



# ENGAGEMENT CRITERIA

#NEWSFORTEENS

---

by Aslak Gottlieb

Fellow in journalism studies 2015-2016

**How can news media target  
and reach young audiences?**

English summary of white paper  
issued in May 2017 from Southern  
University of Denmark.

The full white paper is in Danish  
and but can be downloaded as a  
pdf-document from [aslaggottlieb.dk](http://aslaggottlieb.dk)



*Aslak Gottlieb is a former school teacher now serving news media and academic institutions as an independent consultant specialized in younger media audiences.*

This white paper, *Engagement Criteria*, is the result of investigation and experiments done to examine how we in the media sector can produce journalistic news to engage young media users, teens and young adults. My work was done as a fellow at the University of Southern Denmark's (SDU) Center for Journalism during the 2015-16 schoolyear.

Young people want to keep up with current events, but they feel excluded by traditional media.

They are major users of social media and streaming services, a factor that causes the schism, which is the premise of my fellowship: Never have there been so many media channels for young people; yet, only a few journalistic news media produce content for this target group.

The most important result of the fellowship is the *engagement criteria*.



## NEW MEDIA USERS DEMAND NEW NEWS VALUES

The engagement criteria are intended to be an add-on to traditional news criteria, often called news value in English. They can be used for the education and supplemental training of journalists who want to connect with a younger target audience; and, they can be used as an editorial tool for a range of platforms, formats and genres.

I call the criteria, *engagement criteria*, after spending some days as a fly on the wall at the public TV broadcaster DR3's digital editorial department. *Engagement* here is a word embedded in the team's professional lingo and used as their measure of success for reporting content and satire posted on social media.

The engagement criteria were put into play through trials by journalists at the web-news site *Altinget* and the regional newspaper *Fyens Stiftstidende*, as well as by journalism students at the Center for Journalism as part of their exercises in producing news for teens. News products ranged from web articles and broadcast news to various types of content designed for social media platforms.

Content was regularly tested in focus groups who indicated the engagement criteria as a feasible means of news production for a younger demographic. The fellowship was intended to be a developmental project, and I would like to emphasize there has been no opportunity to test scientifically for evidence of the engagement criteria's efficacy.



Teenagers today have grown up with media content on demand in personalized medleys.

# NEWS MEDIA HAVE FALLEN ASLEEP AT THE WHEEL

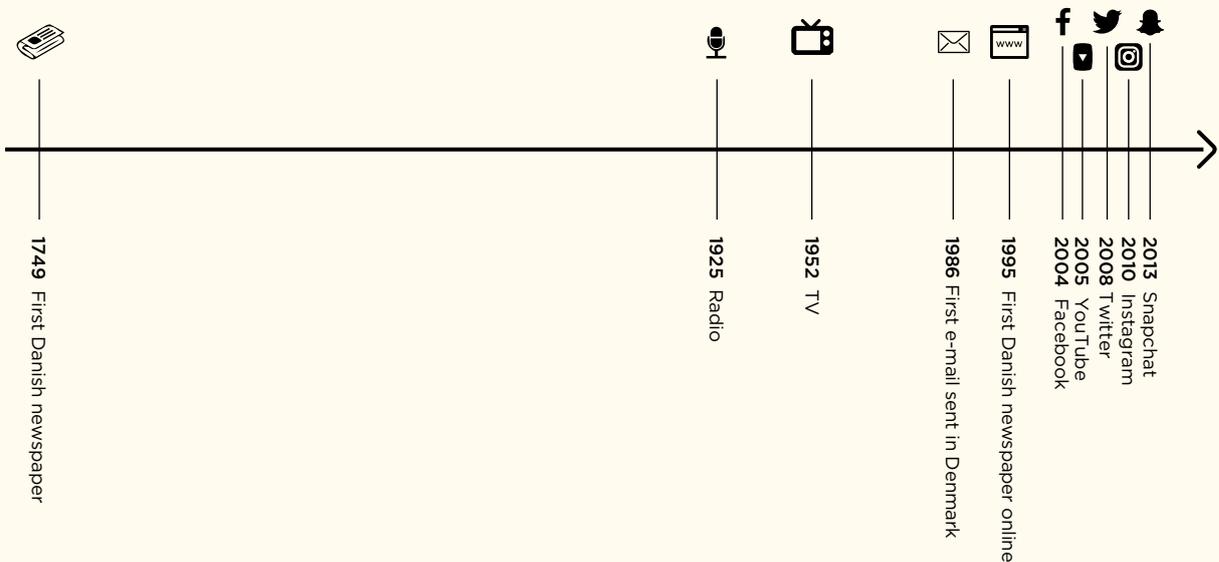
Despite the fact that more and more avenues have opened for reaching young people, editors have failed to develop journalistic vehicles for them.

**IN THE BEGINNING** there was print, when the first newspaper arrived nearly 300 years ago. Then came sound, as radio became the game-changer of journalism, and later technology added motion pictures to create TV as the modern medium for news. Each development was a quantum leap in technology, but the tempo allowed journalism to keep pace and develop new formats.

The dawn of the Internet shook the pillars of traditional media as formats and consumer habits changed. Within just a few years the mobile, social media juggernaut caused a deconstruction of established media. Sources began to exercise unfiltered freedom of speech, users found new channels and the news monopoly was broken.

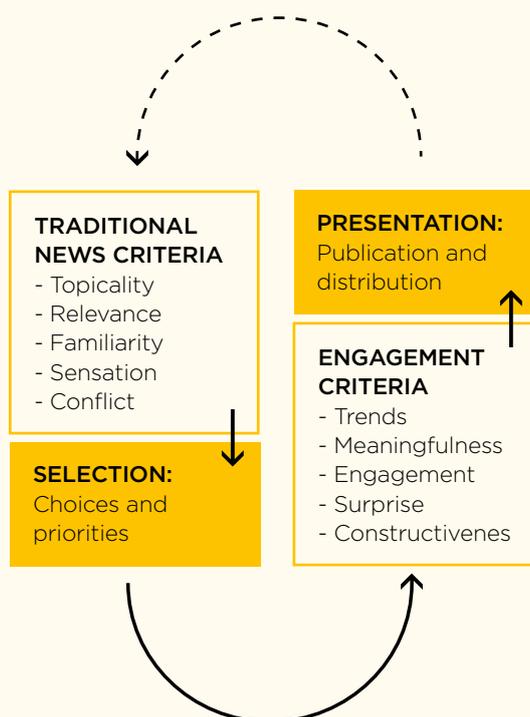
Facebook and YouTube delivered the knock-down punch to journalism around the start of the new millennium, and a younger demographic became the lead users. Twitter! Instagram! Snapchat! A combination of punches within the span of just a few years that left traditional journalism staggering to keep up with technology.

## MAJOR MEDIA PLATFORMS THROUGHOUT TIME



*The frequency of new media platform are rising almost exponentially. Journalism has its serious difficulties keeping track while younger users keep pace.*

## CORRELATION WITH TRADITIONAL NEWS CRITERIA AND ENGAGEMENT CRITERIA



*The engagement criteria are intended to be an editorial tool that shortens response time and acts as the bridge builder between journalism, technology and new users. They intend to correlate with the five most commonly taught and used news criteria in Denmark.*



*Focus groups were conducted in various ways. Here an editor is receiving feedback on her printed daily. The group members are young adults who have made collages from the paper of what content they like (green) and dislike (red). The exercise is prior to developing online stories based on the engagement criterias.*

# SPEECH IS SILVER BUT SILENCE IS GOLD

It seems to be a myth, that teenagers would like their media content to be as colourful and noisy as possible. At least in the focus groups we found, that you don't have to shout out loud to facilitate their engagement in news stories. Stay calm, listen to your audience and watch their media behaviour in general to find the keys on how to approach them as a journalist was one of the main findings in the fellowship.

Boiled down the findings can be summoned in these five alternative news criteria presents as which are meant as an instrument to enrich and modernise the classic five criteria commonly used in Denmark as shown on the previous side.



## TRENDS

Listen to your users at least as much as they listen to you. Young people gather a motley collection of news from a digital buffet. They get their news from many sources and channels, which you must become familiar with if you want to make your content relevant.



## MEANINGFULNESS

Explain users why they should spend time with your story. Young people feel as if they are banging their heads against a wall if they fail to understand your intentions. You cannot rely on your brand or authority as a news medium. Journalism must be relevant each and every time if you want them to choose you.



## ENGAGEMENT

The encounter with content must give users an immediate impulse to do something with it: share, tag someone, comment, contribute, investigate further. Beyond that, it should provoke thought and action: reconsideration, reflection, understanding, vote, support, protest, sympathize, discuss, join, work for a cause.



## SURPRISE

Find an angle the user didn't see coming. Dig up information the user didn't know existed. Use a format or genre that defies convention. You are in tough competition with a lot of wizardry and gadgets youngsters have embraced. You can't beat them, so join them.



## CONSTRUCTIVENESS

Don't let a subject involving conflict just dangle in the wind. Young people want to cling to the belief there are solutions to our, and the world's, problems. Choose optimistic approaches and peripheral angles if you are unable to find a constructive hook for the story.

## PROJECT METHODS AND BASIS FOR RESEARCH

My fellowship involved desktop research and visits to workplaces, while the actual experimentation was done with lecturers and students, at the leading standalone web-news provider in Denmark, Altinget, and the regional daily newspaper *Fyens Stiftstidende*. I prefer to use the term *investigative project*, as I do not feel the processes meet requirements for a classical scientific project. It should also be considered a developmental project, as it has both didactic and editorial characteristics.

As a starting point, I visited two news media with success in engaging a younger demographic: Play Bac Presse (Paris), which prints four-five weekly newspapers for various ages of young people; and, the Danish public radio station P3's digital editorial desk, which produces current reportage and satire designed for social media solely. One is a print medium and the other digital, but both engage their audiences to gather inspiring feedback. Engagement in both cases.



The study also included observation and media company visits. Here at Play Bac Presse in Paris where the young audiences on a daily base is invited to give feedback directly to the staff of the newsroom. Play Bac Press publishes several news paper issues aimed at younger audiences.

## THE EXPERIMENTS



At Southern University of Denmark, students of journalism produced broadcast and digital news for 10th-grade focus groups meaning pupils 17 years of age preparing themselves for secondary education. The experiment in user intervention during the editorial process was considered successful by the journalism lecturers and students, as it inspired the editorial selection and presentation of content, while members of the focus group expressed more interest in following news they were involved in reporting.



Teenagers participating in experiments were recruited from different levels and sorts of education. Here from what is called 10th grade in Denmark. In so called pro active focus groups the members were invited to join part of the editorial development process and contribute with suggestions and ideas. This phase of the focus groups was conducted after the more classical analytical interviews and exercises.



The daily regional newspaper *Fyens Stiftstidende* was interested in capturing an audience slightly older than teen age, young adults in higher education. The community interest desk was chosen to participate with a focus group of students, who were asked to clip articles they liked and or were indifferent to, from the newspaper to evaluate their reading value. Based upon feedback from the focus group, the participating journalists selected three objectives to focus on for content in web articles: gain young adults' interest in topics pertaining to the elderly; broaden niche content to reach all readers; and, create debate around sport. Articles were published on the web newspaper and spread on Facebook. In respect to the printed newspaper, the experiment indicated how a revised format presentation could engage younger readers.



Participants in focus groups were also recruited from higher levels of education. Here from university levels.

At the online news media *Altinget*, the experiment set out to re-write two news series on subjects that had little appeal to two high school focus groups. The content of the two series were originally published for a highly skilled and specialized audience and as such never meant to netither a broader not younger audience. Yet the articles in the series treat subjects that ends up with common interest also for young people. The engagement criteria and a GIF format - popular among young people - were used as the inspirational starting point for the re-writing. Members of the focus groups saw screen dumps in smartphone format of both the original and re-written stories, where they could see headlines, sub-headlines, by-lines and images. They expressed the most interest in articles where the sub-heads had: a slightly humorous tone; thematic images (as opposed to portraits of subjects); and, an explanatory approach to material. The GIFs were used to spotlight topics and function as an umbrella over all articles in the series.

The exercise indicated how complex issues, when stylized especially for social media, can be used to engage readers with little previous knowledge of the issues, and it gave journalists a welcomed means of breaking boundaries.

In all cases, vocabulary, the length of articles, design, style and tone were determining factors in the readability of articles for young people.



*Editor and journalist from the online news media Altinget taking part in proactive focus group following stating that the experience was 'mind blowing'. Altinget's audience ususally consist of skilled professionals at higher academic levels.*



Aslak Gottlieb is an independent media consultant, specializing in analysing, advising and project management for media, publishers, IT firms, public offices, schools and other educational institutions.

Educated as a school teacher, he spent seven years teaching upper levels of Danish elementary schools and has since applied his experience in education to media issues influencing young people.

For almost a decade he has held the daily leadership of Danish Newspapers in Education run by the Danish Media Association.

He was granted the fellowship of Southern University of Denmark in 2015.

Contact information can be found at

[WWW.ASLAKGOTTLIEB.DK](http://WWW.ASLAKGOTTLIEB.DK)

*Denmark's largest journalism award:*  
**Fyens Stiftstidende's Fellowship**



The journalist fellowship is a journalism award which has been given out by the Centre for Journalism at the University of Southern Denmark in Odense since 2006.

The fellowship, often called "the industry's largest journalism award", is awarded annually to a prominent journalist or editor who can contribute to the training and development of future journalists.

During their fellowship, several past recipients have written books, held seminars for industry practitioners or in other ways shared their newly acquired knowledge with a range of current and future journalists and editors.

The journalism fellowship at the University of Southern Denmark consists of a grant of DKK 500,000. It allows recipients to take a leave of absence from their work and immerse themselves in a subject of their choice. At the same time, the fellow is given free access to the knowledge bank that is the university.