

Journalism and the Struggle for the Best Version of the ‘Truth’ in News information – Insights from Denmark

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1. Introduction

In this introductory part of our report, we present our method. We will also give an expanded presentation of the Danish media landscape. As part of this, we will outline an overview of the development in trust in news and journalism compared to other important areas of the Danish democracy, such as the representative government, science, and experts. Finally, we will put a spot-light on trust in journalism and media during the pandemic.

Interviews

Our empirical basis for writing this report is qualitative interviews with seven professional journalists and three researchers. The interviews were conducted in February and March 2022. Seven of the interviews took place online via zoom. Three interviews were face to face. All interviews have been recorded and transcribed.

The first group of respondents work as readers’ or viewers’ editors. Their work is to handle complaints from the audience. Two of the journalists are from the two Danish public media, the independent state-owned institution DR, and the stated owned limited company, TV2. The public service journalists define their positions as ‘news ombudsmen’²⁰ but their official title is ‘viewing audience’ editors. The last respondent in this group is the readers’ editor at Politiken, a moderate left-wing newspaper. The second group of respondents are researching in journalism and fact checking. Two of them are responsible for the Danish Reuter reports. The third researcher has just received funding for a fact-checking research project. The last group of respondents are affiliated to tje-k-det.dk. It is the only fact-checking milieu in Denmark²¹, and has existed since 2016. Tjekdet.dk has recently been granted government funding. Two of the journalists are working as fact checking journalists. One is the executive chairman of tje-k-det.dk. We have also interviewed a digital NGO journalist from one of the big environmental movements in Denmark.

Interview overview:

- Bjarne Schilling: Politiken
- Nathalie Damsgaard Frisch: tje-k-det.dk
- Thomas Hedin: tje-k-det.dk
- Lisbeth Knudsen: tje-k-det.dk
- Lars Bennike: TV2
- Jesper Termansen: DR
- Mette Bengtsson: Copenhagen University

²⁰ The ‘news ombudsman’ is a protected title.

²¹ The Danish public service program, ‘Detektor’, is also working with fact checking journalism. We have contacted them three times, but they have not turned back on our request. Here in September 22, DR has announced that they will close the program

- Mads Kæmsgaard Eberholst: Roskilde University
- Mark Ørsten: Roskilde University
- Thomas Helsborg: the Danish society for Nature Conversation

In order to describe the Danish media landscape, we have consulted both Danish and international statistical indicators of trust in journalism. We have translated the Danish graphs into English with a reference to where it is taken from.

The Danish Media landscape

The Danish media landscape is part of a Nordic media welfare system that is governed by values e.g., social equality, consensus seeking and editorial freedom (Syvertsen et.al., 2014). The landscape can also be described as 'hybrid', meaning that it is dominated by two types of actors, the publicly owned public service television companies, and the private daily newspapers, some of which are owned by funds, while others are commercially owned (Burkal et.al., 2021). Black-Ørsten & Mayerhöffer (2021) suggest that the Danish media landscape is more 'hybrid' than digitalised because the Danes are still loyal to offline public service-platforms.

The Danish Ministry of Culture is responsible for governing the media. In recent years, there have been some changes in the political view of how Denmark ought to regulate and support the media. This has led to a more politicised media landscape, and the so-called arm's length principle between the media and the political system has been challenged (Kristensen & Black-Ørsten, 2021). 'The principle of keeping an arm's length' means that the politicians ought to abstain from governing the cultural licenses in detail. The thought behind the principle is to differentiate the executive, the judging, and the legislating power to control and avoid abuse of power. The politicised media landscape can be illustrated with the latest political initiatives in Danish media policy. With the Law of Media Subsidy from 2014, the former financial support model based on distribution subsidies, is replaced with a production subsidy model. There has also been a move from license fee to taxation. Further, the Media agreement from 2018 has increased the support to private news media, mainly digital online media, at the expense of support to the public service news media. The present social democratic government removed the 20% reduction for the public service media, DR, when they took charge in 2020. Some channels were closed before the decision to reverse the reduction and have not been reopened.

In Denmark, there is a high degree of social trust in media, including radio and television (Kalnes et.al., 2021). Journalism and journalists are considered to operate at high professional standards, cultivated for most journalists through their journalist education that combines theory, practice, and academic skills. In this respect, journalists consider objectivity as an important ideal in their work, as well as weighing autonomy from the political or market agenda (Skovsgaard et.al., 2018). Other values are the thought of being the watchdog of society and democracy, and serving the public's interests (Skovsgaard et.al., 2018). In the interviews, a few of the respondents also mentioned the press complaints commission and the guiding rules for good and ethically based journalism as important brands for trustworthiness and legitimate news. According to Black-Ørsten, the ethical codex has contributed to the positive development of a better media self-image and to self-recognition in relation to what news information is. It has also influenced the Danes in their overall trust in the media.

According to the graph below (Fig. 1), the most trusted news media segment in Denmark is TV, 67 % mention TV as their first, second or third media (Kulturministeriet, 2021:21). It is followed in order by radio (51 %), national newspapers (47 %), and the online platforms of the national news- papers (44 %):

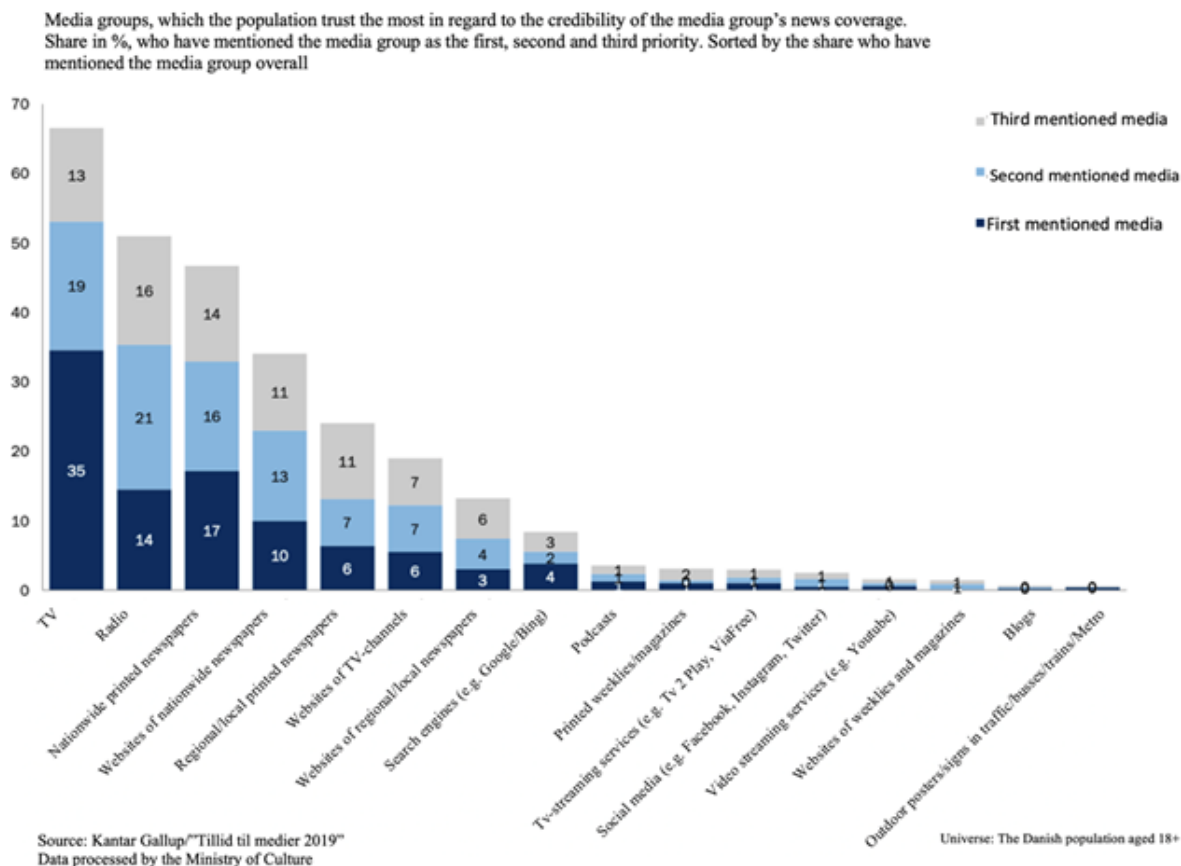


Figure 1: Trust in media 2019, source: Danish Ministry of Culture, 2021, p. 21

The results are confirmed by other surveys, both in Denmark (Schrøder et al., 2020; 2021) and on European (EBU, 2021) and global levels (Newman et al., 2021). If the results are weighed against what source the Danish citizens prefer to get their news from - whether they watch, read, or listen to the news - there is a coherence between what news the citizens trust the most, and what they prefer to watch, read, or listen to. For example, if they prefer to watch the TV news, then they have most trust in TV news coverage, and so forth (Kulturministeriet, 2021:22). This causality between media consumption preferences and trust in news media is confirmed by our respondents. People trust their preferred news source more than they trust other news sources. **Another interesting observation is the very low trust rate in social media (3%).** In Schrøder et al. (2021:15), the trust percentage is higher (13%), but the question is also asked in a different way and is directed towards 'trust in the news that the reader consumes', while in Figure 1 shown above, the question is 'most trusted in relation to the trustworthiness of the media outlet's news coverage'. Irrespective, the level of trust in social media is low, and is probably affected by critical public debates about social media as a trustworthy news source (Schrøder et al., 2021).

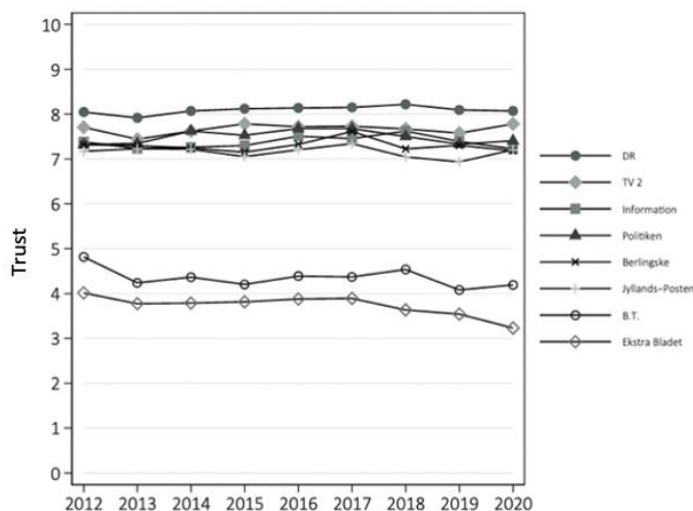
According to Neff & Pickard (2021), well-funded and institutionally secure public media, such as DR News and TV2 News, engage the citizens in democracy and they also serve the public interest rather

than commercial interests. They also suggest that there is a “*virtuous circle in which economic, public media, and democratic health reinforce each other*” (Neff & Pickard, 2021:20). Although Denmark is categorised as a country with less public funding than for example Germany, it is still positioned relatively high on the Economist Intelligence Unit’s (EIU) Democracy Index because of its well-functioning institutionally secure public media policy. In addition, the high trust level of media in Denmark can be explained by a **high awareness of the importance of media literacy** – a statement that Kalnes et al. (2021) confirm through data in the Reuters Institute reports.

From 2000 up to 2020, trust in journalists remains at a relatively stable level but below the general trust in news and the press (Andersen et.al., 2021). There is some fluctuation in the level of trust over the years, but over time the annual changes of trust are equalised. The low trust level in journalists depends on whether the citizens agree or disagree with the opinion that is imparted, and whether they support the values and interpretations the journalists provide.

Further, figure 2 below “Trust in specific news media over time” (Andersen et al., 2021:134) shows that **the trust levels of public service media and written press remain relatively high and stable over the entire period**, whilst the tabloid media, BT and Ekstra Bladet are garner relatively low trust, and in the case of the lowest ranked tabloid, Ekstra Bladet, the trust level has further fallen. This is explained by the commercialisation of journalism that has had a negative influence on the trust in media (Andersen et al., 2021). On the one hand, the news media must generate a profit, while on the other, the news media must take its role as a ‘watch dog’ of democracy seriously (Andersen et al., 2021).

Trust in specific news media over time



Note: Indicates weighted average responses on a scale from 0 (very untrustworthy) to 10 (very trustworthy) to the question: “How trustworthy or untrustworthy do you think the following news media are?” “DR” is index with TV-Avisen on DR1, Nyhedsudsendelser on DR2, Radioavisen on DR, P3 Nyhederne, Tekst-TV from DR and dr.dk. ”TV 2” is index with Nyhederne on TV 2, TV 2 News, Tekst-TV from TV 2 and tv2.dk. For the remaining news media, the respondents have been asked to relate to the news media as a whole.

Source: DR Medieforskning

Figure 2: Trust in specific news media over time, source: Andersen et.al., 2021:135

The high trust level is also interesting because there have been important changes in the way citizens access the news. For example, the Ministry of Culture describes the development in the media

landscape in Denmark as a “period of rapid changes” (Black-Ørsten & Mayerhöffer, 2021). One dimension of the problematisation is that the consumption of media news over the last decade has undergone a digitalisation process. In addition, the use of smart phones (71% of readers according to Schröder et al., 2021) have changed readers’ platforms for reading the news (Kalnes et al, 2021).

In the extract of the dataset below²² from the latest ‘Trust in news media worldwide 2021’, the Net Trust index²³ from 2009 to 2021 also gives a clear indication that **the Danish population trust the different media segments more than the average EU countries; similarly, distrust in social networks is much higher than average in the EU.** Looking back over the years, TV, radio, and the written press have a much higher score in Denmark than in the EU. The only deviation from this picture is the Danes’ trust to the Internet, which before 2013 was much higher than the EU-average. Since then, this trust has decreased and is currently a little below the EU average.

Year	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2021	
Net Trust Index: Radio													
EU Average	23	22	22	16	17	25	19	25	25	25	21	23	
Denmark	49	46	49	50	50	55	57	60	69	65	62	74	
Net Trust Index: TV													
EU Average	3	5	11	1	0	5	1	4	6	4	2	6	
Denmark	36	35	38	28	32	39	49	46	58	53	54	68	
Net Trust Index: Written press													
EU Average	-10	-10	-8	-14	-12	-6	-7	-2	0	1	-1	9	
Denmark	5	-6	3	-4	8	9	22	20	36	33	24	54	
Net Trust Index: Trust in the Internet													
EU Average	-4	-6	-2	-9	-12	-8	-10	-12	-17	-21	-23	-19	
Denmark	17	21	32	19	13	-2	0	-9	-16	-24	-23	-22	
Net Trust Index: Social Networks													
EU Average							-33	-35	-38	-42	-44	-45	-49
Denmark							-40	-36	-46	-48	-55	-57	-72

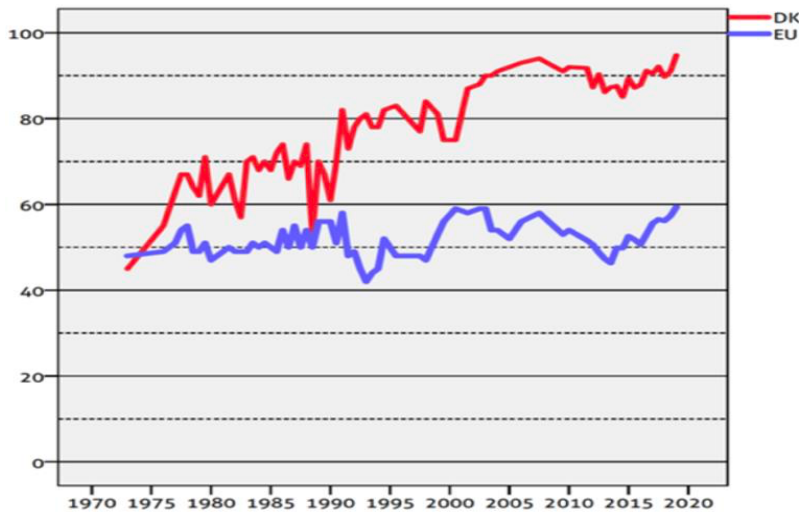
Figure 3: Trust in news media worldwide 2021, source: EBU 2021

Despite the increasing economic and social differences and different crises (for example the Covid- 19 pandemic), **there is high trust in the news in Denmark, in representative government, in science, and in experts** (Krogsholm et.al., 2021). We can also see that **the Danes are more satisfied with democracy than other EU citizens** (Krogsholm et al. 2021:4).

²² https://www.ebu.ch/files/live/sites/ebu/files/Publications/MIS/login_only/market_insights/EBU-MIS-Trust_in_Media_2021.pdf
 Author of this report is responsible for transferring data from the figures made by EBU to the figure made by the author where only the Danish numbers are available (see the numbers in the material ‘Trust in media 2021 dataset’ under the section ‘Other material on trust in media’)

²³ The net trust index shows the level of trust and is a result of the difference between the percentage of the population who tend to trust and tend not to trust without including the ‘don’t know answers’.

Citizens' satisfaction with democracy as a whole 1971-2019



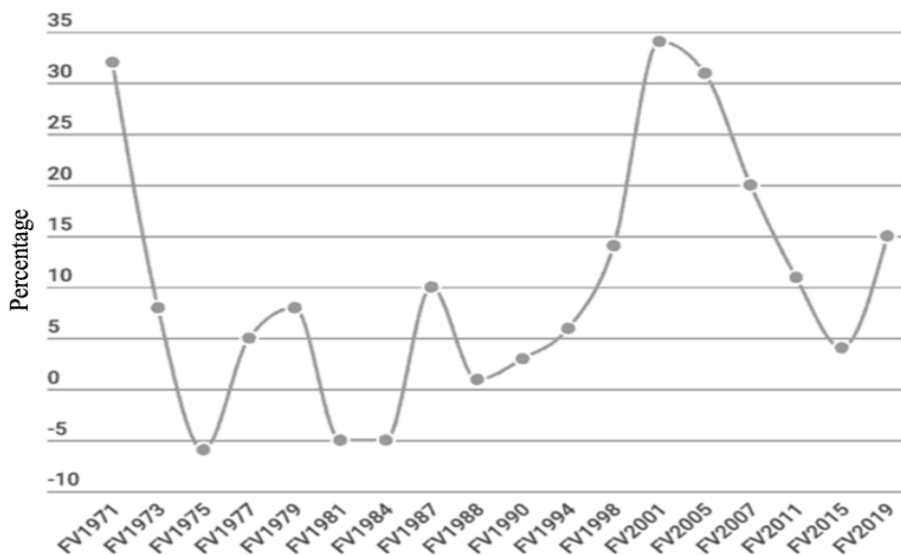
Source: Eurobarometeret, various years

Figure 4: Citizens' satisfaction with democracy between 1971-2019, source: Eurobarometers, various years, Krogsholm et al. 2021:4

In addition, Danish citizens' satisfaction with democracy increased to reach a level of above 95% in 2020. It is worth mentioning that this is in comparison with an EU average of 60% (Krogsholm et al. 2021:4).

The overall satisfaction with democracy is shackled by the **trust in politicians that decreased** from 2002 to 2015. But the negative curve is broken in connection with the Danish Parliament elections in 2015 and 2019 (Krogsholm et.al., 2021:7):

Citizens' trust in politicians in general 1971-2019



Source: Altinget.dk - <https://www.altinget.dk/praktik/artikel/efter-15-aars-nedtur-vaelgerne-har-faaet-mere-tillid-til-politikkerne>

Figure 5: Citizens trust in politicians between 1971-2019, source: Altinget.dk, Krogsholm et.al., 2021:7

Andersen et al. (2021) point out that low trust in media might lead citizens to move to ‘alternative’ media sources, but **misinformation, disinformation, and fake news are not markedly affecting the Danes’ trust in the news and journalism in Denmark**. For example, Denmark, with its 40%, comes after all other countries when it comes to concerns about what is true or fake (Schrøder et al., 2021:16). Only Germany, at 37%, is less concerned. Spain is at the top with 67% (Schrøder et al., 2021:16). Especially during the pandemic, the Danes regarded activists or activist groups (30%) as the main source of fake news about Covid-19 (Schrøder et al., 2021:17).

Regarding age differences in the **validation of the trustworthiness of posts on the Internet, photos, and online news**, the table “Have you checked the credibility of these posts, pictures, or news online?” (NYT, 2021) shows that people with a higher education (30%) are slightly more likely to validate what they meet on the Internet. Furthermore, people from the age of 16 to 34 years (35- 36%) are much more likely to validate the trustworthiness of posts, pictures, and online news than people from 35-54 years (24%) and 55–74 (12-18%). It is also interesting to note that 65% of the 65–74-year-old people claim that they have not encountered misinformation online, while this is only the case for 25% of the 16–24-year-old group:

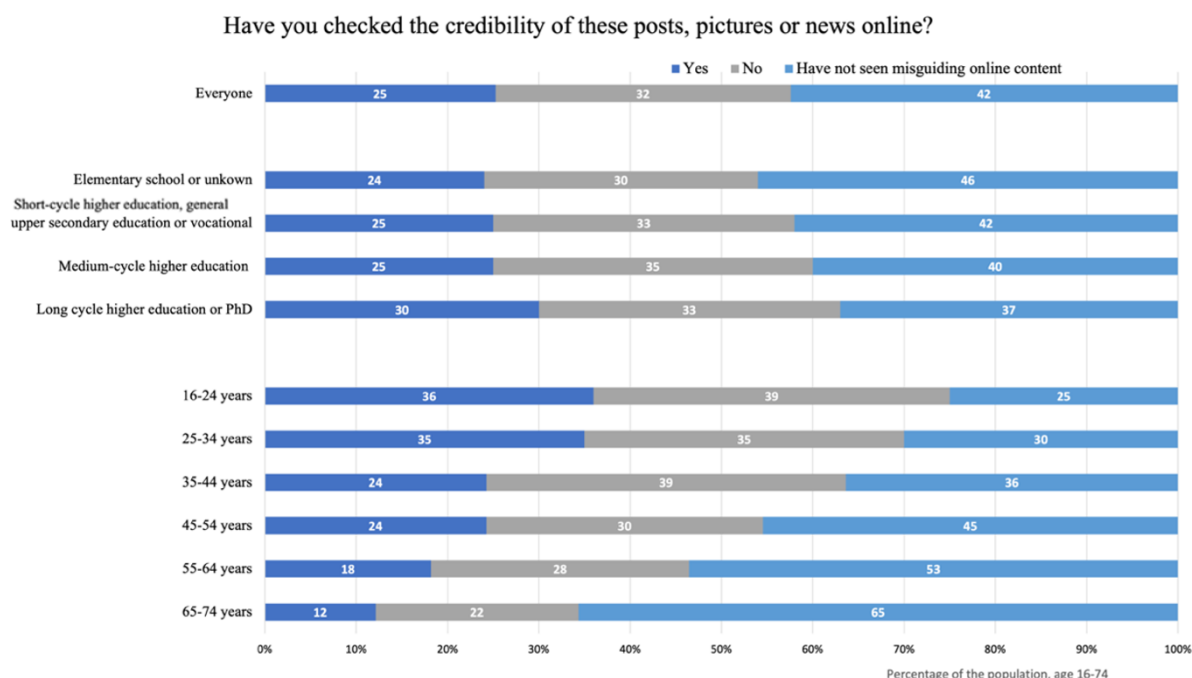


Figure 6: Checking credibility of online sources, source: NYT, 2021

In line with countries as Finland, Germany, and the Netherlands, 10 % of **the Danes are mainly concerned with disinformation from foreign governments** (Newman et.al., 2020:19).

Proportion that say they are most concerned about false or misleading information from each of the following – all markets

40% politicians

More in USA, Brazil, Philippines, South Africa

14% activists

More in Hong Kong, Norway, Czech Republic

13% journalists

More in Greece, South Korea, Croatia, USA

13% ordinary people

More in Japan, Taiwan, South Korea

10% foreign governments

More in Denmark, Finland, Germany, Netherlands

Question: Which of the following, if any, are you most concerned about online?

False or misleading information from... Base: Total sample = 80155

Table 1: concerns about disinformation from different areas, source: Newman et al., 2020:19

The Danish Reuters report from 2021 suggests that **34 % of the media users have experienced misinformation about Covid-19** (Schröder et al., 2021). Another study (Johansen et al, 2022) indicates that there has been **an increase in misinformation on the social media platform, Twitter**, during the first period of the pandemic. The social media actors are divided into two groups. **One group spreads misinformation; the other not only rejects but also ridicules the misinformers**. In addition, the spread of misinformation is outnumbering the share of those who reject misinformation over time (Johansen et al, 2022:4). It is worth noticing that only 5 % of all tweets in the study can be categorised as misinformation.

Another study finds that **only 3% of the identified conspiracy posts on Facebook are false** (Bengtsson et al., 2022). The effect of public posts on Facebook is low, and there is a tendency that private profiles and other social media, such as Twitter, have a greater impact on the spread of conspiracy theories. The table below shows 10 public accounts used for the spread of high-impact fake news (Bengtsson et al., 2022:20):

Name	Type of account	Effect Index
Konspiration DK	facebook_page	5.7
Tisvildeleje hele året	facebook_page	2.1
The Danish Defence League	facebook_page	1.5
Staten passer på dig.	facebook_page	1.4
Christian Nørremark	twitter_account	0.5
Sur-Mand	twitter_account	0.4
(Private person)	facebook_page	0.3
(Private person)	facebook_page	0.2
(Private person)	facebook_page	0.2
(Private person)	facebook_page	0.2

Table 2: public accounts used for spreading disinformation, adapted from Bengtsson et al., 2022:20

An interesting observation is also that **experts and fact checking journalists sometimes spread misinformation when they evaluate different claims from public profiles or groups**. Even though the group “Spørg en læge om coronavirus”²⁴ had as its primary purpose to debunk misinformation about Covid-19, it inadvertently spread misinformation (Bengtsson et al., 2022:21):

Network graph of the spread of misleading and false information

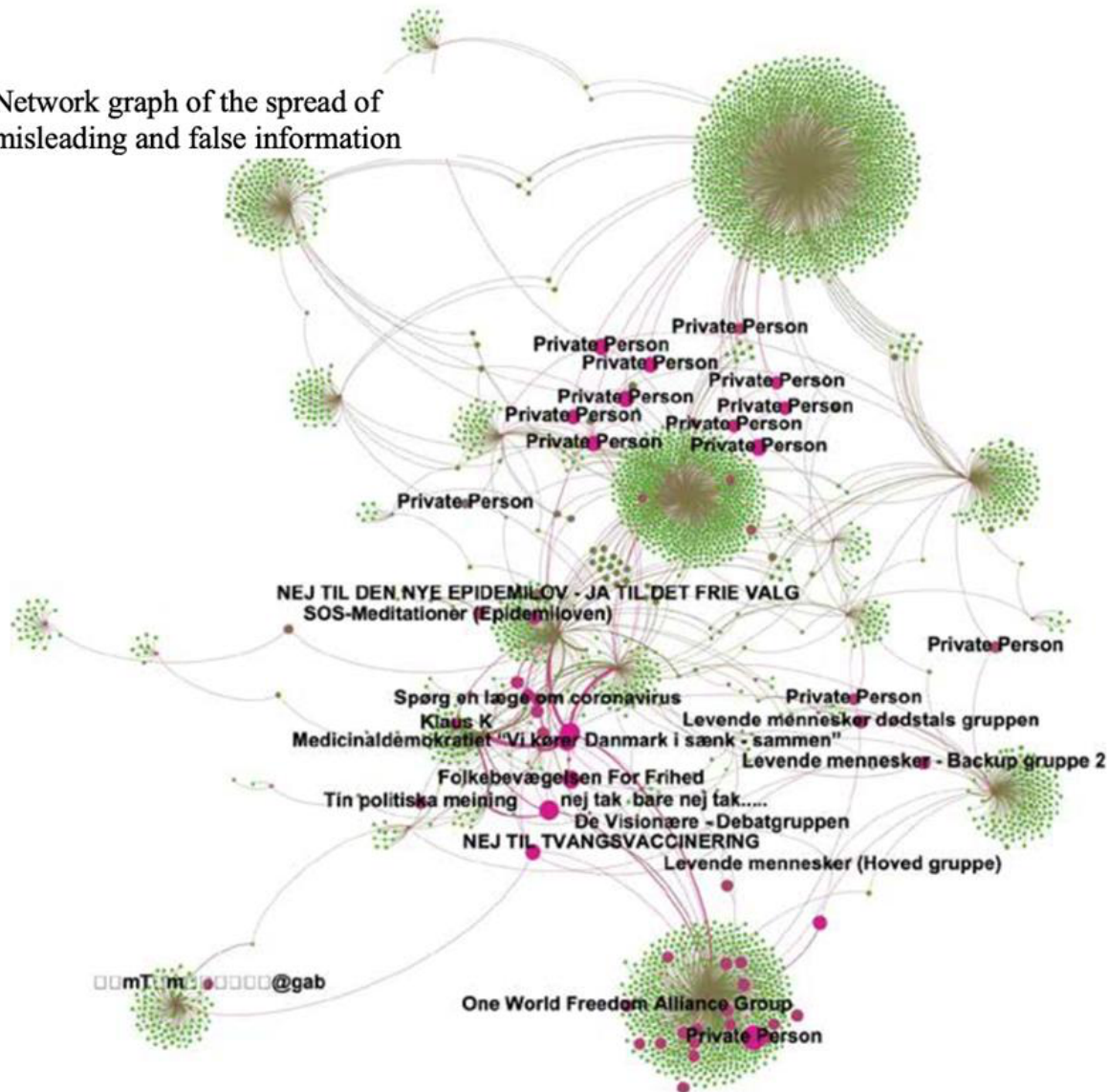


Figure 7: spread of misinformation, source: Bengtsson et al., 2022:21

Like many other countries, and despite the overall satisfaction with the Danish media, Denmark has experienced some negative reactions towards the established media. **New alternative media has arisen, but the share of audience is still very low.** For example, we can see that alternative newsites, in general, do not figure among the most visited Danish information online sites. The most popular ‘alternative news site’, “Dagens.dk”, is only used weekly by 4% of the population, and it is only the 100th most popular webpage in Denmark in April 2021 (Black-Ørsten & Mayerhöffer, 2021:117):

²⁴ In English: ‘Ask a doctor about the corona virus’.

Media	Ranking among Danish websites based on traffic (SimilarWeb, April 21)	Traffic from social media (share of total traffic in %) (SimilarWeb, April 21)	Facebook followers (10.04.21)
Den korte avis	521	21.20%	48672
24nyt.dk	3653	49.05%	(DPV00:37826)
NewSpeek.info	n/a	n/a	13207
Document.dk	n/a	n/a	---
Folkets Avis	n/a	n/a	9405
Konfront	n/a	n/a	4580
Netavisen Pio	1168	36.12%	14215
Solidaritet	n/a	n/a	4801
180 grader	n/a	n/a	25863
Indblik	1085	63.73%	7385
Respons	n/a	n/a	3838
Dagens.dk	100	41.30%	200089
Zetland	1393	25.33%	84352
Verdens bedste nyheder	n/a	n/a	49170
POV.international	4084	30.68%	57622
Journalista	n/a	n/a	8869
Føljeton	n/a	n/a	23042

Table 3: Use of alternative news media April 2021, adapted from: Black-Ørsten & Mayerhöffer, 2021:11

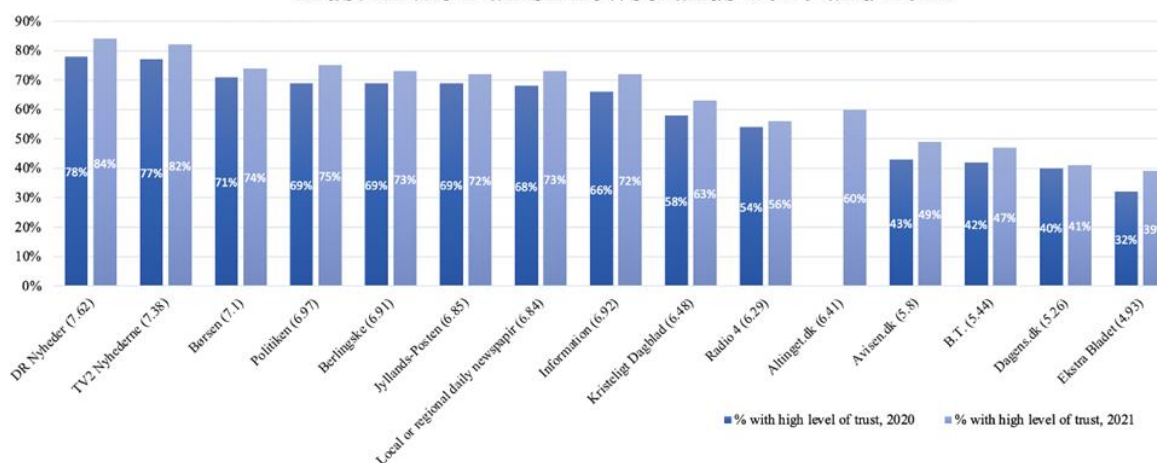
According to a survey conducted just after Denmark was locked down during the pandemic, on 11 March 2020 (Hede et.al., 2020), **the Danes' trust in news and journalism, as well as in government, the authorities, and politicians, is historically high.** This is confirmed by another survey that shows that during Covid-19, most Danes had more confidence in the authorities and the experts than before the pandemic (Jacobsen et.al., 2021).

According to the extraction dataset from EBU (2021)²⁵ shown earlier in this report, **the trustworthiness in already trusted Danish media increased during the pandemic.** For example, the Trust Index shows that trust in radio increased from 62 % to 74 % within two years (from 2019 to 2021). But the increase in the trustworthiness of radio did not increase its use as a news source, which both in 2020 and 2021 is 33% of the Danish audience share (Schrøder et. al, 2021). From 2019 to 2021, trust in television has increased from 54% to 68%. Most interesting, however, is the considerable increase in the trustworthiness of the written press that went up from 24% to 54% during that two-year period (EBU, 2021).

Also interesting is the fact that the pandemic increased the trust in news in general (Schrøder et al. 2021:12). For example, trust in the two public service news brands, DR News and TV2 News, grew 5-6%. Similarly, the tabloid press (especially Ekstra Bladet, 32% to 39%) also experienced an increase in perceived trustworthiness:

²⁵ See note 22

Trust in the Danish newsbrands 2020 and 2021



Q6: How trustworthy would you say news from the following organizations are? (Pick values between 0-10, the graph shows the mean value for the brandnames in 2021, percentage indicates answers between 6-10). Altinget is new in 2021 and is therefore not featured in the bar for 2020.

Figure 8: Trust in Danish news brands 2020-21, source: Schrøder et al. 2021:12

All in all, the **Danish news has gained a notable trust increase** of 13% (59% in 2021) compared to 2020, when 46% of the Danish population had trust in the news overall (Newman et.al. 2020:67; Newman et.al., 2021:75):

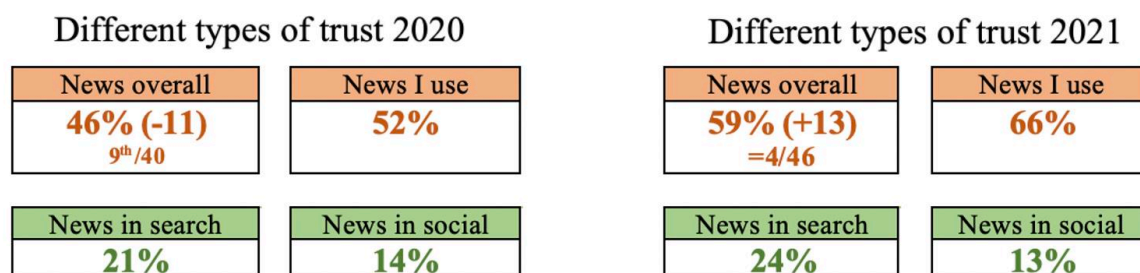
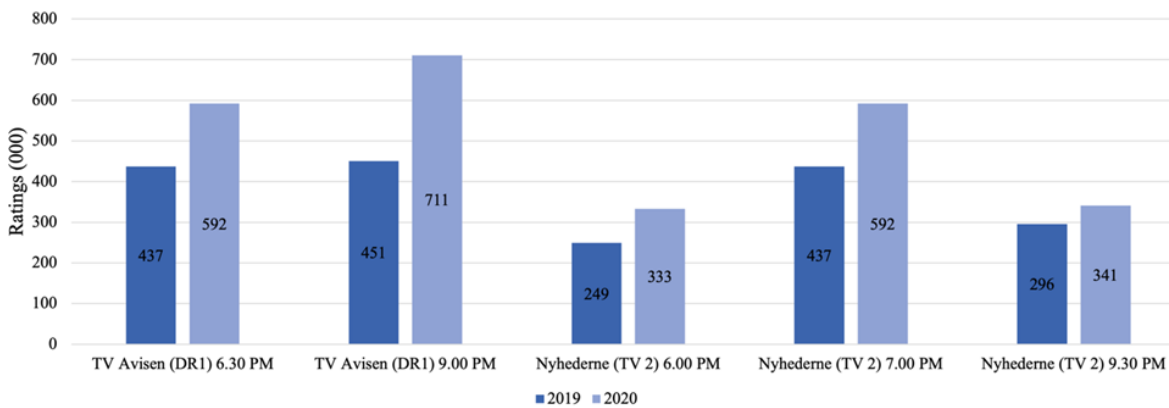


Figure 9: development of trust between 2020 and 2021, source: (Newman et.al. 2020:67; 2021:75)

Further, it is possible to register an increase in the consumption of the TV News, in particular, but also in news media, overall (Newman et.al., 2021:11). The survey concludes **that in the beginning of 2020, Covid-19 led to an overall trust boost**, not only regarding TV news, but regarding all news brands in Denmark. At the end of 2020, the news boost had receded back to normal. What we cannot say definitively, of course, is whether this increase in trust in TV news as a source to get information is directly caused by the specific information about Covid-19 health risks/vaccines that the TV News covered during that period.

A more detailed figure “Ratings for selected news broadcasts in the spring” shows an increase in the number of Danish broadcast viewers during spring, 2019 and spring, 2020. For example, the ‘TV Avisen 21’ almost doubled its audience from around 400,000 to over 700,000; something that is presumably connected to the many press conferences our respondents talk about (DR Medieforskning, 2020:22):

Ratings for selected news broadcasts in the spring

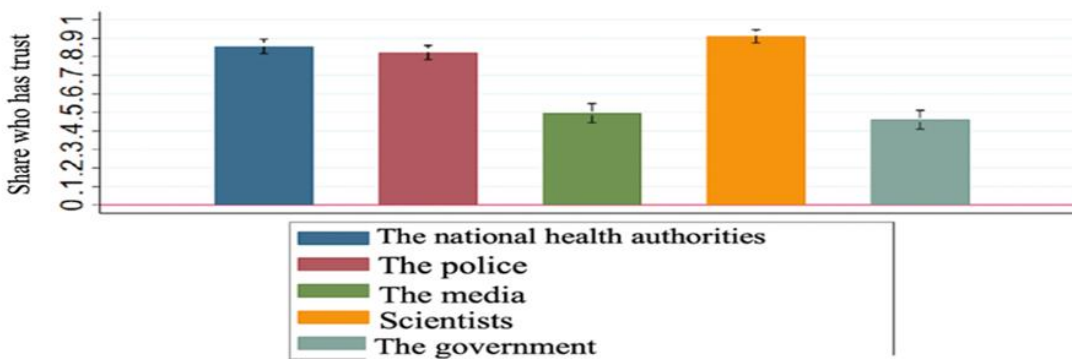


Target group: 3+ years, periode: 13/3 - 11/5 2019 & 12/3 - 11/5 2020. Source: Kantar Seer-Undersøgelsen, Data: Live + VOSDAL

Figure 10: Ratings for selected news broadcasts in the spring 2019, 2020; source: DR Medieforskning, 2020:22

The Danes' exceptionally high trust in the news media needs to be interpreted, however, in relation to the generally high levels of trust in democratic institutions and state authorities. According to the Danish Hope-project²⁶, **the Danes have had an overall trust in important welfare institutions such as the national health authorities, the police, scientists, and the government.** The scientists, the health authorities, and the police are even more trusted than the media and the government (Nielsen et.al., 2022:17):

Trust in central institutions



Note: n=511. The first four bars from the left show the share, who has responded "very much" or "to some extent" to the question: "How much do you trust the following institutions in regard to the corona-crisis?" However, trust in government shows the share, who has responded 7-10 to the question: "Give your assessment on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means that you do not have any trust in the government and 10 means you have complete trust in the government". The vertical lines show the statistical uncertainty (95% confidence interval)

Figure 11: Trust in central institutions, source: Nielsen et.al., 2022:17

Yet, if we look at people's evaluation of the government during the two Covid-19 years, 80% of people are supportive of the restrictions at the beginning of lockdown, but this level of support falls off to 54% in September 2021. Further, there is a sharp increase in the number of people who find the lockdown policies too extreme, from 17% in April 2020 to 33% in 2021²⁷.

²⁶ HOPE stands for How Democracies Cope with COVID 19

²⁷ <https://hope-project.dk/dashboard/>

Summing up, trust in news information, journalism, and democracy is relatively high in Denmark compared to other EU countries. During the first period of the pandemic, the level of trust increased.

2. Problem identification

In this section, we will describe how our respondents define misinformation, disinformation, and fake news. Further, we will consider whether there are differences in the respondents' problem identification.

We have identified minor disagreements between the respondents that are related to the concepts of 'fake news' and 'disinformation' in use, but agreement exists on the identification of the problem. To start with, the largest group of respondents **describe fake news as an ongoing debate about spreading 'false' news. They call attention to fake news as an old phenomenon that has changed because of the emergence of social media**²⁸:

In former times, one would sit over a beer at a bar and discuss the world situation and make theories about the world, but now there is a gigantic platform where people can spread their speculations, in theory, to the whole world... It is [laughing] a democratic step in the right direction; it is also a fantastic platform for people to spread misinformation (Bjarne Schilling).

In continuation of this, a few of the respondents refer to the election for president in the US in 2016, where Donald Trump used the term "fake news" to cast journalists, who did not agree with him, in a bad light:

It is as if it [fake news] is understood as something new in the public conversation, but it is not like that because that is what all journalism is about. It is to separate the sheep from the goats. And to sort out both conscious and unconscious misinformation. So, what to say about the media industry: there was hopefully nothing new in the phenomenon that someone could come up with lying or embellishing the truth. The new thing was that people with a powerful position in society ... [for example, the American president, Donald Trump] but also people placed elsewhere in positions and in political life [were consciously misinforming people]. So, I think it was a shock, a mixture of shock and a wave of laughter that the journalistic community experienced at the time. I think it was Trump's press secretary who introduced the concept of alternative truths ... (Bjarne Schilling)

Further, they underline that the 'new' focus on fake news has put journalism as a discipline **under pressure**. Fake news is 'false' news that threatens authoritative and trustworthy news. Fake news flourishes in the *echo chambers* that people create on social medias where their own opinions get reflected and reinforced. The problem is that there is a **risk of creating political polarisation**.

In relation to the question of how to define fake news and misinformation challenges, Bennike raises concerns regarding the politicians increasing use of social media and political trust. It is an issue that has been discussed in research, for example, in relation to politicians' use of the term 'fake news' (Kalnes et al. 2021). Bennike describes most of the politicians' news information on social media as spin, not as fake news. Spin is more likely to be a one-source story, and will usually not be characterised as fake news, but **sometimes spin trespasses the limit and can tend to become fake news**. Bennike refers to a famous news situation in Denmark where a former Minister

²⁸ It is something that is confirmed in academic literature as well. See for example Kalnes et al. (2021)

for Integration, Inger Støjberg, produced a narrative about 'child-brides'. Bennike describes her way of promoting the asylum seekers as 'child brides' in the press and on social media as fake news²⁹:

Inger Støjberg. I mean, this is fake news. Inger Støjberg has always staged a narrative, which was about "child brides". In my opinion, the whole state trial case and the state trial decision is not about 'child brides' at all. It is about illegal administration. And there I think, we can talk about fake news, and I think she's been good at staging a different narrative to her followers on social media. Or trying to stage her narrative as if it was the legal essence of the case (Lars Bennike).

Another problem is that **people do not distinguish between bad journalism and fake news**. People are too focused on incorrect news. But with all the news information that is produced today, it is difficult for journalists to write an article that thoroughly describes a case. There will always be 200 experts out in the 'real' world that know more than the journalists. In line with this perspective, **the users' lack of media literacy can be a problem**.

The tjekdet.dk representatives describe their role as public democratic debate facilitators, typically in relation to the political debate. According to the journalists, **there is a need to nuance and correct widely circulated claims that have been put forward in the public debate**. But they see a problem in how their fact-checked journalism is met by researchers; one group of researchers denies that there is misinformation in Denmark; another group is turning it into an even greater problem than the fact checkers think it is. Another problem is **the risk of marginalising the ones that disagree with the scientific facts represented in fact-checked journalism**. In addition, the tjek-det.dk journalists are critical of fake news as a concept that can describe problematic news information. According to the fact checkers, **there are different levels of problematic news information depending on the sender's intention to spread the news, as well as the level of falseness, that plays an important role in the definition**: There is misinformation, disinformation and malinformation. Misinformation is a claim that the sender shares with others without being aware of the 'wrongness' in the news and without having a purpose to hurt others. Disinformation is when the sender shares false information with the intention of spreading wrong news to destabilise a debate or a society. Disinformation is also when a state shares propaganda news to secure its power over its people. Disinformation takes place on different levels of society, both on the micro level and on the governmental level, for example, the intentional manipulation of information by Russian troll factories. Malinformation is defined as hate speech or harassment. It is false information or information that may not be wrong but is shared with the intention of harming others.

The problem definition from this group of respondents is in line with the EU report about information disorder (Wardle & Derekshan, 2017). The tjekdet.dk representatives are thus following the suggestions recommended by an expert group set up by the EU, as well as many other scholars who find the term fake news misleading and over-politicised. The representatives from tjekdet.dk have an underlying foundation rooted in science in their approach to the 'fake news problem', assuming that it is always possible to **find an objective and true information about a given statement**.

This is something that Mette Bengtsson, from the last group of respondents, criticises. For her, it is problematic that journalists and journalism base their trustworthiness on an objectivity norm:

Some fact-checking journalists think of journalism and science as very solid authoritarian entities... It is not that I take up a radical social constructive perspective on this, but if one is

²⁹ The political order was to separate asylum seekers that were either young fiancées or married couples, and where one or both were under 18 years old. In 2021, Støjberg was sentenced to two months' imprisonment because of violation of the ministerial accountability Law.

known with social constructivism, then we know that the world, and especially when it comes to the social, political, and economic aspects of it, is produced through language, as well ... Fact-checkers are also trying to build up an ethos or authority, for example, by their membership of the international fact-checking society. But it is, to some extent, a construction, as well and an attempt to build institutional authority (Mette Bengtsson).

Fact-checkers are not objective truth-tellers, but an integrated part of the process of truth, as she argues in her Carlsberg Young Researcher project description. Bengtsson's point is that:

... quite often, it is not possible for fact-checkers to determine whether an actor's information is true or false; consequently, they invent a range of middle categories labelled 'half true', 'half false', etc. Seen from a rhetorical perspective, this is because, often, the factual claims that we discuss in political debates are not easily determined. Sometimes, it is a complicated matter, and we do not simply know enough yet or have enough evidence to make a strong argument. Sometimes, the facts checked are propositions about the future and, therefore, with build-in uncertainties. Sometimes it has to do with language and very different framings and understandings of reality. I hope that a rhetorical way of understanding political debate and argumentation can help sort out the many various speech acts that are now being fact-checked, and that a typology and suggestions for ways of handling these very different kinds of speech acts can help improve the fact-checking practice. I want to understand the fact-checking practice better and find ways to improve it for fact-checkers (Mette Bengtsson).

To a certain degree, Bengtsson is backed up by Bennike: *I don't believe in neutral journalism. But I believe in professional journalism that shows the pro and cons in a case, and where the basic facts are in order.* Bennike's point is that it is possible, to some extent, to agree upon what is true and false. Still, he is not consistent in this view during the interview. The same can be said about Termansen. On the one hand, he is critical of what he calls the "so-called trust seeking news":

I think it is a democratic problem if the news media creates some form of coherent consensus about what is right and wrong. It is positive that we have some crazy stories sometimes, also when they turn things upside down, because it contributes to our trustworthiness (Jesper Termansen).

On the other hand, Termansen agrees with the tjekdet.dk representatives on the different levels of intentionality:

It [fake news] is news that is constructed as fake, real fake news. That is, things that have not taken place, that are being planted for the purpose of manipulating someone... Misinformation is a completely different concept, and it is more difficult to handle and define ... Well, there is deliberate misinformation; it is what is called 'cherry picking' [selective reading and use of information]. But, to me personally, misinformation presupposes some degree of continuing intention to deliberately manipulate people into a wrong or twisted perception of a phenomenon (Jesper Termansen).

To sum up, the tjekdet.dk representatives are avoiding fake news as a concept and use misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation to describe the levels of the actors' intentions. Other respondents only refer to the concepts they are being asked to define, fake news and misinformation. Still, some of the respondents talk about misinformation and disinformation in the interviews. It shows that our respondents are familiar with the academic discussions and have informed views. A minor difference in the problem of definitions might often result from their different involvement in fact-checking practices and other related tasks. For example, the editors' role is to

secure the editorial quality and to estimate if the government conditions are respected in their newspaper or the public media they represent. In their job, they meet citizens who actively complain about news while the tjecket.dk respondents are active in finding claims in the public debate in response to misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation. Bengtsson brings up a discussion about news journalism and the underlying condition of objectivity as a norm for truth finding. According to Bengtsson, journalism must dissociate itself from the 'true' and 'false' norm because there is no objective truth in the world.

3. Trust in news and journalism

In this section, we will examine if disinformation and fake news affect trust in journalism. In addition, we will present what causal relationships and mechanism our respondents are identifying to explain the emergence and the salience of 'fake news'. In addition, we will examine whether our respondents see distrust in news and journalism as beneficial or detrimental to democracy.

Our respondents underline that there is an overall trust in journalism and news in Denmark, especially the high trust in public service news media, highlighted as something that supports democratic dialogue and strengthens Danish democracy. It is therefore seen as a democratic problem when people mistrust news and journalism, and start believing that journalists provide misinformation, or a story angle in favor of the journalist's own political opinion, as a respondent says. **It is the journalists' assignment and duty to verify and qualify information; to deliver as good and accurate news as possible; to have the will of being self-critical and to reconsider the angle of the news information.** With reference to this, the discussion about trustworthy journalism and objective news is brought up again. It is not a matter of creating one hundred per cent objective news. In a democracy, the most important thing is that the users of the news can **take their own positions and be critical** with the news media. This is seen as having a positive effect on democracy:

... because [professional journalism] is the basic supply to democracy. It is a mainstay of our democracy that we are enlightened citizens who, on an enlightened basis, can take a stand in democracy. And if our news media, the professional news media, as I allow myself to call them, if they get so weakened and we do not believe in them, then that's a big problem for democracy (Lisbeth Knudsen).

In line with this, some respondents emphasise the importance of media literacy and the effect it has on their use of traditional media. The respondents see a connection between **low media literacy**, and people who live outside the bigger cities with low levels of education. People in this group have not necessarily got a tradition of using the professional news media, and may not trust them, either. This again impacts their use of social media. They will usually act in a rather unreflective way, for example, when they share news information without thinking of the potential consequences it may have on other people. **Low media literacy is thus seen as a major risk when exposed to fake news.**

With the above perspectives in mind, all the respondents underline that it is a great problem if journalists and journalism are mistrusted. Regarding distrust in journalism and news and the possible beneficial and detrimental effect it can have on democracy, the respondents mostly comment on **distrust as a benefit, that is, keeping themselves motivated in their job** or something that sometimes makes them defend or change their practice or ensure transparency. Many of the respondents also refer to 'fake stories' that made it into the news because of 'failures' of fact-checking by the journalists or unreliable sources. Such cases are seen as highly detrimental to trust in journalism and journalists:

But all institutions and all human beings make mistakes. The important thing is how we handle the mistakes. And in connection with this, all media institutions have gone through a development where they have become more conscious of what kind of instrumental tool they need to avoid and handle the mistakes afterwards. For example, the [viewers' and readers'] editors³⁰ (Mark Black-Ørsten).

Some of the respondents also see a causal relationship between a small group of people who have a **feeling of being overlooked** and the rise of alternative media that makes them feel empowered:

There are some people out there who feel they are marginalised and who feel that ... the media does not see them, does not hear them and their way of seeing the world. It is again a dilemma we have because what is said and written in the media must, of course, be based on facts, but it also does not help that you do not hear those who disagree... They are overlooked and start to completely lose confidence, and then some of those, what are they called, alter- native media ... arise. It is often [in these situations] where misinformation comes out ... [For example] an alternative media such as Danmarks Frie Fjernsyn (DFF)³¹ ... has arisen because there is a large group of people ... who believe that they are not seen and heard in the established media image (Nathalie Damsgaard Frisch).

To sum up, all the respondents agree that the emergence of fake news has affected trust in journalism in a negative way, but the effect of disinformation on trust in general is small. Rather, as some of the respondents' underline, the emergence of fake news and misinformation has been a wakeup call for journalists. Their point is that journalism has always been working with fact checking, but the latest focus on fake news has set off a constructive discussion about both social media and news media. The discussion has forced people to adopt a more critical and mature approach to social media, and it has reactivated a discussion about what the news media can and should do in challenging times.

4. Originators of disinformation and misinformation

Section four focuses on disinformation and, according to our different groups of respondents, who is made responsible for the spread of disinformation. How salient are those who spreaders fake news, disinformation, misinformation, and who supports them?

The editors do not meet disinformation in their work directly. Termansen refers to his "pen pals" those who use fake news or misinformation as insults. They are the people who write to him daily to complain about news or sources they claim are fake news or biased. Or they find that a report omits information on purpose:

Then, there is the use of misinformation as a term of abuse. I see a lot of this in my work... People who write to me about news that they call misinformation or fake news... (Jesper Termansen).

The editors have only heard about disinformation from the media itself or researchers. As examples, they come up with anti-immigrant groups, anti-vaccine groups, and 5G networks, etc.

The fact checkers meet the spreaders of disinformation in their work, so they are obviously more precise in their description of the group. According to them, the spreaders of disinformation consist

³⁰ There are three in Denmark. All three participate as respondents in this report

³¹ Translated from Danish: Denmark's free television. In a press release from April 2022, they describe themselves as a media that has undergone a change from being a television of resistance to a constructive television

of a small group of people that experience being overlooked; **they feel marginalised from others, but they also have a case**; something that they strongly believe in. They are “*activists*”, so to speak:

There are some who feel overlooked ... some who may have had some real and reasonably fair concerns about such things as vaccines and the management of coronavirus, and then they may have felt that they were neglected ... They may have been called crazy and those with tinfoil hats³² and whatever else, and then there may have been some degree of radicalisation... It is my view that they feel neglected and marginalised perhaps, as well (Nathalie Damsgaard Frisch).

The spreaders of disinformation are also described as **a small group of people that has been through a process of radicalisation. They go along the path of being concerned, sharing these concerns with others, and feeling neglected by society for so doing. They are different to the spreaders of malinformation, who aim to deliberately harm others.**

An interesting observation is that the representatives from tjekdet.dk tend to see an increase in disinformation, misinformation and malinformation, while the researchers are a little more cautious about talking the problem up:

So again, if we take the traditional news media first ... it is very difficult to find pronounced misinformation, it is difficult to find fake news in the Danish news media [Ørsten gives examples from the Reuters report] ... But where one encounters the most misinformation, it's on social media. Then I have some colleagues [Ørsten refers to Bengtsson et al. 2022] who have conducted an analysis together with Tjekdet.dk about the same thing, and they also find some misinformation, but in reality, very, very little. So even though they [tjekdet.dk] have been ... scraping the social media to find as much as there might be, there is not very much (Mark Black-Ørsten).

Further, some of the respondents expand their criticism to also include **journalists themselves and the way they practice journalism and use sources in their work** or as Knudsen says: “**We are all guilty of spreading misinformation if we uncritically post or forward something**”. Knudsen says that they often have this discussion on tjekdet.dk. But she defends the exposure risk with the argument that they will usually only fact check news that has been shared many times on social media.

Further, it is sometimes **difficult to distinguish between facts and opinions**, as the respondent from the environment organisation says:

In my work in the Danish Society of Nature Conservation, it's [misinformation is] fragments of something true, or it can be a partly true conclusion. So, for e.g., some sub-studies or something, which are 'true', but then they are linked to other contexts, where they become misleading in some way. And it's kind of harder because when you look, at least on social media, we [the Danish Society of Nature Conservation] kind of argue and say: “Well, that's simply not right [laughs slightly], it's not how we understand it”, and then they send just a link to something [an article], where it [the argument] stands in black and white, well, this is how it is, this and that. But it is the bigger picture, the whole context, where it becomes true (...) it is at this point we [the Danish Society of Nature Conservation] think it is wrong (Thomas Helsborg).

³² A description used to describe conspiracy theorist or one with paranoid delusions. Also, a reference to the movie, *Signs*, a 2002 American science fiction horror film written and directed by M. Night Shyamalan

The NGO continues to reflect on the 'misinformation' that he meets in his work. On the one hand, it is difficult to navigate on social media because people cherry-pick the academic information that confirms their statement. On the other hand, he himself brings up a dilemma. He works for an interest organisation that has special interests in spreading information that confirms the organisation's own agendas. The point is that trustworthiness becomes a question of whom and what the receiver of the news information trusts the most. The journalists themselves are cherry picking, as well, when they work in an interest organisation. There is a risk of creating "*myths of fake news*", as Termansen points out.

Another respondent mentions that **think tanks³³ can affect trust in journalism in a negative way**. He gives an example of the independent, liberal, free market think tank, CEPOS (Centre for Political Studies, based in Copenhagen) that are prettifying their messages on the back of what they call research. But they merely conduct contract- or mission-oriented and not independent research that is peer reviewed before being published:

You and I know that this is not how research works, but many people do not think about this, right? This is somehow far more damaging than all the strange stories we hear about, i.e., the traditional false information (Mads Kæmsgaard Eberholst).

A third example of journalists' involuntary involvement in contributing to 'fake news' is a well-known episode in Danish politics. In 2012, the then liberal Prime Minister in Denmark, Lars Løkke Rasmussen, was overthrown as his party's chairman by journalists even before a decision was made. The whole situation was relayed live on public television, and throughout the day, journalists reported that they had trusted sources that could confirm the dethronement. But Rasmussen was not dethroned from his position as his party's chairman. The respondent's point with this example is that journalists make "*mistakes*". The 'mistakes' are at risk of being received as 'fake news' by the user of news information. It is something that is confirmed in the interview with some of the respondents:

When we ask people: 'When did you last come across fake news?'; then they will answer that it was when a journalist wrote something wrong. This is very often what people perceive as being fake (Mads Kæmsgaard Eberholst).

Another point is raised by Schilling. As he sees it, journalists face a dilemma when they are obliged to take up theories raised by people that look at the reality in different way to most other people. Journalists walk a tightrope between fairness to the people who disinform, and being critical of spreaders of disinformation:

*So, I certainly think that we in the established media are involved in a difficult balancing act because you can say, we must at no time be perceived as a rubber stamp for the authorities and for a completely free and uncritical platform for the authorities. On the other hand, we must also, as I said, must not fall for the one with... Well, yes, we must present, we must reflect reality. The reality is that there are some people who have one theory, another theory of vaccinations. Therefore, we must represent them with the same weight. It would, in my opinion, be deceptive to the readers and not live up to our task. So, we must of course describe e.g., *Men in Black*³⁴ and the others as the phenomenon it is. We must loyally and fairly present their views, but of course we must be as critical of them as we are of the authorities, and we*

³³ It is a discussion that is raised in the Danish WP 3 EnTrust report on social movements, but in a different way. Here is a link to the Danish report: https://komm.ku.dk/forskning/cts/entrust/DK_WP3_-_Social_movements.pdf

³⁴ An anti-authority protest movement that protested against the corona restrictions several times during the pandemic

must ... Sometimes there has been a slight tendency to make fun of them and such. But we must take them seriously (Bjarne Schilling).

Summing up, the spread of disinformation and misinformation in Denmark is relatively contained. The originators and spreaders of disinformation are described as a marginalised group of activists that has a strong belief in a specific case. These are distinguished from the equally low numbers of people who malinform, i.e., intentionally invent and spread false news.

5. Effects of the pandemic

This section will focus on journalism and the effects of the pandemic. We will examine whether there have been any trust changes in journalism. Has trust been undermined or strengthened? How is trust in journalism/news related to trust in science and experts and representative government? Is the pandemic seen as an opportunity for rebuilding trust in journalism and news?

Many of our respondents refer to the results presented in the introduction and see **a strengthened trust in journalism** in the context of the pandemic. The pandemic has been an opportunity to re-build trust. They mention the development as **a return to the traditional media and the media's classical function of being people's watch dog**. During the pandemic, people needed valid and true news information (Trenz et al. 2021). From an overall perspective, the media did a good job in explaining the new disease, and they created interesting insight stories on the subject, as well.

However, some of the respondents also bring nuances into the overall trust picture. They divide trust during the pandemic into three phases. The first lockdown was a period of *"public information to the citizens"* (Lisbeth Knudsen) where the media communicated basic knowledge about the virus and instructions about what to do. Some media withdrew their paywall on some of the Corona news articles, which according to some respondents contributed to an increase in trust in the media, in general. Other respondents comment on the many press conferences that the government conducted under very restricted circumstances, where the media was merely informed and there was little scope for raising critical questions. On the one hand, this was a national crisis, and first and foremost, people wanted safety and community spirit, to which the media contributed. People were insecure about the whole situation and looked for trustworthy information, especially news updates from the public service television, DR. The trust in DR TV news is a picture that is confirmed by the surveys already presented in the introductory part of this report. On the other hand, the journalists behaved in a rather unprofessional way by covering information from the government without a 'filter'. This is because the journalists were acting as the authorities' mouthpiece, as one respondent describes the first phase of the pandemic, and because some of the questions were *not genial* (Bjarne Schilling), as another respondent says in an ironical tone.

In the second phase, during the summer 2020, things went back to 'normal'. People returned to their regular use of media and developed a more critical attitude towards journalism and the quality of Corona news, as only a few journalists had shown an interest in the consequences of the lockdown.

The third phase is **the pandemic's most polarised period**. This period was a challenge for journalists and journalism in general, both in relation to trust, but also in terms of the sheer amount of communication. Termansen describes this as the **political phase**:

Then came the political phase, where at least in parts of the population, there was resentment over a regime that had gone too far in governing society and another wing, at the same time,

that was just as militant [as the resentment wing]. [This wing] was angry at the first militant wing who they perceived as going too lightly on the health risk, so it became a choice between, should we have an open society, or should we have a more governed society... It was maybe the most polarised phase we had all together (Jesper Termansen).

The aggressive and more politicised tone is also experienced by the tjekdet.dk journalists. Especially during the pandemic, they were accused of being the authorities' extended arm. They experienced harsh tones from people who mistrust the authorities; a couple of times, the journalists were exposed to death threats because of their journalist work.

They describe what they have experienced as **people's extreme use of facts and their interpretation of scientific research. It has changed the aim of their fact-checking work.** The false information is more **harmful** than before the pandemic:

People were playing amateur virologist ... on a level that we had never seen earlier in tjekdet.dk's lifetime. Also, the aggressive atmosphere became larger than before. ... But then, the claims came from everywhere, and the democratic debate was at risk of resting on the wrong foundation... The claims came from all sorts of places ... and had perhaps an even larger harmful effect! ... Originally, tjekdet.dk's mission was to take decision makers and those in power at their word and examine their claims. But we have adjusted our mission. Now, we take anyone at their word because everybody can put something in circulation [on a social media], which can reach enormous numbers of people. That is, an artist with 15,000 followers who says something wrong about the climate ... the information can gain attention just as much as a politician can, perhaps even more (Thomas Hedin).

In connection with this, tjekdet.dk was accused of spreading propaganda and supporting the governments' 'narrative' about Corona, especially when their work supported the official statements such as Frisch's remarks when asked to give an example of how the pandemic has changed trust in journalism:

[Hmm ... long break] Yes, [laughs], we have a lot of examples of this! So, our own articles are a lot like ... Because it is what there is evidence for. [Our own articles] lean on something, the health authorities have announced. So, we have some readers who are happy; being able to find out what is up and down. And then, we have some readers who think we are doing propaganda, right! We have, that is, I almost think that all the Corona stories ... have substantiated the official narrative.

[Interviewer]: Can you be a bit more specific?

For example, there was a pamphlet in circulation that a Corona sceptical restriction resistance group had made. And they had made it with a layout, so it looked like something that came from The National Board of Health. They had chosen the same font and stuff like that, and then there was a whole lot of wrong stuff in it. Then, [after fact checking] we published an article. We got a positive, very positive response from people who had seen it [the pamphlet] flourish and were worried because it [the pamphlet] was about vaccines for children and young people. So, there were many who were worried and were like, now I must stop vaccinating my child ... And then, at the same time, we got direct threats from people who thought we should be shot in the neck, and I do not know what, right! So, it [the discussion about vaccines] totally divides the waters (Nathalie Damsgaard Frisch).

In relation to the aggressive and politicised tone, many of our respondents see a **connection between the above-described uncritical trust in information news in the first phase of the pandemic, and the scientific expertise** presented by the media during the two-year health crisis. For example, Black-Ørsten refers to a white book about the Corona crisis, where it is described how the term ‘following the advice from the authorities’ was a problematic formulation because the authorities did not recommend a lockdown:

In Denmark, the communication to the people was very political ... because Mette Frederiksen [the Danish Prime Minister] used some rhetorical tricks, that were not fair. They have also been outed a bit in the first book (Mark Black-Ørsten).

Black-Ørsten also points to some of the political scandals in Denmark during Covid-19, for example, the Mink Scandal³⁵. He sees these scandals as “*challenges towards our democracy and democratic*” principles. He cites a researcher without mentioning her/his name. The person in question has described the Danish debate as “*fast and with force*”. The point is, according to Black-Ørsten, that the Danish health authorities are politically governed. It means that **the arm’s length principle between the authorities and the politicians is threatened**:

Then you can clearly see that there has been a very unhealthy culture and an unhealthy way of going to our health authorities and the mention of Kaare Mølbak³⁶ and his role in the process has shown that there has been a very big focus on showing political action, and certainly not the same focus on making sure that the action was kept within the bounds of the law. And that is highly problematic ... so there is a much larger mix of politics and knowledge in Denmark than there is in e.g., Norway and Sweden. And I think that in principle, it is bad, but also bad if you must have trust, and if you must make sure that the knowledge is based on the health authorities. And you could say that the health authorities did not agree that we should lock down Denmark at the time we did it. It was a purely political decision (Mark Black-Ørsten).

Others show attention to the **trustworthiness of science in general**. It is seen as positive that the pandemic has shown that science is not a key to true or false answers. Science cannot predict the future and scientists disagree, but it can help people with knowledge to make decisions on an informed basis. On the negative side, the pandemic has had consequences for people who had different views and were not supportive of lockdown policies, the restrictions and vaccine recommendations:

Then, there is an anti-science movement in the USA, which also moves to the conspiracy groups that exist in Denmark. It is a counter-acting movement against the experts that have power and influence to be cited in the media. I see Men in Black³⁷ as a protest against the government, the media and the experts. They think the same and go in the same direction ... that is, of course, what politicians do when they push the experts in front of them. They get the legitimacy that comes from the experts. But the experts need to be aware of the political contagion the other way around. That they are used in relation to a political legitimation. It can trigger anti-science if you see the elite plotting together against the people; that was what Trump used massively in his campaigns to say that science and the power elite and the

³⁵ The government decided to destroy all the minks in Denmark because the minks were suspected of being super spreaders, but maybe the government did not have the legal authority to take such an excessive decision. Afterwards, the Danish Parliament appointed a commission to investigate the authorities and the Ministers’ involvement and acts in the decision

³⁶ Kaare Mølbak was the professional director of the Danish Serum Institute. He played a leading role in the decision of destroying all the minks in Denmark

³⁷ An anti-authority protest movement that protested against the Corona restrictions several times during the Pandemic

media have plotted together. So, there is a danger in, if, what to say if the experts are used too often (Lisbeth Knudsen).

All in all, the pandemic has had a positive impact on trust in journalism, as well as on trust in experts, and the government has increased, especially in the first phase where people turned towards public service media; this was something that affected trust in journalism negatively, as well, especially for the *tjekdet.dk* journalists who were blamed for being representatives of the government. However, for some of the respondents, the positive development has been undermined in the third phase that became more aggressive, more politicised, and more polarised.

6. Counterstrategies against disinformation and misinformation

So far, we have presented an overall picture of Denmark as a highly trusted country, both with reference to media and to democracy, in general. In Section 4, we have also pointed out that disinformation in traditional Danish media is very low, and that most of the disinformation is posted on social media, mainly on Twitter and Facebook. To give the disinformation and misinformation combat in Denmark space, this section will present the Danish fact-checking media, *tjekdet.dk* and their strategies towards disinformation, as well as misinformation. What are their objectives, design, and scope? Further, we will give notice to other media's fact-checking practices.

We have observed some smaller disagreements in relation to our respondents' reflection on fact checking. Not surprisingly, the *tjekdet.dk* representatives see fact checking as an important initiative towards disinformation, but most of the respondents are also critical towards the ability to create more trustworthy news information through a false promise of what one of the respondents calls a *black and white construction* (Mads Kæmsgaard Eberholst) of news information. While disinformation only represents a few per cent of all news information, we will also cover the misinformation combat in traditional news media, as well. The editors' role as media ombudsmen is not an initiative against disinformation. Their work as media 'watch dogs' can rather be understood as a safeguard of news value and quality of information, both on television and in the newspapers.

The first media in Denmark that was committed to fact checking journalism is a DR public service programme, called *Detektor*. The program has been broadcast as a radio programme on P1 and as a television programme at DR2. It suggests that the two programmes are intended for a relatively narrow target group. As already mentioned in the introduction, *Detektor* did not respond to our request and is therefore not represented in our interviews. *Detektor* started in 2011 as a radio programme, and then continued as a TV programme. It turned back to a radio programme in 2019. On the programme's website, the objective is described as a weekly programme that confronts "*politicians, the media, and other people of power with errors and false claims in the public debate*"³⁸. In its present form, the programme invites the investigated person or media (if they agree to be interviewed) onto the programme and confronts them with what the editors find is an undocumented claim. They bring the fact checking story even though the person denies being interviewed. Some of our respondents refer to the programme and say it was and maybe still is a high-profile consumed programme:

... and then it [Detektor] supports the idea that it is important that journalism must be given an in-depth examination; precisely because we as users do not have the opportunity to do it. Yes, of course, some have expert knowledge in all sorts of strange fields, who know what is true, but if ... you don't, then it is worth nothing. So, it helps to substantiate the narrative o

³⁸ <https://www.dr.dk/lyd/p1/detektor-radio>

what kind of journalism deserves to be trusted. You do that by checking, what is right, and then get the error corrected (Mads Kæmsgaard Eberholst).

Eberholst also mentions that the fact-checking programme brings in **science as a judge**. Eberholst has had a media expert role in the TV version of Detector. In these situations, he was supposed to give science a number between 0 to 10. He finds it problematic because science is not a black and white construction of information. Using fact checking in such a minimalistic format in a programme is very difficult.

Tjekdet.dk is the other fact-checking media in Denmark. According to the tjekdet.dk's website, their "... goal is to qualify the public debate and strengthen the democratic dialogue by ensuring that both aspects are as informed as possible – free of misinformation, disinformation, and fake news"³⁹. It is a political independent and non-profit media owned by the association, "TjekDet – National Portal to fight against Fake News". The organisation consists of a chief editor, five journalists, and two researchers, who are working with fact checking daily, especially on social media. In this connection, tjekdet.dk cooperates with Facebook and Instagram as the social media's *third part fact checker*. They have the authority to place a note on a post that contains a link to their fact checker article so that other users are made aware of the possibility that the post contains misleading or false information. Except for drawing attention to disinformation and misinformation and what the media calls *information nuances*, tjekdet.dk is also involved in different public awareness initiatives⁴⁰ and in the development of information and materials for teachers⁴¹. Further, the website has a site of knowledge with analyses, reports, and research about misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech⁴². The tjekdet.dk is a member of the International Fact-Checking Network, (IFCN)⁴³ and they are working with the standards the network requires.

The tjekdet.dk representatives see their project as a contribution to overall 'checks and balance' between journalism and the journalists and the media world, in general. Instead of denying a mistake, it is confidence-building that the media recognise its mistakes. *Just look at the statistics on our website... You can see how many media we have checked over the years. We help to keep an eye on each other, and I think this raises the quality of journalism*, as Hedin remarks. It is important that the public debate can rely on facts. Frisch is more specific in her reflection on how fact checking can raise trust in journalism. She mentions two points. The first relates to their documentation. It is made in a way that makes it possible for everyone to copy their *work of art*, as she describes it. Further, she hopes that the project will **raise people's awareness of the quality in news**. Scientists must not only be able to refer to their research, but also know where they get their knowledge from. The last representative, Lisbeth Knudsen, talks about their working methods. She underlines that they are mostly concerned with verifying news information that is widely shared:

... maybe 5000 or 10,000 or more. And we work with international standards that are far stronger than the Complaints Commission and the Media responsibility Law, and it makes of course, the work with fact checking more difficult because we use three independent experts (Lisbeth Knudsen).

As mentioned already, many of the other respondents bring into the discussion some **critical points about fact-checking journalism**. Bengtsson has criticised the underlining understanding of a solid

³⁹ <https://www.tjekdet.dk/om-os>

⁴⁰ <https://www.tjekdet.dk/artikel/hvem-staar-bag-og-hvad-gaar-det-ud-paa>

⁴¹ <https://www.tjekdet.dk/artikel/laerervejledning-og-information-om-materialet>

⁴² <https://www.tjekdet.dk/forskning>

⁴³ <https://www.poynter.org/ifcn/>

journalism as a matter of finding the truest version of reality. In addition, tjkdet.dk is seen as a niche media that reaches out to a few readers.

The controversy about a truer truth in news information is also mentioned by the editors. For example, Termansen is clear about his view on fact checking:

... and if there's something I have a problem with, it's when people say we need to deliver the truth, because I do not mean that there is any truth in journalism. This is also why I am very critical of the fact-checking programmes because I believe that they are based on an often exaggerated and false premise that one can ... determine what is right, as if it is a piece of mathematics. What is the result in the end. And you often cannot determine it (Jesper Termansen).

In connection with this, it is important to mention that the tjkdet.dk's representatives are aware of the critique raised by the researchers and the other respondents. Their argument against the critic is that they seek consensus. It is rare to find consensus in science, and therefore the journalists search for the nuances in the argumentation instead. Often, the journalists are forced to differ between "a claim and a stance" (Nathalie Damsgaard Frisch). The journalist does not go into detail about the difference between the two concepts, but her remark falls at a point in the interview where the interviewer asks the journalist how the journalist fact-checks subjects that are related to humanity science:

It is very difficult, but I think often for us it's just about getting as close to the right version of the truth as possible. And make sure that if we ask some researchers, then we must trust what they say, because they probably know a lot about it; and then not just ask one, but then we ask two or three, or as many as are needed until we feel that we have a proper picture of things. It is difficult (Nathalie Damsgaard Frisch).

If the subject implies the grey zone, they will publish the article as an insight article instead of a fact checking article, or decide not to publish the article, at all.

The editors' work is part of the media's internal complaints board. Politiken was the first media in Denmark with an ombudsman in 2001. This was followed up by DR in 2004, and TV2 in 2008. They describe themselves as independent media watch dogs, whose aim is to investigate **journalists' possible misinformation**. The editors from the two public service media are determined by Law to ensure a critical eye on journalism and ethical issues. The editors receive claims and critique from the media audience and their function is to forward the accusation of misinformation to the relevant journalists. Maybe therefore, Schilling describes the role as editor as being a *postman*. The editors do not have the power to decide anything. Sometimes, their work can be a reminder to the journalists of the ethical principles they work under. The editor in DR mentions **a complaint system**⁴⁴, too. If people are not satisfied with the case handling, the editor writes a recommendation and conclusion of the complaints to the Director General in DR. It is then up to her/him to take a decision on whether she agrees or not. Sometimes, the editors work under what Black-Ørsten calls *difficult conditions*. The underlying internal critic of other journalists' work is not necessarily met with open arms, either from colleagues or the management. Black-Ørstens' point is that the effect of the editors' work can be questioned because there are no consequences for the journalists who have been accused of misinformation. Regarding the external part of the editors' work, the challenge is to **meet the audience' frustrations and gain their trust in return**. Bennike calls attention

⁴⁴ This is a link to an overview of the complaints: <https://www.dr.dk/etik-og-rettelser/brugernes-redaktoer/ankesagsindeks>

to a special part of the audience that reacts to societal incidents, for example, the pandemic or the war in Ukraine:

I sometimes say that my function is a seismograph for the level of nervousness that is in the population [laughs easily]. I can see that even now, because of the war in Ukraine. I have received 200 emails this weekend about EVERYTHING. Normally, after a weekend, there might be 60... It is simply a seismograph for how the psychological mood in the population is ... Sometimes, it is just a little thing they complain about... It can be a little tiring let's just say it as it is. But as a starting point, it's because they have some expectations that what they see is okay. It should preferably be the way they want it. But the basis [the quality in news information] must be right (Lars Bennike).

The editors from DR and TV2 send the results of their inquiries to the governing body. All the reports are published on their websites⁴⁵.

In addition to the above-mentioned initiatives, there have been several initiatives to combat disinformation and misinformation and improve the citizens' **media literacy** in other arenas (Lasse Lindekilde & Jesper Rasmussen, 2022). For example, there is a special focus on disinformation in primary and lower secondary schools, upper secondary school, and in the vocational educations. In line with these initiatives, the public service television DR has a programme for children and young people called "Ultrasnyd"⁴⁶ and Politiken is publishing "Børneavisen"⁴⁷, a special newspaper for children.

It is also worth mentioning that a few of our respondents have mentioned the Norwegian fact-checking media, faktisk.no, as the most successful and well-functioning fact-checking media in the Nordic countries. Faktisk.no is a cooperation between the Norwegian news media and has a very high number of users. It has also been highlighted because it is backed by all the largest news organisations in Norway. One of our respondents mentions that this is the reason why faktisk.no has a better chance of changing media institutions from the inside.

To sum up, the fact-checking milieu in Denmark is small. Although some of the respondents highlight Detektor as a fact-checking media, it is difficult to determine the role and the programme's strategy towards disinformation and misinformation. It is rather a public service programme that is dedicated to fact checking journalism. Tjekdet.dk's strategy towards disinformation has changed because of the pandemic and now involves everyone on social media who reaches out to a large audience. The media serves as a public awareness raising organ, too. The ombudsmen's strategy against misinformation is determined by Law. It has taken some time to institutionalise the strategy, but the initiative seems to have been taken up positively by some of dissatisfied citizens.

7. Conclusion

So far, we have outlined how Denmark understands and handles problematic news information. In this last section, we will conclude how Denmark is performing in a European context and describe what main challenges our respondents believe lie ahead. In academic literature, Denmark is described as part of the Nordic media welfare system that values social equality, editorial freedom, and compromise seeking, with a well-functioning public service.

⁴⁵ <https://www.dr.dk/etik-og-rettelser/brugernes-redaktoer/halvaarsrapporter> and <https://sr.tv2.dk/beretninger/> ⁴⁶ Ultra-'snyd' means ultra-cheat in English <https://www.dr.dk/skole/dansk/mellemtrin/tema/bliver-du-ultra-snydt>

⁴⁷ https://borneavisen.dk/?gclid=EAlaIqobChMI3c7yhaXm9wIvixRCh1MHwZ6EAAYASAAEgKcPPD_BwE

From an overall perspective, the Danish people have trust in the welfare system and its institutions. There is also **a high level of trust in journalism**, something that became even clearer during the first period of the pandemic when people returned to the two public service institutions who guaranteed reliable news information. It places Denmark as one of the most trusting countries in Europe, both regarding news and journalism, as well as in other important parts of Danish democracy.

Although the main news problem in Denmark is misinformation, the Covid-19 crisis brought some nuances into this overall picture of trust. In the first phase, the Danish people's reaction to the crisis was an ever-increasing trust in news media. In the second phase, the level of trust returned to pre-Covid-19 levels. But especially during the third phase of the pandemic, some negative reactions to news and journalism arose. Before the pandemic, the fact-checking work was mainly targeting misinformation from decision-makers, but during the pandemic, the fact-checking work changed to **embrace everyone who reached a huge audience on the Internet**. For example, misinformation claims in English or German were shared to a large Danish audience. As one of the journalists says, it was as if **a culture of spreading lies arose. The misinformers resorted to an extreme use of facts and their interpretation of scientific knowledge were sometimes exaggerated**, something that had never been witnessed in Denmark prior to the pandemic. It was also hard to differentiate between the misinformers' lies and their motivation for spreading an untruth. It led **to fluid boundaries between misinformation and disinformation**.

Regarding the main challenges ahead, the complexity of the problem is reflected in the respondents' different answers. One respondent mentions **the Danish Public Information Act**. The act states that any correspondence between ministries and agencies must henceforth be withheld from the public if a minister has – or will have – a need for civil service's advisory assistance. This should ensure that politicians and civil servants have peace of mind and full confidentiality around political processes. But in the media, the law has been criticised for muzzling journalists who work as the media's 'watch dogs.' Currently, many politicians are too fond of one-way communication on social media. They post half-truths on social media, and afterwards refuse to be interviewed by the press. Clearly, politicians' communication needs to be transparent, and fact based.

Although **funding** is not a new problem, some of the respondents see it as the biggest challenge ahead. Denmark is a small country, and the news media will never be able to fund the media through advertising, etc. One solution could be to convince the Danes about the necessity **to pay for quality news**. One respondent mentions **people's news consumption habits** as a challenge that is at risk of creating a polarising effect between the younger and older generations. Young people get their news on social medias and have not been raised to pay for it. Therefore, there is room to rethink a new business model and new technological platforms that support people's news consumption in a way that requires payment at affordable prices. Another issue in relation to funding is the local and regional news media. Because of a lack of income, **they are at risk of dying out**. Their function is to keep an eye on local and regional politics, and their loss would create a democratic problem--namely, having no media to watch over the shoulder of local power.

According to other respondents, **social inequality** is a challenge ahead. The point is that some people have a feeling of being overlooked, yet not being heard; they see themselves as outsiders to the power elite in Denmark, for example, experts, politicians, and the media. They are not participating in any of the democratic elections in Denmark and they get their news on free social media. The respondent's point is that this group does not participate in all the important democratic processes that keep Denmark together as a society, feelings of disenfranchisement lead to polarisation.

Then there is the regulation of social media. Social media platforms operate in a common European market and not only in Denmark, and the market is also agitated for viable and profitable news business models. Danes are increasingly no longer willing to pay for their news, but it is also recognised that these are clearly European challenges that Denmark, as a small country, cannot confront alone. One respondent mentions that combating misinformation and disinformation must be through **monitoring claims that are lies, deliberately spread to hurt people or a country,**

At the date of interview, politicians were in the middle of negotiating a new media agreement. In connection with this, a respondent recommends that politicians look at what kind of future public service they want instead of the usual 'cut-price' practice. Maybe it would need funding at first, but the Danish people need to be educated to handle future challenges. According to the respondent, the pandemic has shown that people trust the Danish public service media. Therefore, it is important to invest in **developing it** for the future, as well as **raising Danish people's media literacy levels.**

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