 - 15%
Assignment 3 - 20%
Final Project - 30%

To be eligible for a passing grade in this class, you must complete all of the assigned work. Late papers or assignments will be deducted a third of a grade point per day they are late. Grades will be uploaded to the Grade Center on Canvas.

Field Studies, Workshops & Assignments

During the course we have two scheduled field trips, 3 assignments and a final paper/project:

Participation (20%) - Expectations of the students:
We expect you to have done the reading for each class and prepare notes and questions for us and for your peers in class. This will give us material to generate conversation. When responding to questions in class, make references to our readings to support the points you are making. Overall, engaged participation will be rewarded.

It is key that you engage actively in the discussions we have in class and are willing to innovate this brand new methodology in collaboration with us and your peers.

You are also expected to engage with and interview people you do not know as part of this course.

Assignment #1 (15%)
Paper: The Watergate scandal and it’s pro and cons for news reporting and society.
Analyze an evening news program identifying negative and positive elements. If applicable, discuss the Watergate scandal’s influence on modern news reporting.
Length: Min. 600 words - Max. 900 words

Assignment #2 (20%)
Paper: Identify and explain how positive psychology can be used to create a constructive narrative in modern day journalism.
Length of the paper: Min. 600 words - Max. 900 words

Assignment #3 (15%)
Oral presentation in class – work in teams: People of Copenhagen
Details TBA.
Final project (30%):
Work in teams. Max. 6 ppl.
Your group can either create a new format for political interviews OR create and develop ideas for constructive journalism. More details TBA.

Course Plan
Schedule is subject to change if necessary with as much notice as possible.

1. Class/Student introductions. Introduction to the course. Overview.
   Bring laptops! We are taking a VIA Institute Strength Survey: www.viacharacter.org/ during class.
   You need to set up a profile, for you to be able to login to the survey. The profile is free.

2. What is the news focusing on? Western journalistic foundations.
   Objectives:
   Learn the criteria by which conventional news is based. How does it relate to journalists’ code of ethics?
   Readings:

   Optional Readings:

2nd part of class:
News journalism and Watergate. How it has framed the news. Is it always beneficial?
Objectives:
Challenges of today’s news criteria. How does it reflect truth? Whose truth? Which truth?
What are the consequences of a negativity bias?
Sharing knowledge on how this iconic news event has shaped news reporting since 1973
Watch documentary in class: “All the Presidents Men. Revisited”
Readings: None

Mandatory Field study, Date TBA
Your instructors will provide you with more details

3. Guest lecture: Kamilla Lange
How can news/journalism be innovated through Positive Psychology? Part I

Objectives:
Getting an overview of possible PP applications valuable for news journalism

Readings:
Positive Psychology, General introduction:

2nd part of class:
How can news/journalism be innovated through Positive Psychology? Part II

Objectives:
How to critically analyze news stories through the lens of Positive Psychology

Readings:
Read newspapers/news sites finding articles to bring to class

Core Course Week, Date TBA

4. What is constructive journalism?
Simple elements that can make journalism constructive.
Is there a difference between positive news stories and constructive journalism?
Ethics/discussion: Is it okay for a journalist to want to be constructive?
Readings:
Haagerup, Ulrik: Constructive News (2014) – chapters 4 + 5 + 8
Gyldensted & McIntyre, 2016: Constructive Journalism
Worldsbestnews.dk – website

5. Can we find solutions to our problems?
Objectives:
How to interview for a constructive change. Past, present, future orientation

Readings:
Paterno, Susan (2000): The Question Man
Tomm, Karl (1984): Interventive Interviewing:
Part III. Intending to Ask Lineal, Circular, Strategic, or Reflexive Questions?
Five Elements of Positive Psychology in Constructive Journalism. Chapter 9: Change the Question
6.  

**Guest lecture: Kamilla Lange**

How can news/journalism be innovated through Positive Psychology? Part III

**Objectives:**
Getting an overview of possible PP applications valuable for news journalism

**Readings:**

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**Long Study Tour / Travel Break 2**

7.  

Humans of Copenhagen – in class group project

**Objectives:**
How to interview people you do not know

**Readings:**
Berger & Milkman (2012) What makes online content viral?
Research what you can find on HONY interviewing methodology – pro and con
Prepare to discuss your findings in class – and to just do it

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8.  

From being constructive to help solving problems.

What’s the difference between constructive journalism and problem-solving journalism?
How to develop a problem solving case.
Ethics/discussion: Is it okay for journalism to want to contribute to the solving of problems in society?

Readings:
Haidt, Jonathan (2013): The Righteous Mind. Why Good people are Divided by Politics and Religion. Intro chapter
Jonathan Haidt: The moral roots of liberals and conservatives - Tedtalk

Long Study Tour / Travel Break 2

9
Can we find solutions to our problems?
Choose your final team assignment that you will present in class on April 28.
(Max. 5 persons in each group)
Your focus is to create a new format for political interviews OR create and develop ideas for constructive journalism.
More details TBA.

Readings: None

Travel Break 3

Mandatory Field Study, Date TBA
Your instructors will provide you with more details

10.
Work in teams on your final presentation. Pitch your idea and draft to the class and get constructive feedback from us.
Readings: None

11.
Final Class. Oral Presentations & Wrapping up.
Objectives:
What did you learn? How will you use it?
Readings: None