come together

The Come Together project

Learning Compendium

Training and fellowship program
for aspiring journalists and editors
2024-2025

Edited by Kurziv&Gerador

Co-funded by
the European Union

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The Come Together project is co-funded by the European Commission through the Creative Europe program.

Introduction to compendium

In 2024, The Come Together project launched its training program for aspiring journalists and editors. The project “Come Together – Strengthening community media in Europe” was founded on the principles of partnership and peer-to-peer learning among community media organizations situated in six different EU countries: Poland, Belgium, France, Portugal, Austria and Croatia. The consortium is composed of representatives of media outlets, networks and cooperatives Eurozine, VoxEurop, Gerador, Krytyka Polityczna, Kulturpunkt.hr, Rekto:Verso and VoxFeminae. The initiative aims to unearth and leverage the existing wisdom residing within these organizations to foster innovative approaches. As a result, a community of practice was established, fostering collaboration, knowledge exchange, and partnership to fulfill their primary goal of enhancing community media organizations on a sustainable basis.

Training program for aspiring journalists and editors was crafted to address the current challenges and disparities within the media industry and to reshape the landscape of newsrooms, with a particular emphasis on promoting inclusiveness and representation by fostering diversity, expanding collaboration networks and equipping underrepresented groups with essential professional skills. By doing so, the initiative aimed to ensure a more comprehensive and accurate portrayal of the world in media.

Participants in the Come Together Training Program were offered a well-structured curriculum spread across three modules, totaling 15 classes and 30 hours of learning, in two cycles. Expert trainers guided them through essential topics, providing a robust foundation for their journey in journalism. The program was meticulously designed to address current challenges and disparities within the journalism industry and aimed to establish a collaborative community among participants. Participation was free of charge. It was expected of participants to apply the acquired knowledge and skills beyond the training sessions. The goal was to see the impact of the program reflected in their journalistic work and contributions to the media landscape which happened within the Fellowship Program.

The selection committee for the participants of online courses and the fellowships was composed by the editorial board members and project managers of the Come Together project:

Agnieszka Wiśniewska (Krytyka Polityczna), Catherine André (VoxEurop), Clara Amante (Gerador), Hannelore Roth (rekto:verso), Ivana Pejić (Kurziv), Réka Kinga Papp (Eurozine), Tiago Sigorelho (Gerador), Tihana Bertek (K-zona), and Matija Mrakovčić (Kurziv).

The first edition of the program was organized by Gerador, a Portuguese platform for journalism, culture, and education, and it took place between March and May 2024.

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module	sub-modules	class dates	trainer
1. Independent Journalism: from theoretical foundations to practical application This module is designed to equip participants with the knowledge and skills essential for independent journalism and the creation of innovative community media.	None	March 04, 11, 18, 25	Ricardo Cabral Fernandes
2. Development of specialized journalistic skills This module is dedicated to refining participants' skills in data journalism and investigative journalism, which are instrumental in ensuring the credibility, impact, and relevance of journalism in today's dynamic and information-rich landscape.	**2.1. Data journalism** Participants will explore the essentials of data journalism, including data collection, cleaning, analysis, and visualization. Emphasis will be placed on the ethical considerations involved in handling data in journalism.	April 01, 03, 08, 10	Rui Barros
	2.2. Investigative journalism This segment guides participants through the complexities of investigative journalism, covering areas such as story identification, advanced research techniques, effective interviewing, and the crafting of compelling investigative narratives.	April 15, 17, 22, 24	Filipe Teles
3. Community in focus These workshops will contribute to sensitising future journalists for reporting on vulnerable social groups and improve their professional capacities in dealing with topics that are usually out of the focus of mainstream media.	**3.1. Ethnic-racial filters in the media** Understanding how ethnic and racial communities are portrayed in the media; exploring the impact of stereotypes and biases; developing strategies for fair and accurate representation.	April 30	Paula Cardoso
	3.2. Media representation of people with disabilities Examining media representation of individuals with disabilities; addressing common misconceptions and stereotypes; promoting inclusive storytelling and accessibility in media.	May 02	Dora Alexandre
	3.3. Media representation of the LGBTQ+ community Analyzing the historical context of LGBTQ+ representation; exploring the challenges faced by the LGBTQ+ community in media portrayal; developing strategies for promoting authentic and positive representation.	May 09	tba

The second edition, organized by
Kurziv – Platform for matters of culture, media, and society
from Croatia, was held between October and December 2024.

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module	topic	date	lecturer
Introductory session		Sep 26	
Journalistic Tools and Media Literacy	Media Pluralism	Sep 30	Iva Nenadić
	Investigative reporting	Oct 3	Barbara Matejčić
	Fact-checking	Oct 7	Petar Vidov
	Data journalism	Oct 10	Jelena Prtorić
	Solution journalism	Oct 14	Dora Santos Silva
	AI and journalism	Oct 17	Letiția Pârcălăbescu
	Media Policy	Oct 21	Jelena Berković
Sustainability and Future of Work	Culture and Climate	Oct 24	Ana Žuvela
	The Future of Work	Oct 28	Davor Mišković
	Slow Mobility	Oct 31	Ana Žuvela
	Beyond a Green Cultural Empire	Nov 4	Forest University
Community in Focus: Diversity Reporting	Phralipen	Nov 11	Maja Grubišić & Matej Čelig
	In Portal	Nov 21	Damir Fatušić
	Meduza	Nov 28	Kalia Dimitrova
	Oblakoder	Dec 5	Marina Zec
	KLFM	Dec 12	Kristina Tešija
Final Session	Fellowship Applications Opening	Dec 19	

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Beyond the training course, participants had the opportunity to propose and work on their journalistic and editorial projects. Five projects were selected in each cycle. They received financial support and mentoring, allowing participants to contribute meaningful media pieces with guidance from experienced editors. The pieces produced as part of the program were translated and published in the media outlets of the consortium members.

The Come Together Learning Compendium is designed as a curated collection of lectures and workshops that took place as part of a program for aspiring journalists and editors. It also includes journalistic research conducted by participants during the fellowship program.

We have selected several topics that we believe are particularly relevant at this moment, while also ensuring that those considering a career in journalism – whether in general, in community journalism, or in specialized journalistic fields – can find valuable information. It was important for us to highlight key aspects of the training program and recognize the dedicated journalists and media professionals who address important issues through the respected media outlets they manage and edit.

We hope this compendium will be a useful resource not only for professionals in the field – journalists, editors, publishers, organizers, authors, and researchers – but also for the general public seeking reliable information. Over time, we hope it will continue to expand with new and even more timely topics. Ultimately, this compendium serves as a call to action for journalism – a call for impartial, ethically grounded, evidence-based, well-argued, and responsible reporting.

Independent Journalism: from theoretical foundations to practical application

10.

The text was created based on the presentation by Ricardo Cabral Fernandes, edited by ChatGPT.

With a degree in International Relations and a master's degree in Political Science, Ricardo Cabral Fernandes began working in the newsroom of the Portuguese newspaper i/weekly SOL in 2017. He worked in the International, Online, and Society sections, where he focused mainly on human rights issues, such as the right to housing.

In 2020, he joined the daily newspaper Público, in the International section, where he focused on the Middle East.

In June 2020, he published a major investigation into the links between the Portuguese and Ukrainian far-right. In 2021, he left Público and joined other journalists to found "Setenta e Quatro", a non-profit digital investigative newspaper. He has been its editor since the project's public launch in July 2021. In addition to having published investigations so far, Cabral Fernandes has also taken on the task of editing the newspaper.

The Evolution and Impact of Journalism

Journalism has long been intertwined with the progress of modern society and democratic governance. Its roots can be traced back to the 18th century, when the liberal press emerged as a powerful force against absolutism. In this era, journalists and intellectuals championed the freedom of the press, advocating for the widespread dissemination of liberal ideas. Early journalism often took the form of pamphlets and leaflets, inspired by revolutionary thinkers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose Social Contract played a pivotal role in shaping political thought. These publications sought to challenge authority, inform the public, and ignite discussions on governance and human rights.

The Role of Journalism in Society

The 19th century marked a turning point in journalism with the rise of the penny press, which made newspapers widely affordable and accessible to the general public. This democratization of information was accompanied by the professionalization of the field, as journalism schools and press associations began to set ethical standards for reporting. In 1918, the French National Union of Journalists introduced the first Code of Ethics, emphasizing principles such as accuracy, impartiality, and responsibility.

By the 20th century, journalism had developed a more structured approach. The inverted pyramid style, which prioritized the most important information at the beginning of a news article, became the industry standard. Additionally, different journalistic genres – such as interviews, investigative reporting, and feature writing – became widely adopted, shaping the modern landscape of news media.

The Rise of Alternative Journalism

Despite the growth and professionalization of mainstream journalism, many felt that traditional reporting failed to fully serve the public interest. This dissatisfaction led to the emergence of alternative journalism, a movement that challenged the norms of objectivity, hierarchical newsroom structures, and the commercial pressures of corporate-owned media. Scholars Chris Atton and James F. Hamilton describe alternative journalism as a critical response to mainstream media, often focusing on marginalized voices, grassroots activism, and investigative work that questions power structures.

The Rise of Alternative Journalism

Amid concerns over media consolidation and declining journalistic independence, non-profit journalism emerged as a solution to provide public-service reporting free from commercial pressures. Unlike for-profit news organizations, non-profit media prioritize investigative storytelling and in-depth reporting that serves the public good. Their objectives include:

- Strengthening democracy by ensuring that crucial information reaches the public.
- Exposing corruption and abuses of power through investigative reporting.
- Enhancing journalism quality by producing substantive, well-researched stories.
- Covering underreported topics, such as environmental justice, human rights, and systemic inequalities.
- Educating the public, fostering a more informed and engaged citizenry.

The Growth of Non-Profit Journalism

The movement toward non-profit journalism began gaining traction in 1977 with the founding of the Center for Investigative Reporting in the United States. However, it saw a significant expansion after the 2007-2008 financial crisis, when many veteran journalists left traditional media to work for non-profit outlets, bringing with them valuable expertise and networks.

The success of non-profit journalism has been supported by legal recognition of their tax-exempt status, collaborations with academic institutions, and the establishment of organizations such as the Institute for Nonprofit News, which provides financial, technological, and strategic support.

Building a Non-Profit Media Organization

Establishing a non-profit media outlet requires careful planning and strategic vision. The process begins with a market analysis, identifying gaps where traditional media fail to adequately inform the public. Studying successful non-profit models around the world offers valuable insights into sustainable business structures and editorial independence. Understanding the political and legal environment is also crucial, as non-profit journalism often faces challenges related to press freedom and government regulations.

A distinct editorial identity is essential for standing out in the media landscape. This includes defining a clear mission, fostering a strong newsroom culture, and choosing a journalistic focus—whether investigative reporting, features, or opinion journalism. Success is measured not only by audience size but also by factors such as engagement levels, social impact, content quality, and recognition through industry awards.

The Structure of a Non-Profit Newsroom

A successful non-profit newsroom requires a well-organized team with clearly defined roles:

- Board of Directors – Provides strategic oversight and ensures mission alignment.
- Editor – Oversees content production and journalistic standards.
- Business Manager – Handles financial operations and sustainability.
- Journalists – The core team responsible for investigative reporting and content creation.
- Art Editor – Manages visual storytelling, including photography and graphics.
- Marketing & Social Media Manager – Engages audiences and promotes content.
- Administrative Staff & Freelancers – Support operations and provide specialized expertise.

Sustainable Funding Strategies for Non-Profit Media

Unlike commercial media, non-profit journalism cannot rely on traditional advertising revenue alone. Instead, it adopts a diverse funding approach, including:

- Grants and Foundation Support – Many non-profits secure funding from philanthropic organizations dedicated to press freedom and investigative journalism.
- Subscription-Based Models – Encouraging loyal readers to contribute financially through membership programs.
- Crowdfunding – Engaging the public to support investigative projects.
- Ethical Advertising – Partnering with advertisers whose values align with the media outlet's mission.

Broadcasting, Marketing, and Audience Engagement

For non-profit journalism to be successful, visibility and outreach are essential. Most organizations distribute their content through:

- Websites – The primary hub for news and analysis.
- Newsletters – Regular updates to maintain reader engagement.
- Social Media – Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp help amplify reach.
- Community Engagement – Hosting forums, public discussions, and investigative events to interact with audiences.
- Innovative Content Formats – Using digital storytelling techniques, such as interactive carousels and video reels, to attract new audiences.

Effective marketing and communication strategies ensure that non-profit journalism remains visible, credible, and financially sustainable. In a world where misinformation spreads rapidly, the role of independent, non-profit media has never been more critical. It continues to serve as a pillar of democracy, providing the public with the information they need to make informed decisions, advocate for change, and hold those in power accountable.

Development of specialized journalistic skills

This module was dedicated to refining participants' skills in data journalism and investigative journalism, which are instrumental in ensuring the credibility, impact, and relevance of journalism in today's dynamic and information-rich landscape.

Data journalism

The text was created based on the presentation by Jelena Prtorić, edited by ChatGPT.

Jelena Prtorić is an independent journalist currently based in Berlin, writing in English, French, and Croatian. Her work primarily focuses on environmental issues, migration, and human rights, often as part of investigative, cross-border projects. Since 2020, Jelena has been collaborating with the non-profit organization Arena for Journalism in Europe, which supports data and investigative journalism across Europe (and beyond). For Arena, she organizes the Dataharvest investigative and data journalism conference and works on research within the Climate Arena network.

Introduction to data journalism

In this day and age, journalism is no longer just about chasing stories through interviews and observations – it is about finding leads, patterns, and trends in structured datasets. Data journalism helps us to find, verify, and tell compelling stories.

Data journalism allows reporters to move beyond anecdotal evidence and into the realm of structural analysis. Instead of treating a case of corruption, gender inequality, or environmental damage as an isolated incident, journalists can use data to prove systemic issues. Imagine a journalist suspects that court rulings for rape cases are more lenient than those for theft. Instead of relying on individual testimonies, they can collect court records, analyze sentencing patterns, and reveal whether justice is being served fairly. Or consider a journalist who believes historical figures honored with street names in a city are overwhelmingly male. By collecting and analyzing street name data, they can expose gender imbalances in how history is remembered.

But data is never truly neutral. Every dataset is shaped by the people who collect it, the way it is structured, and the methodology behind it. Numbers can be manipulated, omitted, or misinterpreted, making it crucial for journalists to approach data with a critical eye. Understanding data means understanding its origins – who collected it, why it was collected, and whether it has been altered or updated over time. Journalists must always ask: What story is this data telling, and what is it leaving out?

Finding reliable data is one of the biggest challenges in data journalism. While official sources like government agencies, international organizations, and research institutions provide large amounts of structured data, they often come with biases, gaps, or lack of transparency. Also, those official databases are valuable, but not always sufficient.

Working with data requires caution. Even the most comprehensive dataset can have problems: missing values, outdated figures, or unexplained anomalies. Journalists must be mindful of data harmonization, ensuring consistency across different collection periods and sources. Data formats can also be tricky – data trapped in PDFs or poorly structured reports can slow us down. Thankfully, tools like Tabula, Open Refine and others help extract and clean data for analysis.

To obtain additional data,For deeper investigations, journalists can turn to unofficial sources, including watchdog organizations, scientific research, and even crowdsourcing. In some cases, journalists can create their own datasets, gathering information through Freedom of Information (FOI) requests, independent research, or manual tracking of trends – like monitoring urban changes over time or measuring soil pollution levels to uncover environmental hazards.

Sometimes, the stories can emerge also from a lack of data. If there are no records of workplace safety violations in a particular industry, it might indicate a cover-up. If no data exists on police misconduct, it could mean authorities are deliberately avoiding documentation. In such cases, journalists can try to look for stories explaining the lack of data or try to collect their own data (with the help of researchers, citizens etc).

For example, when the Bureau of Investigative Journalism wanted to investigate the impact of extreme heat on homes, they crowdsourced information from residents. Similarly, when they examined working conditions for Deliveroo riders, they worked directly with the riders to gather data about wages, working hours, and treatment by the company. These methods allow journalists to fill in the blanks where official records fail.

Collecting and cleaning data is only the first step – making sense of it is where journalism begins. Data journalists can use tools like Excel, Python, and R to work with the dataset and interrogate the data. But the journalistic questions and hypothesis are driving the research: Who donated the most money to political campaigns? Which companies are most frequently mentioned in corruption scandals? What neighborhoods are most affected by pollution?

Also, raw numbers alone don't tell the story - storytelling is important. The human brain processes visual information far faster than text, making data visualization a crucial tool in storytelling. Through charts, maps, and infographics, journalists can transform complex datasets into engaging, easily digestible narratives. Tools like Datawrapper and Flourish allow them to create compelling visuals that bring their findings to life. Whether it's a map showing income inequality across a city or a graph revealing patterns in climate change data, visualization makes the story more powerful and accessible.

Some of the big(gest) investigative stories in recent years have been powered by data leaks. The Panama Papers (2016), Paradise Papers (2017), and Pandora Papers (2021) exposed the hidden offshore wealth of politicians, corporations, and criminals, thanks to massive datasets leaked by whistleblowers. These leaks contained millions of documents, requiring teams of journalists to sift through terabytes of data, connecting the dots between secret bank accounts, shell companies, and tax havens. Without the ability to process and analyze massive datasets, these groundbreaking investigations would not have been possible.

The field of data journalism is constantly evolving, with new tools and technologies emerging every day. Artificial intelligence and machine learning are becoming increasingly important, helping journalists detect patterns in vast datasets that would be impossible to analyze manually (but don't come without challenges, ethical considerations and hallucinations). Meanwhile, collaborative journalism – where media organizations share resources and expertise – allows reporters to tackle complex global investigations more effectively than ever before.

Ultimately, data journalism is about storytelling. It is not just about numbers, spreadsheets, or algorithms. It is about using data to reveal hidden truths, hold power to account, tell stories that matter, whether it's exposing government corruption, highlighting social inequalities, or investigating environmental destruction.

Some useful resources and courses

The Centre for Investigative Journalism

Data journalism website

Code academy

Knight Centre's journalism courses

Some useful resources - How to's

Global investigative journalism network has many useful tools/tips in their RESOURCE CENTRE, for data journalism and databases

A GitHub repository - guide to bad data (some of the problems with the data you could encounter, and what to do about it)

Tools/apps for visualisation and other data work

Flourish - turning data into visualisations

Open Refine - allows you to clean and organise your data (Tutorials are here: Getting started and How to clean your data)

Tabula: extracting tabular data from PFDs

Google Pinpoint

Some further data sources

European Union data portal

World Bank portal data

Investigative dashboard resources

Aleph OCCRP

Investigative journalism

The text was created based on the lectures on investigative journalism within the program, edited by ChatGPT.

Investigative journalism stands apart from day-to-day reporting in its relentless pursuit of the truth. While traditional journalism often assumes the honesty of its sources, investigative reporters understand that information can be manipulated, hidden, or even deliberately falsified. They do not take statements at face value but instead scrutinize every detail, cross-checking facts and seeking out independent sources. In many cases, the information they seek is not freely given but carefully guarded, its exposure potentially threatening the powerful institutions and individuals who control it.

Unlike routine reporting, where journalists may simply contrast official statements with opposing viewpoints, investigative reporters have the freedom – and the duty – to challenge, question, and even dismantle official narratives when the facts demand it.

At its core, investigative journalism is deeply moral. It does not merely report events; it seeks to reveal wrongdoing and, in doing so, reinforce society's understanding of right and wrong. These journalists act as custodians of public conscience, using their work to expose villains and protect victims. Their stories often serve as a form of public reckoning, confronting readers with the stark realities of injustice, corruption, and abuse of power. Their goal is not just to inform but to provoke, to make people feel, react, and demand change. As scholars Ettema and Glasser put it, investigative journalists do not claim moral superiority, but they hold the power to engage the public's sense of justice, serving as a voice for those who might otherwise go unheard.

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Formulate hypothesis

- “Keep this in mind, please: If you merely try to prove at any cost that a hypothesis is true, regardless of the evidence, you will join the ranks of the world’s professional liars - the crooked cops who condemn the innocent, the politicians who sell wars as if they were soap. Investigation is about more than proving you are right. It’s about finding the truth. Hypothesis-based investigation is a tool that can dig up a lot of truth, but it can also dig a deep grave for the innocent.”

- Mark Lee Leonard, Story Based Inquiry: A manual for investigative journalists

The impact of investigative journalism is profound and far-reaching. Its revelations have shaped the course of history, influencing legislation, court rulings, and public opinion. When a journalist uncovers systemic corruption or abuses of power, their work can lead to new laws and policies designed to prevent such wrongdoing in the future. In legal contexts, their investigations can spark lawsuits, criminal prosecutions, or high-profile resignations. Their work also has a powerful effect on society at large, shaping cultural attitudes and mobilizing communities toward reform. Institutions that find themselves at the center of an exposé are often forced to confront their own failures, implementing internal investigations, disciplinary actions, or sweeping structural reforms. Even the economy is not immune to the power of investigative journalism – companies implicated in financial misconduct can see their reputations destroyed, their stock prices plummet, and their business prospects vanish. More broadly, investigative journalism has the power to challenge societal norms, forcing cultures to confront uncomfortable truths and rethink long-held beliefs.

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Hypotheses are important because:

- They make it easier to collect data, gather and organize new facts and evidence, and analyse it
- They help us keep control of the investigation and manage it effectively
- They help test the easiest and best methodology for establishing hypotheses
- They help us to focus and be precise and to establish the boundaries and goals of the investigation
- They helps us to more closely understand the issue that we are researching
- They help us come up with solutions in the event that problems arise
- They are the cornerstone of a fully integrated investigation
- They help us to market the idea to others
- They help us to set budgets and keep a tighter hold on time and resources
- They help us establish the sources of the investigation

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Hypothesis characteristics

- It can be tested
- It is based on established and documented facts as well as uncorroborated informations
- It is concise
- It is coherent and based on facts that the journalist is looking to gather as well as information they already have
- It deals with a single problem

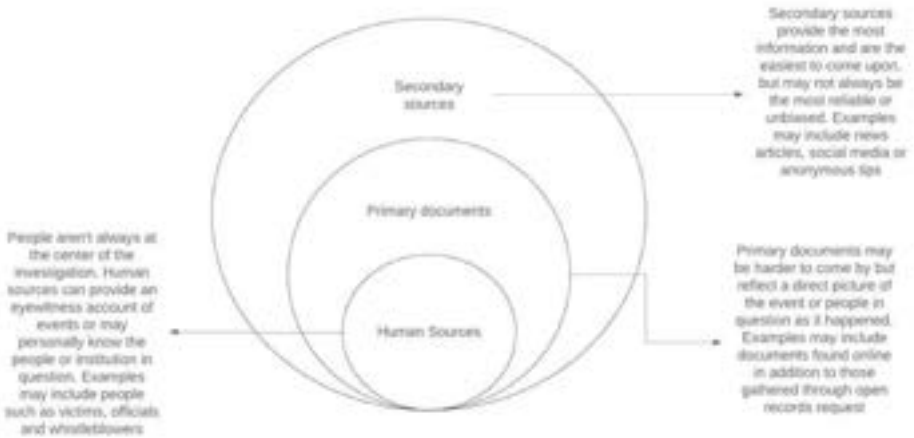
In the modern era, investigative journalism has taken on a new form—one that transcends borders and unites journalists across the globe. The Panama Papers serve as a striking example of this shift. This massive leak, comprising 11.5 million documents from the Panamanian law firm Mossack Fonseca, revealed the secret financial dealings of politicians, celebrities, and business moguls across the world. The sheer volume of data was staggering—it would have taken 22 years to read through every document. This was not a story that could be uncovered by a single reporter or even a single newsroom. Instead, it required an unprecedented level of collaboration, involving more than 100 media organizations working in 25 different languages.

This shift toward collaborative journalism is not just a convenience—it is a necessity. The challenges of modern investigative reporting are immense. Investigations are becoming more complex, requiring expertise in fields such as data analysis, cybersecurity, and financial forensics. At the same time, newsrooms are under increasing financial strain, with many struggling to support costly, time-consuming investigations. Meanwhile, the global nature of corruption and crime means that no single journalist or media outlet can tackle the world's biggest stories alone.

But there is strength in collaboration. By pooling resources, investigative journalists can take on more ambitious projects, bringing together diverse perspectives and expertise to uncover the full scope of a story. This networked approach not only enhances the depth and reach of their reporting but also offers greater protection to journalists covering sensitive and dangerous issues. Where a lone journalist might be silenced, a collective effort ensures that the truth still emerges.

Despite its challenges, investigative journalism remains one of the most powerful forces for truth and accountability in the modern world. It is more than a profession—it is a mission, driven by the belief that knowledge has the power to bring justice, that exposing wrongdoing can create change, and that a well-informed society is a stronger, fairer one. As long as there are journalists willing to dig deeper, challenge authority, and risk everything for the truth, investigative journalism will continue to shape history, one revelation at a time.

Work from the Outside In technique



Secondary sources

- News articles
- Academic articles and dissertation theses
- Books
- Magazines and newsletters
- Directories
- Legal notices
- Social media posts
- Anonymous tips

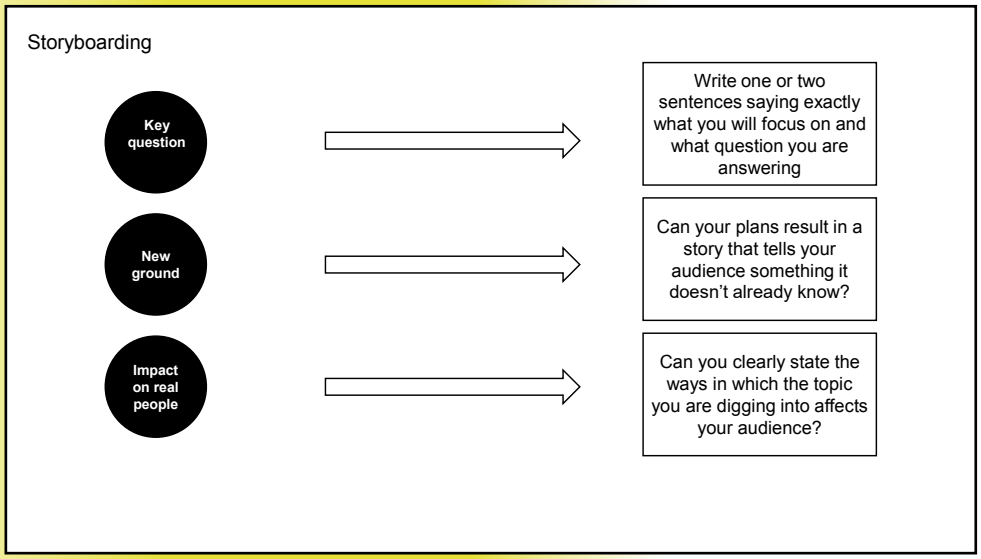
Primary documents

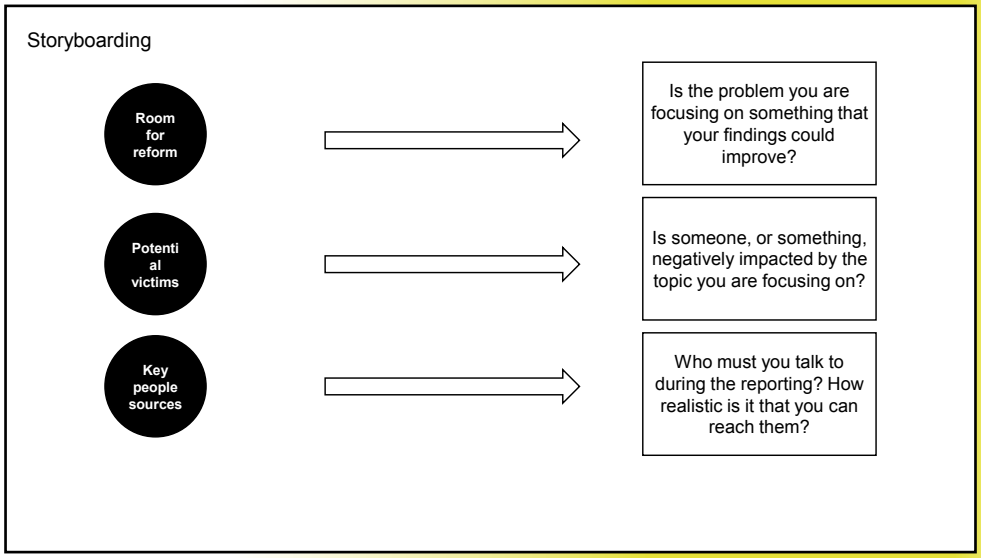
- Documents help you locate human sources
- Contact the “formers”
- Documents take on new meanings when explained by insiders
- Only interview key sources when you have the document trail established
- Documents serve as a reality check in interviews

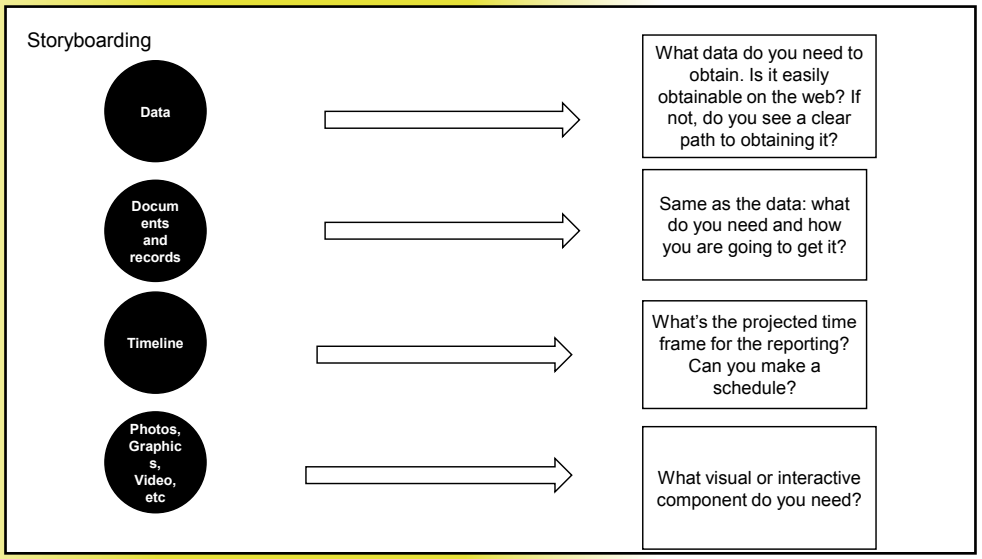
Human sources

- Memos
- Emails
- Letters
- City council meeting minutes
- Transcripts
- Licenses
- Certificate
- Board minutes
- Campaign finance reports
- Lawsuit filings
- Annual reports

Storyboarding in investigative journalism is a technique used to plan and structure a complex investigative story before it is written or produced. It helps journalists organize their findings, identify gaps in reporting, and ensure a logical, engaging narrative while handling large amounts of information.







Selected Published texts

Denmark's 'Parallel Societies': Imaginary borders under renovation

Author: Barbara Alves
Mentoring organization: Gerador
Originally published in Portuguese
Translation: Albie Mills | Voxeurop

Denmark's 'Parallel Societies': Imaginary borders under renovation

Sønderbro is a neglected area of Copenhagen known for the socio-economic difficulties of its residents and for providing shelter to 200 to 300 homeless people. With an above-average concentration of immigrant residents and people of 'non-Western' descent, the neighbourhood is undergoing regeneration that raises questions about inclusion, segregation and the future of social housing in Denmark. This report explores how the changes in Sønderbro are impacting its residents and how those changes reflect national trends.

Photo: Barbara Alves

Regenerating 'Parallel societies'

Every year since 2010, the Danish government has published a list of 'parallel societies' which identifies certain areas and neighbourhoods as 'at risk'. Hørgården, the housing complex made up of grey, modernist blocks in the southern part of Sønderbro, was included in the controversial list in 2018 and 2019, previously called the 'ghetto list', leading to a regeneration drive that aims to be inclusive and transform the area with the participation of the residents.

Nevertheless, resident participation in these urban renewal projects has not been consistent from neighbourhood to neighbourhood and, according to Project Manager, Niels Frisch Kjølholt, who works for Copenhagen's Technical and Environmental Administration, Hørgården's members are often under-represented in meetings.

Ahmed, 27, lives in Hørgården and, like all residents of Sønderbro, was invited to take part in one of the meetings. He went to the first meeting and from then on wasn't very involved. 'It was just a bureaucratic meeting that went round in circles, talking about introducing a small lawn here or changing the car park there. That's not what people need.'

According to the latest publication of the list, a 'parallel society' is defined as a social housing area with at least 1,000 residents, where the proportion of immigrants and descendants from non-Western countries exceeds 50 per cent and where at least two of four criteria relating to educational attainment and employment, income and crime levels are met.

In recent years, Hørgården has been considered a 'prevention area'. This means that although it is no longer on the list of 'parallel societies', it still has more than 1,000 residents and a proportion of immigrants and descendants from non-Western countries of more than 30 per cent. In addition, at least two of the following four criteria are met:

1. The proportion of residents aged between 18 and 64 who are in neither employment nor education is over 30 per cent, over a two year average..

2. The proportion of residents convicted of a penal code violation, weapons law violation or violating drug laws is at least 2 times higher than the national average, again over a two year average.

3. The proportion of residents aged between 30 and 59 not educated beyond the age of 16 exceeds 60 per cent of residents in that age group.

4. The average income of taxpayers aged between 15 and 64 in the area (excluding those looking for education) is less than 65 per cent of the average gross income of the same age group in the region.

Under Danish law, a 'Western' country is one of "all 27 EU countries, the UK, Andorra, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Monaco, Norway, San Marino, Switzerland, Vatican City, Canada, the US, Australia and New Zealand". Africa, Latin America, the Middle East and Asia are all considered non-Western.

Daniel Tomicic, 27, is one of the residents of Hørgården and has taken part in some of the Sønderbro regeneration team's initiatives. He doesn't hide his criticism or anger at the government's list, which is published every year. In his opinion, it only embeds discrimination. 'I can get a job, I can work, I'm educated, I don't commit crimes, I even create art, which has ended up being my way of life, but my ancestry is something I was born with and I can never change it,' he says. 'The law basically states that non-Western ancestry means you live in a ghetto - it's state racism.'

According to Daniel, many do not know what the regeneration project entails; 'All the young people I spoke to didn't know about it, or they weren't interested because nobody explained why it should be so important to them.'

He views the neighbourhood as friendly and kind and, though he doesn't deny that there are some 'negative stories', he also stresses that there are many 'positive stories', condemning the stigma that residents face because of the way the neighbourhood's problems are framed by the list.

For Henrik Gutzon Larsen, an urban policy researcher and co-author of the study 'Gentrification: Gentle or Traumatic? Urban Renewal Policies and Socioeconomic Transformations in Copenhagen', situating a problem geographically is a very common way of approaching problems politically. 'It's much easier to say that we have a problem here than that we have a problem everywhere.' Indeed, it is true that there are specific places that need to improve services to improve quality of life.

However, he argues that the 'parallel societies' list has led to a change in discourse since the 1980s, where the most vulnerable socio-economic groups living in social housing have been problematized geographically, instead of perceiving social problems such as unemployment and the integration of immigrant groups at a national level.

Creating inclusionary or exceptionary policies?

In the 2018 plan called ‘One Denmark without Parallel Societies: No Ghettos in 2030’, the then government proposed urban development projects to ‘restore and develop areas into attractive neighbourhoods with a mix of residents’ including ‘the sale of existing buildings, targeted demolitions and new construction of private housing’ if an area remained on the list for five consecutive years, with a view to reducing the proportion of family social housing to a maximum of 40 per cent, according to Law § 168 a.

To prevent areas from being on the list, Niels explains that, ‘we, the city, decided - or at least the politicians decided - to regenerate all the areas that appeared on the list, to try to keep those same areas off it in the future.’

Yet, as Niels explains, ‘in principle, urban regeneration can be separated from gentrification, but in reality they are often very closely related and almost impossible to disentangle from one another.’ According to Niels, these projects promoted by the state aim to create integrated societies with a mix of social demographics, where it is stated that they will ‘try to come up with a greater social mix or some variant of that word, saying that we have a neighbourhood here with challenges that relate to that specific socio-economic group and it would be good to bring in some people who perhaps have a stronger socio-economic profile’.

He explains, however, ‘there is often an unspoken rule, that if you bring someone in, you need to kick someone out or you need to create more space and, if you manage to bring in a new group, this could drive out the old group in any case, for example through price rises,’ he says.

According to Rasmus Anderson, the architect responsible for the renovation of Hørgården and the space near the borders of Sundholm, in the northern part of Sønderbro, Sønderbro’s regeneration will not lead to a different socio-economic mix. Nevertheless, this urban renewal drive contains two projects within Hørgårde’s Regeneration Plan named ‘Possible Densification in Hørgården - new types of housing for more people’ and ‘Infrastructure Projects in Hørgården - from closed residential area to an open, green and active one’.

As the Regeneration Plan mentions, these two projects, which are the responsibility of the housing association 3B that owns the Hørgården housing complex, ‘are not directly part of the Sønderbro Area Renewal Plan, but the Area Renewal Plan will, as far as possible, support projects and support improved traffic and connections between the residential area, Hørgården, and the surrounding city.’

To add another layer of complexity to this regeneration drive, as Hørgården is a ‘prevention area’, flexible renting is still in place. This measure, applied specifically to areas covered by the list, allows the City Council to work with housing associations so that vacant homes in a housing block are rented out according to special criteria. This means that applicants who meet certain criteria, such as employment status or educational attainment, must be at the front of the queue.

Daniel Tomicic declares with some anger: ‘They’re building low-income housing, but they’re making access difficult for people on low incomes.’ In his opinion, the list is simply moving the problem elsewhere. When he moved to the neighbourhood a few years ago, where he lives alone in a flat, he had to show documents that proved that he was studying and had no criminal record. ‘You can no longer move into the area if you don’t have the correct paperwork,’ he says.

It is also worth noting that the list focuses on social housing. ‘It takes a narrow view, only looking at social housing and not at private renting. If you expand it to account for private rental properties, then you would identify problems in other areas’ explains researcher Henrik Gutzon Larsen.

In the author’s view, the rhetoric used by right-wing parties about the ‘parallel societies’ list has paved the way for the demonisation of social housing built in the ‘golden age’ of the Danish welfare state, pointing out that 20 per cent of Danish real estate still belongs to not-for-profit housing associations.

On 21 March 2023, according to the Regeneration Plan for Hørgården, the residents of Hørgården voted to proceed with the densification project. This proposed densification is intended to build private housing alongside new social housing for the elderly, generating a ‘more mixed composition of residents’. The neighbourhood’s current ‘temporary civic centre’ containing facilities for children and teenagers and a ‘worn-out square’ where residents have a small market, a bar, and a pizzeria, will be demolished if this densification plan goes ahead.

Despite not being very involved in the neighbourhood's regeneration, Mohammed, an employee at Hørgården's youth centre, which is located next to this area, recalls a vote on selling the plot around the youth centre and possibly even the area that includes the youth centre. 'No one has come to talk to us here, so we don't really know what's going to happen to this place. I just know that it was a strange vote, people didn't really know what they were voting for and only a few people were there, so they don't represent everyone.'

For Henrik Gutzon Larsen, 'framing the management of this issue in ethnicized politics, particularly in this type of housing, could conceal a different kind of objective: selling social housing.' Attributing unique problems to these areas, 'makes actions that would have been unheard of before, like getting rid of social housing, possible.'

The youth centre fosters inclusion, but its future is uncertain

Mohammed has been an employee of Hørgården's youth club for 20 years, the place where Daniel and Ahmed spent time as teenagers after school. Adjacent to the recycling centre, this space for young people aged 13 to 18 to meet after school is a place for socializing, keeping young people off the streets and preparing them for the future.

It was late afternoon when I visited the youth centre. Classes had already started and it was a community dinner evening. Hassan, the centre's other social worker and another Hørgården resident, was already in the kitchen with his apron and some young people had already arrived. If they want to, they can help prepare dinner so they don't have to pay. 'But since it's only 10 Danish kroner (€1.34) for dinner', says Mohammed, 'most people pay.' Some were in the computer room, others were playing Playstation, others were on the sofas, distracted by their mobile phones, and there were still some very carefully tending to the tomato plant in the small garden at the entrance to the centre.

The youth centre is a 'safe haven' where young people can relax after school or on holiday and be 'themselves', in Mohammed's words, but that's not all. It's also a place for advice and preparation for adult life, especially 'in a neighbourhood that was, and still is, a problem area where most young people hang out on the streets and do things they shouldn't do,' according to Hassan, a social worker who has been at the centre for 11 years.

Before they turn 18, there is a list of things that employees try to teach them. It is a list that brings together practical knowledge that is often unknown to some families in the neighbourhood. ‘We help them with the things they need to know, the basics. For example, dentistry is free until you’re 18, and when our young people are 17, we remind them to get their last check-ups before it costs them,’ Hassan explains.

They also help them to apply for a residence card if they don’t already have a passport, a process that has become more difficult over the years, they support them in applying for social housing lists so that they can have a long-term flat at affordable prices, and they also organise visits to some companies or institutions so that they can get an idea of the academic and/or professional path they would like to follow.

At the moment, Mohammed isn’t worried about the young people he sees and works with. He says ‘they’re on the right track with school and work.’ They play sports. ‘There’s no crime, no gangs’ and he says it’s a pleasure to be working there. But the vote on 21 March 2023 on the sale of the space owned by 3B, the housing association that owns all social housing in Hørgården and Sundholm Syd, and is responsible for the densification project in the Hørgården neighbourhood, has upset the apple cart. The uncertainty about the future of the youth centre’s current premises is felt not only by staff, but also by former members Ahmed and Daniel.

‘The only thing I know is that they’re going to sell’, says Mohammed, and that ‘some private companies might buy.’ The red-roofed buildings next door - the ‘temporary civic centre’ mentioned in the Hørgården Regeneration Plan - make up institutions for children and adolescents.

As Mohammed says, the area is attractive, it’s close to the city centre, it’s well connected with the metro and bus network and ‘Copenhagen doesn’t have many places to build anymore’. ‘They did it next door in Urbanplanen, where they also built private housing, so I think it’s the same thing that will happen here. In twenty years’ time, only people with money will live here.’

Hassan would be more than happy if the institutions there were renovated and provided the same services, but ‘if they remove the centre from here and move it elsewhere, it will be difficult for us to establish a strong relationship with our young people and children.’

In addition to uncertainty over its premises, the youth centre’s budget, provided by the Municipality of Copenhagen, has been cut over the years. Ahmed, who is helping with translation, intervenes: ‘Every year they provide a bit less, but it’s still a small enough cut for no one to really fight it because it’s not that drastic. They have to lay off staff every year or do less of something. They can’t finance themselves and in the end they will get so little money that there’s no-one left to complain,’ Ahmed explains.

Not knowing the fate of the centre, which is a ‘safe haven’ for the neighbourhood’s young people and children, breeds a sense of hesitation, insecurity and loss, especially for the young people who complain that there is ‘nowhere to go’ in the neighbourhood.

According to Ahmed, the lack of resources for families in the neighbourhood not only affects parents, but also young people living in the area. ‘Many families don’t have much money, so there isn’t always much to do at home. Many parents end up being away most of the time. So if you take away all the football pitches or the playgrounds or anything else, they’re just left to

Breaking down invisible borders

Daniel was always told not to cross the street where Hørgården physically and mentally ends. Sundholm can be seen to the north with the new 3B flats - Sundholm Syd - and, above that, the imposing yellow buildings from the early 20th century that serve as support institutions for around 200 to 300 homeless people.

When I was younger, I was afraid to go there. I'd hear stories from older people about the homeless people who lived there and the substance abuse on the streets. The juvenile prison is also in the area, so it always seemed to him to be an 'isolated and segregated' area.

To counteract the isolation of the area, near the intersection of Sundholm and Hørgården, Sønderbro's regeneration plan proposes 'a social meeting point for the whole neighbourhood,' says Rasmus, the architect responsible for the project.

According to him, this space should include the homeless people living on Sundholm - 'a very vulnerable group' -, the residents of Sundholm Syd, the residents of Hørgården, and also the children of two special needs schools that are located right next door. He admits that the area is very complex, but he says that the 'space needs to be able to contain different types of uses without excluding certain groups'.

Considered a 'romanticized' project by some participants in the project meetings, this initiative is the embodiment of the soul of urban regeneration in Copenhagen.

Jørgen moved to Sundholm in 2015 when 3B opened the housing competition for the newly built flats in front of Hørgården. Called Sundholm Syd, it was when he happened to cycle past on his way to work that he discovered a kind of 'lottery' for a flat in the development.

In Niels' words, this development was a 'way of attracting wealthier residents than those who already lived in Hørgården'. And indeed, since 2015, 48 new households have arrived in the neighbourhood, belonging to a stronger socio-economic demographic.

Aware of the aim of this housing to encourage diversity in the neighbourhood and create a social mix, according to Jørgen, all the new residents were aware of the compromises this involved: 'The homeless who sometimes make noise, the youth prison next door where young people set off fireworks and cry in the middle of the night. It's a bit annoying, but it is what it is. Some of us came with an understanding of, please don't cry, don't steal, behave normally and we'll all be happy, but that's not the world we were put into.' (Many of the young inmates at Sønderbro's juvenile prison have friends in the neighbourhood, and it is they who set off fireworks outside to entertain their friends inside).

Nevertheless, since Jørgen arrived in the neighbourhood in 2015, he admits that the various social groups don't interact on a daily basis.

He doesn't share Rasmus' enthusiasm for the area as a social meeting point for people in the neighbourhood, but he also confesses that he is not very involved in the process of renovating the neighbourhood. He thinks there needs to be a greater purpose for people to start interacting with the process. 'If it's to remove the car park, add a bit of grass and some benches, I don't see that doing anything.'

Daniel also agrees that there needs to be a reason for the people of Hørgården to use that part of the neighbourhood. In his opinion, the opening of some cultural venues, a youth centre or even 'some shops and cafés' could make the area less isolated, and he would view that project with some optimism.

For his part, Ahmed shows some concern for the gentrification of the neighbourhood, for example when he thinks about the future of the old barn next to the space about to be regenerated. 'They're going to present it as inclusive, everyone is welcome, but no one is going to invite us. It's going to be a high culture thing that people from outside are going to use a lot.'

Rasmus says that, in the renovation team, the risk of gentrification is 'something we take seriously', but he doesn't think it should be too great a concern.

However, Lars Lindegaard Gregersen, Artistic Advisor at Glimt Amager, one of the organisations based in Sønderbro, believes that the neighbourhood 'could very well go down that path.' According to him, it all depends on the institutions or cultural activities that exist there, 'because if it is designed to try to get more of the rest of the city to come to Sundholm, with things exclusively for people who live in neighbouring areas, then it could easily foster a conflict with Sundholm residents who feel their space is not really their own.'

In my last conversation with Rasmus, the architect maintained a hopeful tone, believing that small steps had been taken in the right direction. At the beginning of September, the regeneration team organized a social event that included a community dinner. Around eighty people attended and, according to their calculations, thirty to forty of the participants

Everyone shared the same meal together.

were homeless people living in Sundholm.

This is just the start for Sønderbro's regeneration, which, as many others have before it, promises to create a more integrated neighbourhood. Yet the question remains: will Sønderbro be an example of true inclusion or just a half-realized promise?

EU Media Policy and Regulation

The text was created based on the presentation by Jelena Berković and edited by ChatGPT.

Jelena Berković works as a policy advisor at Faktograf, a fact-checking media outlet from Croatia she co-founded in 2015, while serving as the executive director of democracy watchdog Gong. She previously worked as a journalist and editor atRadio 101 and Student newspaper REVOLT, and in 2001 she received the Croatian Journalists' Association award "Marija Jurić Zagorka". She holds a degree in journalism from the Faculty of Political Science in Zagreb and a master's degree in Global Politics from the London School of Economics and Political Science.

The EU is the first one globally to introduce overarching regulation of digital services and markets, with the EU standards for media freedom, the time has now come for the enforcement of these legislative acts. What is the Digital Services Act bringing to users of online platforms in the EU, what are the EU's expectations for the media sector and how this trickles down to new national regulators?

The Digital Services Act (DSA)

The Digital Services Act (DSA) is a European Union regulation designed to create a safer, more transparent, and fair digital environment. It establishes clear responsibilities for online platforms, including social media networks, marketplaces, and search engines, ensuring they manage content and services responsibly. The DSA addresses key areas such as risks and mitigation measures for content moderation, advertising transparency, user rights, and platform accountability. It applies to all digital services operating within the EU, regardless of where the company is based, aiming to protect users and promote fair competition.

Under the DSA Guide for Users, several key rights and protections ensure fairness in digital services. Users can no longer be targeted with ads based on sensitive personal data, such as information about minors, ethnicity, political views, or sexual orientation.

Platforms must also provide clear information about sponsored content. Additionally, users have more control over personalized recommendations, with the ability to modify selection criteria or opt out entirely. Digital services must explain any restrictions they impose on content visibility, monetization, or service suspensions.

When it comes to content moderation, users can challenge decisions. They have the right to object to over-moderation, such as unnecessary content takedowns, as well as under-moderation, where platforms fail to act on harmful content. If they disagree with a platform's decision, they can resolve disputes through an out-of-court settlement process. Users can also file complaints with their Digital Services Coordinator regarding any platform, and EU service recipients can be represented by non-EU stakeholders in lodging complaints.

To ensure stricter compliance with these regulations, the DSA applies special obligations to Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs) – those with more than 45 million users – including Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, YouTube, TikTok, Pinterest, Snapchat, Wikipedia, Alibaba, AliExpress, Amazon Store, Apple App Store, Booking.com, and Zalando. Similarly, Very Large Online Search Engines (VLOSEs), such as Bing and Google Search, must also adhere to specific responsibilities.

These platforms must assess systemic risks associated with elections, disinformation, algorithmic influence, content moderation, terms of service, advertising, and data collection. They are required to implement risk mitigation measures in line with established Codes of Conduct to enhance user safety. Additionally, they must undergo third-party audits, publish reports on their findings, and follow up with necessary implementations. Transparency is a priority – companies must release annual reports detailing their content moderation practices, the use of automated tools, complaint mechanisms, advertising transparency, and user engagement data.

Furthermore, platforms must provide vetted researchers with access to aggregated data to ensure better oversight and accountability.

The DSA also defines risks as actual or foreseeable negative effects in several key areas. One of the main concerns is the distribution of illegal content, including child sexual abuse material, illegal hate speech, and the sale of prohibited products or services. Another significant risk is the violation of fundamental rights, such as human dignity, freedom of expression, privacy, data protection, non-discrimination, and the rights of children and consumers. Risks also extend to democratic processes, impacting civic discourse, elections, and public security. Additionally, concerns about public health and protection of minors arise, including serious threats to physical and mental well-being and gender-based violence.

Regulation of illegal content is determined by existing EU and national laws, covering areas such as terrorist content, child sexual abuse material, and illegal hate speech. However, content deemed illegal will only be removed within the specific country where it is considered unlawful. To enforce these rules more effectively, Trusted Flaggers – organizations with recognized expertise – will have access to a priority reporting channel. Their status will be granted by the Digital Services Coordinator in their respective Member State, ensuring a quicker response to illegal content.

Beyond illegal content, the DSA also addresses harmful content, particularly misinformation and disinformation. Efforts to combat this will be reinforced through a strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation, aimed at limiting the spread of false or misleading information online.

Regulatory bodies play a crucial role in overseeing digital services across the EU. Each Member State appoints a Digital Service Coordinator (DSC), responsible for functions such as approving data access requests, designating Trusted Flaggers, appointing out-of-court dispute resolution bodies, handling complaints, and requesting information from digital services. These coordinators must operate independently of both private and public entities to maintain impartiality.

At the European level, the European Board for Digital Services brings together all Digital Service Coordinators, along with external experts, to ensure unified oversight and guidance. The European Commission also holds significant enforcement powers, similar to those used in antitrust proceedings, to ensure compliance across the EU. Additionally, the European Centre for Algorithmic Transparency (ECAT) supports the Commission in monitoring and evaluating algorithmic systems used by major platforms, fostering greater transparency and accountability.

The DSA represents a significant step toward a more responsible, transparent, and user-centric digital landscape in the EU, ensuring platforms uphold fundamental rights while promoting a fairer and safer online environment.

Additional Sources of Information on the DSA:

- Fact-checking Database for European Elections by the European Fact-checking Standards Network
- DSA Observatory at University of Amsterdam
- Research by Amnesty International: TikTok & Meta addictive design
- Webinar Alternative recommender systems in the DSA
- Panel: Whistleblowing Women: How Female Tech Workers are Taking on Big Tech
- Videos of parliamentary testimonies:

Frances Haugen in the European Parliament

Mark Zuckerberg et al in US Congress

- Podcast Mozilla IRL
- Policy recommendations by Panpotykon: How to Fix Recommender Systems + Safe by Default
- Advocacy campaigns People vs Big Tech

Cyber hygiene:

- Tools against sneaky tracking, inconsistent encryption by EFF's Tech Team
- Data Detox Kit for Smartphones by Tactical Tech
- Digital Security Tools and Tactics by Frontline Defenders

European Media Freedom Act (EMFA)

The European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) is a landmark regulation aimed at protecting media independence, ensuring transparency, and strengthening democratic discourse within the European Union. It guarantees that audiences have access to a diverse range of editorially independent media content, free from government influence or interference.

To uphold editorial independence, media service providers offering news and current affairs must ensure that journalistic decisions are made freely within the media outlet's established editorial line. Any potential conflicts of interest affecting news content must be transparently disclosed. Governments and regulators are explicitly prohibited from interfering in editorial policies, disclosing journalistic sources, or using intrusive surveillance methods against media professionals. This means authorities cannot detain, sanction, inspect, or surveil journalists, nor can they deploy surveillance software on their devices.

Definitions:

“Media service” = the principal purpose of the service or a dissociable section thereof consists in providing programmes or press publications, under the editorial responsibility of a media service provider, to the general public, by any means, in order to inform, entertain or educate;

“media service provider” = a natural or legal person whose professional activity is to provide a media service and who has editorial responsibility for the choice of the content of the media service and determines the manner in which it is organised;

“editorial decision” = a decision which is taken on a regular basis for the purpose of exercising editorial responsibility and linked to the day-to-day operation of a media service provider;

“editorial responsibility” = the exercise of effective control both over the selection of programmes or press publications and over their organisation, for the purposes of the provision of a media service, regardless of the existence of liability under national law for the service provided.

Recital 19 of the European Media Freedom Act:

“Journalists and editors are the main actors in the production and provision of trustworthy media content, in particular by reporting on news or current affairs. Sources are tantamount to ‘raw material’ for journalists: they are the basis for the production of media content, in particular news and current affairs content. It is therefore crucial that journalists’ ability to collect, fact-check and analyse information be protected, in particular information imparted or communicated confidentially, both offline and online, which relates to or is capable of identifying journalistic sources.”

Under the EMFA, media service providers are granted several key rights. They have effective editorial freedom and are protected from undue interference by national regulatory authorities. However, they also have important obligations to ensure transparency in media ownership and funding. They must disclose their ownership structure, including direct and indirect shareholders and beneficial owners. Additionally, they are required to report the total annual amount of public funds received for state advertising and any advertising revenue from foreign public entities outside the EU.

Maintaining media independence and integrity requires strong regulatory oversight. Each EU Member State must ensure that its national regulatory authorities have sufficient financial, human, and technical resources to effectively carry out their duties.

At the European level, the newly established European Board for Media Services plays a key role in coordinating national efforts to combat disinformation and foreign interference, particularly from non-EU media that pose risks to public security. The Board also monitors compliance with the Code of Practice on Disinformation and facilitates discussions between media organizations, civil society, and Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs).

Key EMFA Mechanisms and Safeguards

Structured Dialogue

The Board will organize an annual structured dialogue between Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs), media service providers, and civil society representatives. This dialogue will focus on improving access to diverse and independent media on digital platforms, sharing best practices related to content moderation, and monitoring adherence to self-regulatory initiatives that protect users from harmful content.

Monitoring Exercise

The European Commission will conduct a continuous and independent monitoring exercise to assess risks and progress in the internal market for media services. The findings will be subject to consultation with the Board and discussed with the contact committee.

Transparency in Public Funding for Media

The EMFA establishes clear rules on how public funds can be allocated to media service providers and online platforms. State advertising and public contracts must be awarded based on transparent, objective, proportionate, and non-discriminatory criteria. These criteria must be made publicly available in advance through electronic and user-friendly means. However, smaller subnational governments (representing fewer than 100,000 inhabitants) may be exempt from these requirements.

Transparency Database

A centralized Transparency Database will contain publicly accessible information on media ownership and funding sources. This includes the names of direct and indirect owners of media outlets, the total annual state advertising funds allocated to them, and advertising revenues received from third countries.

Selected Published texts

Charred urban roots

Ioana Gabriela Cherciu

Mentoring organization: Eurozine
Originally published in English

A fire is burning in the centre of Bucharest. Twelve hectares of trees and vegetation are under ongoing destruction, threatened with being wiped off the city map. The damage is occurring in Alexandru Ioan Cuza Park, locally known as IOR, a 50-year-old park with a complex history. It is the only place that burns constantly in Bucharest, whatever the season.

Two opposing camps have formed over the park's transformation. While civil society actors are campaigning for it to be recognized as a public space, public authorities and institutions alongside urban developers seem to have a different agenda. A lack of official accountability and systematic law enforcement is blocking rather than supporting the concerns of local citizens. Behind the scenes of the city's day-to-day life, its streets, houses, trees and traffic, a wide-ranging conflict is unfolding on many levels between citizens and landowners, tenants and the state.

The park's emergency reveals a complicated story intertwining unresolved trauma from recent communist history (related to conflicts over litigious property rights), corruption within public institutions, unregulated urban development and poorly implemented environmental policies.

The impact of illegal deforestation in this natural setting points to an issue that is commonly overlooked: the importance of green urban space.

Photo: Gabriela Cherciu

Tracing ownership

The degradation of IOR park as a public entity began long before the fires started. Since the fall of communism in 1989, Eastern Europe has been confronting issues related to the politics of memory. Questions about how recent history is recorded and communicated to the public – what is being told and what is being hidden – have arisen. Throughout the region, countries have adopted different methods to deal with this, including financial and symbolic rewards for individuals persecuted for their political stance, judicial rehabilitation of political prisoners, rewriting history books and redesigning museums.

An important aspect of democratization was the restitution of property that had been assumed during communism. The general public, especially those who had been wronged, saw it as atonement for past sins and an assumption of responsibility on their behalf. Romania's parliament introduced Law 10/2001, which addressed the legal status of real estate that had been taken over by the communist regime between 6 March 1945 and 22 December 1989. While the law enabled Bucharest's property restitution, the poor way it was applied still haunts Romanian society and the city's fate today.

The section of IOR park that is frequently ablaze is subject to this specific circumstance. Tracing the history of the park located in the Titan neighbourhood, District 3, at the heart of the capital, reveals that at the turn of the twentieth century the site was part of a vast estate owned by I.B. Grueff, a Bulgarian landowner, who bid for the land at an auction in 1903. At the time, Grueff owned the equivalent of almost every part of the Titan neighbourhood and the entire district. Political changes in Romania shifted the estate's course: the nationalization process brought much of Grueff's wealth under communist state control in 1945.

The Titan neighbourhood was one of Bucharest's largest working-class areas. In the 1960s architects inspired by Le Corbusier developed spacious city planning ideas, including a vast park intended to connect people. The park, once completed in 1970, was named IOR, an acronym taken from the name of the nearby factory Întreprinderea Optică Română (Romanian Optical Enterprise). The factory, which produced a wide range of optical products such as glasses, cameras and telescopes, was a symbol of local industrial prowess. After the fall of communism, the park's name was changed to Alexandru Ioan Cuza, but people continue to refer to it affectionately as IOR.

In the 1990s the entire park was still listed in urban planning documents as a public space. Then, in 2005 Grueff's nephew, who was his legal heir, ceded part of the parkland and its disputed ownership rights to Maria Cocoru, a woman in her eighties, whose claim to the land remains mysterious. At this point, Bucharest City Hall retroceded the IOR land to Cocoru under Law 10/2001, where its legal status changed from public to private property. Cocoru's name appears not only as an owner of this disputed area of the park but also of several other green spaces in Bucharest, including Constantin Brâncuși park, named after the famous Romanian sculptor, a 1,431-square-metres park. Brâncuși park has been lying in disrepair for about five years and is no longer in use – it has been abandoned.

Planning category corruption

Dan Trifu, leader of the EcoCivica Foundation and a specialist in green spaces legislation and urban planning, traces the history of Romanian urban green space privatization to 2000. ‘When the General Urban Plan of Bucharest (PUG) was designed, many green areas and parks in Bucharest were listed in the document as buildable areas, meaning that potential construction projects were allowed there, even though those areas should have been categorized under the usual code used for green areas or parks. The 12 hectares of the IOR were listed in the PUG under the CB3 code’ which ‘allows the local authority to develop building projects such as administrative, cultural and social institutions in the area’, says Trifu.

The EcoCivica Foundation has filed dozens of lawsuits mainly over retroceded green spaces in the city, dealing with what Trifu describes as ‘the real-estate mafia that has taken over chunks of the city’. Trifu points to the connection between investors and politicians who benefit from common profit-led real estate interests. In some cases investors even begin as party members or collaborate directly with them. Sections of land from almost all of Bucharest’s parks are registered under PUGs codes that enable construction. Green areas between blocks of flats and squares have already been redeveloped.

Parks have either disappeared due to construction interests or have been abandoned. According to local media, 609 hectares of Băneasa Forest – the largest green space within Bucharest’s administrative area – have been retroceded. The names of politicians and business people have been associated with construction in the forest. The woodland’s integrity is increasingly under threat from the expansion of residential neighbourhoods, illegal logging, poaching and fragmentation.

This situation reflects a broader pattern of poorly managed societal order post-communism, where private interests often prevail over public interests and quality of life. According to the investigative publication RiseProject, the grey market of litigious property rights competes with the black market of drugs in terms of profit generated. The phenomenon is known locally as ‘the mafia of retroceded land’.

The PUG represents the legal ground for any development action proposed. It includes rules with respect to urban planning matters such as the establishment of the protected zones and historical areas of the town, establishment, and the delimitation of the areas currently being under temporary or definitive interdiction of construction.;

Making a case for public space

It took around eight years before the majority of local visitors to IOR Park realized that 12 hectares of the space they consider their treasured park were no longer public. People continued to go there because they felt that the place belonged to them, that it was part of their history, of their collective memory, spanning generations. Some partly grew up or raised their children there.

Maria, a 68-year-old woman who has lived in the neighbourhood since it was built, remembers with nostalgia the special times she and her daughter spent walking the paths that have been retroceded: ‘My daughter learned to walk in the park. When she got older, I took her rollerblading there. It was full of plane trees and rose bushes. That area of the park was a wonder to me. I miss it.’

In 2012 the District City Hall decided to sue Maria Cocoru, aiming to bring the receded part of the park back under public ownership. A 10-year lawsuit unfolded, during which the space was in legal limbo. It was at this point that the general public found out about the status of the park. In the end District City Hall failed to present the necessary proof that the area in question was ever a park. It didn’t show sufficient evidence that the area was ever developed as a recreational space or that it contained other public utility facilities of local interest. It lost the case in favour of the owner before the High Court of Cassation and Justice in October 2022. According to witnesses of the trial such as Dan Trifu and local councillors, no

Recreation under fire

testimonies were presented in court, no documents that show the investment of the City Hall in the park's redevelopment. Dan Trifu said the lack of proof made the trial's legitimacy questionable.

Occasionally, a civic group organizes picnics in the retroceded area on ash-covered, black earth. The gatherings are not intended as protests in the classical sense but rather as a symbolic reconnection with a place that should belong to everyone. It is a means for locals to meet and engage in social activities: eating, chatting, taking pictures – all amidst a desolate landscape. The picnics are a form of alternative protest, where activists want to not merely adjust to the existing desolate space but to reinvent and reimagine its potential. They transform the retroceded, private section of the park into, at least for a few hours, a space for leisure and communal joy.

They are connected to the group *Here Was a Forest / Here Could Be a Forest* established in 2023, where artists, joined by disgruntled and desperate residents of the area started to organize regular protests near the park. They demand that the 12 hectares of illegally private property be transferred rightfully back to public ownership, claiming that the authorities 'have turned a blind eye' to the injustices that have happened to the park. They feel that local citizens are not truly consulted regarding urban development planning.

Andreea David, who organizes the group's protests, says that members have organically assumed their roles over time. Others are involved in documenting and researching legislative issues and archives related to the history of the park, or writing requests and sending petitions to public institutions such as the Local Police of the Municipality of Bucharest and the City Hall of the District, urging them to take immediate action. The group also produces an online and print newspaper, The Titans Don't Sleep, which documents the case. They have a website acting as a digital information platform for anyone interested in the history of the park and its retrocession,as they think it's important to trace the memory of the park and register the stages of its destruction.

Going one step further, IOR-Titan Civic Initiative Group, one of the longest-established campaign advocacy groups for the park, initiated a lawsuit in May 2024 suing Bucharest City Hall's 2005 retrocession decision. This action, they hope, will be decisive for the fate of the park. If they can prove in court that IOR was illegally retroceded, the City Hall will be able to reclaim the land and make it public again. Painstakingly investigating the City Hall's archives and cadastral documents from the 1980s and 1990s, the group argues that IOR was a park in its entirety since it was built and its status as a public space was never officially changed until the 2005 restitution, therefore making its restitution illegal.

As Trifu explains, proving the illegalities of the restitution of green spaces and parks in court is a more sustainable, long-term solution than expropriation since only very few expropriation cases have been successfully made. 'Most of the time when we argued for expropriation, the municipality responded that it doesn't have enough funds to do that. I told them to take another look at how the restitution decisions were issued: do these people actually have the right to own these areas?'

Planned destruction

Importantly, there is a law that, at least theoretically, should protect green spaces in Bucharest. Emergency Ordinance 114/2007 prohibits the change of use for green spaces, regardless of how they are listed in urban planning documents, regardless of whether they are public or private.

This law, along with the Green Spaces Law 24/2007, should block real estate developers obtaining building permits on green spaces, and yet, in many cases, the law is seemingly insufficient for preventing the destruction of parks. When nature stands in the way of profiteering, real estate developers erase any evidence that a particular land was ever a green space, so that the law cannot protect it anymore. As long as trees are growing in retroceded land, they cannot build anything there. The fires are an aggressive method of accelerating the process towards obtaining construction authorization.

Experts, locals, activists and the few politicians who have made public statements on the IOR's destruction have described the arson as a strategy by owners to clear the space for a high-rise complex, hence the urgency to remove all the trees and, indeed, the entire ecosystem in that area. Those who administer the land have already set to work, renting it out to various interested parties, who have begun setting up an amusement park on the charred land. Inflatable slides and carrousel, train and car rides for children have appeared in the burned, apocalyptic landscape. Appearing out of nowhere, the 'amusements' are not covered by a permit, no name has been associated with the project, no start nor finish date has been mentioned.

To date, 90% of the IOR park's retroceded area has been burnt. The view is striking: piles of blackened trees lie on top of one another; the land is so scorched that nothing is growing there anymore. Regeneration looks impossible. The idea seems to be that, eventually, local citizens will no longer have anything to fight for, that they will be silenced.

In a public statement to the press, Eugen Matei, local councillor for District 3, reinforces this hypothesis: 'They cut down the trees to be able to claim that there is no actual green space. It's akin to the tactics of those who had listed houses, which they neglected until they collapsed, and could then request demolition and construction permits for buildings with ten floors.'

Ana Ciceală, president of the Environment Commission of the General Council, is of the same opinion. The fine for illegal logging, when paid within two weeks, is only between 5-100 lei per tree (around 4 euros). Ciceală is the sole politician who has proposed a law to the General Council of Bucharest arguing for an increase in the fine: 1000 euros per tree.

But her draft stalled in the Council, due to a series of abstentions and rejections. Ciceală explains: 'Councillors said they could not approve this project because Bucharest City Hall isn't issuing deforestation permits quickly enough. Their argument is basically that they should not issue large fines, even though they are illegally allowing the cutting down of hundreds of trees, because of a permit bottleneck.'

With permits being bypassed, there is no clear evidence of how many trees in Bucharest are being cut for valid reasons. No transparent records are kept on how many trees are cut down annually, on what grounds and how many have been planted to replenish stocks. Consequently, there are countless reports in the press about people being caught with chainsaws in hand, cutting down trees between blocks of flats, parks or green playgrounds – all areas that have been retroceded.

To make matters worse, tree conservation in Bucharest has also been affected by the modification of the Forestry Code. Up until 2020 all trees were classified as vegetation and managed under forestry regulations. Uprooting, felling or otherwise harming trees was considered a forestry offense and a criminal case could be filed. But this is no longer the case.

In addition, no register of green spaces functionally exists at a municipal level. Such a record would provide a fully accessible digital data base documenting each area of Bucharest's current public green space. Although a register was drawn up in 2013 at the request of the European Union in order to establish and monitor the total green space index per capita in the capital city, it has not been updated, making it difficult to assess the actual reality of public urban green spaces. In addition, the register has not been approved by the General Council of the Municipality of Bucharest, giving it no legal value.

Protection conflict

Since 17 January 2022, when the first reported fire in IOR Park was registered, the response from authorities has been inconsistent. The local police commissioner has not made a public statement about the situation despite activists calling for answers.

Activist and resident of the Titan neighbourhood Beniamin Gheorghiță explains the arduous process of engaging authorities in protecting the area. It took much convincing before surveillance cameras were installed in the retroceded area and now only 3 out of 12 are operational. According to an ISU Bucharest-Ilfov (the General Regional Inspectorate for Emergency Situations) statement requested by Gheorghiță, 28 fires have occurred in the retroceded area of IOR Park from 17 January 2022 to 26 August 2024. In the institution's statement, the cause of 21 of these fires was connected to discarded cigarettes. However, the likelihood of the same place accidentally burning so frequently due to negligence is highly unlikely. As for the remaining eight counts, no information has been communicated as to who started the fires or why. Some of the locals, including Benjamin, regularly attend council meetings where they put forward their concerns about the case, but no further action is being conducted.

In July 2024, when walking in the park, Gheorghiță caught two young men with axes in hand as they struck at the base of several large plane trees, most probably with the intention to weaken them, so they would fall quicker. All of this happened in front of the police. When Gheorghiță intervened, drawing their attention, he received a death threat from the tenant, who appeared on the scene and addressed him by name, even though they had never met before. This incident made him fear for his life; he now has a video camera in his car, at the entrance of the housing block where he lives and on him to document any potential attack.

The fires continue despite protests and complaints. After two years of reported incidents, only one person has so far been remanded in custody. A month after the suspect's arrest in August this year, another major fire broke out on 9 September while the man was still in pre-trial arrest, raising suspicions among locals that more people are involved in the arson. This was one of the most powerful fires to date, destroying two hectares of vegetation. The smoke was so thick that it reached the subway entrance near the park, which thousands of people use daily. People in the area feel terrorized. Apart from the pollution, discomfort and harmful effect the smoke is having on their health, they fear that the next fire might cause casualties.

Health and Wellbeing

According to a statement in the press made this summer by Bucharest's Mayor General, Nicușor Dan, the city has lost 1600 hectares of green space since 1990. About 300 hectares of green spaces have been retroceded. Gardens, lakeshores, courtyards and squares, sections of parks and urban woodlands have been turned into apartment blocks, parking lots, shops and malls. The green areas that remain are at risk of disappearing because existing laws do not protect them sufficiently. At the local level, the Municipality of Bucharest does not have a specific policy or legislation to cover elements related to biodiversity, management of protected natural areas, and the conservation of natural habitats, flora and fauna.

Several institutions and NGOs have called for an urgent Green Spaces Register. The National Environmental Guard even issued the Bucharest City Hall with a fine of over 20,000 euros in 2021, but, to this day, there is still no such public tool for registering and managing the city's public urban green space data.

EU environmental policies are putting more emphasis than ever on bringing nature back into cities by creating biodiverse and accessible green infrastructure. The EU's 2030 biodiversity strategy, for example, emphasizes the importance of developing urban greening plans in larger cities and towns, encouraging local stakeholders in each member state to introduce nature-based solutions in urban planning to achieve climate resilience. Climate change, inadequately planned urbanization and environmental degradation have left many cities vulnerable to disasters, and such policies could be crucial for the liveability of urban areas.

According to the 2022 'state of the environment in Bucharest research report', the city has approximately less than 10 square meters of green space per capita. Bucharest's oxygenated environment is, therefore, supported by less than one tree per person, placing it among those European cities with the least urban green areas. Data on the surface of overall green infrastructure in Bucharest varies, but in 2018 a European Environment Agency study measured around 26% of urban-green-area coverage, significantly less than the average 42% in the 38 EEA member countries. In Romania, high-level pollution is linked to a growing number of diseases such as respiratory infections, heart attacks and strokes. According to a study by the European Commission in 2021, air pollution contributed to approximately 7% of deaths (over 17,000 deaths) in Romania, a higher share than the EU average of around 4%.

The case of Bucharest's disappearing trees and urban nature, which finds its most aggressive manifestation in the IOR park, reflects how environmental and urbanistic problems do not exist in a vacuum. They are a direct reflection of how corruption impacts human lives and corrodes the relationship between people and the space they inhabit. Without a management plan, developers build unchecked, contributing to a reduction in urban biodiversity. The current situation underlines the urgency for clear regulations and protection of Bucharest's natural heritage. It also highlights the poor legislation and lack of environmental awareness on the part of public institutions, as well as an interest in immediate, short-term profit at the expense of the well-being of the people and the sustainability of the city, especially in times of climatic changes where resilience is needed.

What is occurring at IOR could be a never-ending story, constantly repeating itself in other locations if certain bureaucratic and profiteering realities do not change course, if the root of the problem stays the same. Despite all odds, people continue to fight to bring the space back into the public domain. Their hope remains.

Community reporting: diversifying the newsroom

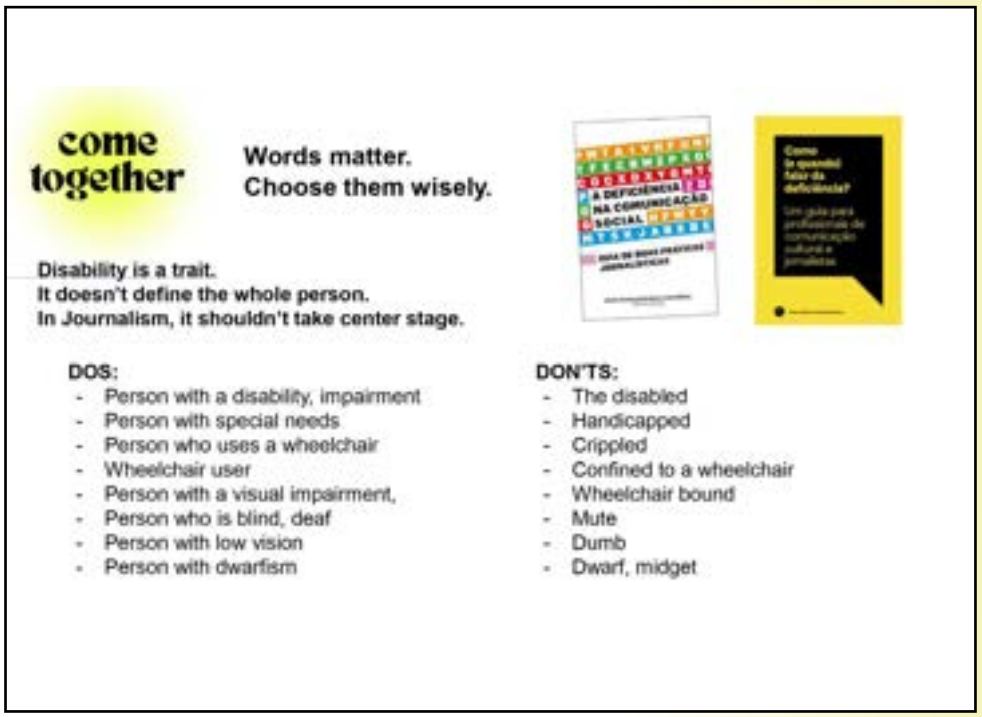
Within the training courses, workshops analyzing the position and media representation of various underprivileged and vulnerable communities were conducted by representatives of these communities. This contributed to sensitizing future journalists to reporting on underrepresented social groups and improving their professional capacity to address topics often overlooked by mainstream media. Guided by the principle “nothing about us without us,” members of these groups led workshops with journalists and editors, directly highlighting the shortcomings in their media representation.

Paula Cardoso: Ethnic-racial filters in the media.

Understanding how ethnic and racial communities are portrayed in the media; exploring the impact of stereotypes and biases; developing strategies for fair and accurate representation.

Dora Alexandre: Media representation of people with disabilities.

Examining media representation of individuals with disabilities; addressing common misconceptions and stereotypes; promoting inclusive storytelling and accessibility in media.



Dani Bento: Media representation of the LGBTQ+ community.

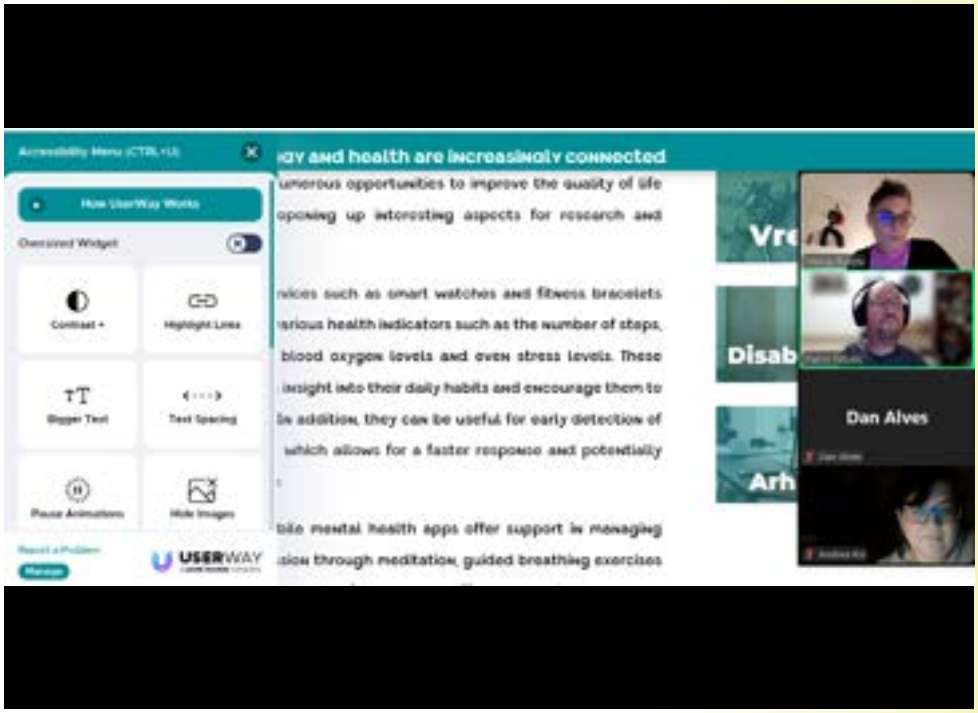
Analyzing the historical context of LGBTQ+ representation; exploring the challenges faced by the LGBTQ+ community in media portrayal; developing strategies for promoting authentic and positive representation.

Maja Grubišić & Matej Čolig: Phralipen.

Community media platform where members of the Roma community together with members of other minority communities and the majority people work together to create content with an emphasis on investigative journalism, “live” stories of people and positive experiences. The contents, on the web portal and in the printed and digital form of the magazine, are available in four languages - Croatian, English, Roma and the language of Roma Bajaš, which makes them unique, but also accessible to a wider readership.

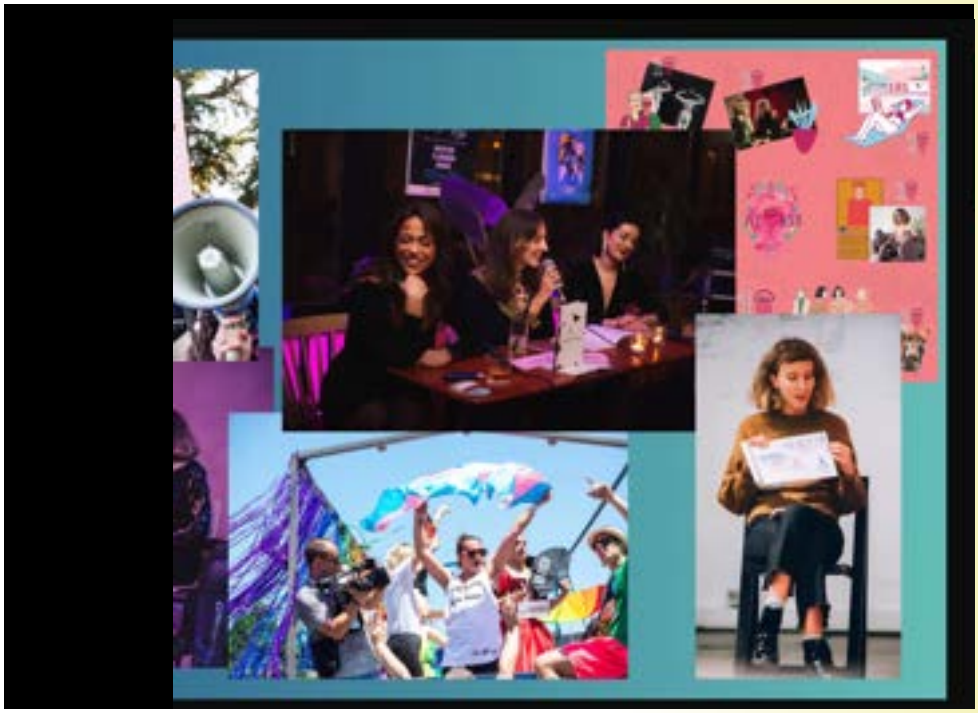
Damir Fatušić:
In Portal.

Non-profit media that consists of a total of five editors, journalists and external collaborators, and its specificity is definitely its quality. It was created in 2013 at the instigation of the first editor-in-chief, Mladen Kristić, after he got the idea to launch a portal dedicated to people with disabilities at the International Meeting of Persons with Disabilities, which was not covered by the media. The publisher of In Portal is the Institution for Professional Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities - URIHO, but URIHO does not perceive this media project as its property. In Portal is the property of all those whose primary concern is the better life of all people with disabilities, both in Croatia and in the world.



Kalia Dimitrova:
Meduza.

Launched in 2018 as the first feminist online platform in Macedonian language, with the initial idea to counter the rising misogynist speech in the cyber discourse, by offering an affirmative space for marginalized voices. Since its launch, Meduza has grown to become a recognized and respected media space that archives, creates and shares intersectional feminist knowledge and values, becoming a source of information, inspiration and a space for community building and connection.



Marina Zec: Oblakoder.

Free online magazine, whose main goal is to educate, inform and empower young people, and to ask relevant questions, analyze everyday life and social phenomena that affect their lives. Magazine was started in 2018 by five young journalists who wanted to create a space for stories that will be important to young people. Oblakoder pays special attention to the cultural scene and promotion of unestablished young artists and authors. It explores contemporary forms of journalism and nurtures the author's expression, and in addition to creating content, Oblakoder also deals with the organization of various events, from concerts to debate programs.

Kristina Tešija: KLFM.

Community radio KLFM was founded in 2012 by experienced media workers, journalists, educators, lecturers, designers, and architects, as well as members of activists and non-profit associations. KLFM is a project and initiative to create a community radio whose main purpose is to serve the community and to include the community in radio production. The radio program is broadcast 24/7 at klfm.org and is produced by more than 30 active volunteers. Other than the radio program, KLFM is organizing different musical, discursive and educational programs with the community, promoting media literacy, responsible and "slow" journalism.

New focuses: Concepts and approaches that go beyond maintaining the status quo

The text was created based on the presentation by Višnja Kisić and Goran Tomka, edited by ChatGPT.

Višnja Kisić
Goran Tomka

both studied and now teach and research cultural issues, and their socio-political, economic and ecological relations. Goran has a background in economics and cultural and media studies, and Višnja in visual culture, gender studies and heritage and memory studies. They teach at several universities in Serbia, as well as in Lyon2,

University of International Relations Beijing, Hassan II University in Casablanca, and have worked extensively in both non-institutional and institutional fields of culture and cultural policy in the last fifteen years. In the last few years of living close to the forests of Fruška Gora they have been seeding the Forest University, a place to relearn about the interconnected ways of living on this planet, not just through concepts and policies, but everyday life practice.

Introduction

In the midst of a surge in writings, policy documents, and pledges addressing climate change and ecological breakdown, distinguishing between genuine ecological transformation and superficial pledges has become increasingly difficult. Dominant ways of addressing massive challenges that lie ahead align with “greening politics” – a framework that seeks sustainability within a capitalist, neo-colonial, techno-managerial, and deeply anthropocentric system, hence maintaining the status quo. As journalists and analysts, how can we critically assess these positions? More importantly, how can we recognize and understand initiatives that move beyond these limitations, offering paths toward a truly ecological transformation – one that is pluriversal, caring, decolonial, post-capitalist, and symbiotic?

In this lecture we will first offer tools for critique of the status quo – a planet-wide system of destructive technologies and ways of maintaining power. We will use the term Empire to denote such power dynamics. Then we will look at the ways this Empire tries to address rising concerns about the massive destruction of all life on the Planet which often boils down to cosmetic superficial technology-driven, capital-intensive “solutions”. Finally, we will offer several concepts and examples of a truly ecological politics that goes beyond the business as usual approaches.

The Modern Empire

Though empires formally ended after World War I and with the rise of nation-states and decolonization, today's global system continues to reflect hegemonic empire-like structures. This modern "empire" is not ruled by a single monarch but by a network of governments, multinational corporations, and financial institutions. Post-Marxist theorists describe this empire as a system that extracts life from ecosystems, labor, and communities for the benefit of a small elite. In contrast, the multitude – the collective force of humanity – resists this extractivist model, advocating for diverse identities and struggles that challenge the empire's dominance.

This empire remains deeply capitalist, shaped by historical colonial powers and Western European notions of progress and growth, which are framed as universal truths. It sustains itself through economic, social, and cognitive orders that convince people of its inevitability. However, growing dissatisfaction is evident.

Greening the Empire

The most obvious and superficial way to tackle the growing dissatisfaction is greenwashing. These acts are more and more often recognized by the well informed parts of the public and independent media and companies that invest their efforts in such dubious practices are sometimes punished by facing public backlash (examples of Coca Cola, Shell, McDonalds).

Against this very low standard, other policy and corporate measures are portrayed as genuine. However, they are also problematic in that they don't address the root causes of current demise, but only its outcomes. Typical example would be concentrating on the reduction of CO2 by investment in electric cars or production of energy from renewable sources, like wind and solar. Even though these technologies are a step away from burning fossil fuel, their embrace often happens by the same marriage of corporate greed and state complacency – both of which are responsible for the trouble at the first place.

The European Green Deal exemplifies how the empire adapts to ecological crises without fundamentally altering its capitalist core. While the EU Green Deal aims to reduce emissions and decouple economic growth from resource use by 2050, its underlying goal is to protect economic interests while maintaining Europe's moral authority. By repackaging environmental concerns within a capitalist framework, the deal ultimately preserves the status quo rather than challenging it.

The empire's approach to ecological issues remains Eurocentric and anthropocentric. It prioritizes green technologies and economic growth while often neglecting social justice, decolonization, and deeper ecological change.

Challenging the Empire

The Pluriverse – questioning the hegemony of the modernist West

The dominance of Eurocentric knowledge systems has led to a singular global vision of science, data, and truth, pressuring all societies to conform. The concept of the Pluriverse challenges this notion. Originating from the Zapatistas in Mexico, the Pluriverse advocates for a world in which multiple ways of knowing and being coexist.

Colombian thinker Arturo Escobar critiques the Western capitalist worldview, which frames development and secular logic as the only viable path forward. This perspective is reinforced through education, culture, and international development aid. However, many communities – particularly indigenous and peasant groups in the Global South – resist this imposition, seeking alternatives that honor their traditional ways of life. These movements push for a world that values diverse knowledge systems, relationships, and modes of existence.

While Europe claims to champion inclusivity, it often pressures marginalized groups to assimilate into a system that disregards their worldviews. The Pluriverse calls for recognizing ontological differences – how different groups live and relate to the world – rather than forcing everyone into a singular framework. For many indigenous communities, the goal is not integration but the creation of alternatives that reflect their values and relationships with the land.

Rethinking Ecology: Timothy Morton and the "Mesh" of Life

One influential thinker in ecological philosophy is Timothy Morton, whose work on "ecological thought" challenges conventional boundaries. Morton argues that ecological awareness requires an understanding of interconnection – acknowledging that prosperity in Europe is linked to conditions in North Africa, and that pollution in the EU is inseparable from pollution in China or the Philippines, where Western industries operate.

Morton suggests reframing public health as global health, recognizing that ecosystem degradation affects human well-being. The COVID-19 pandemic exemplifies how endangered ecosystems can become breeding grounds for new viruses.

Life, Morton argues, is a "mesh" – an intricate network where humans, wildlife, plants, and ecosystems are inseparably intertwined.

From this perspective, meaningful policy change must extend beyond human-centric concerns to include the well-being of all living beings, from soil and water to non-human species. Morton and other deep ecology thinkers advocate for recognizing the agency of all life forms, challenging the traditional human-centered approach to environmental stewardship.

Buen Vivir: An Alternative Vision of Prosperity

A powerful alternative to capitalist development is the concept of buen vivir ("good life"), rooted in indigenous traditions of South America, particularly among the Quechua and Aymara peoples. Enshrined in the constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia, buen vivir promotes living in harmony with nature and community rather than prioritizing material accumulation.

Concepts like Sumak Kawsay (plentiful life) and Suma Qamana (living well together) emphasize abundance as a collective and ecological flourishing, not individual wealth. Indigenous communities across Latin America, such as the Guarani in Brazil and the Mapuche in Chile, uphold these values, which contrast sharply with the Western model of sustainable development that often imposes a one-size-fits-all solution shaped by empire.

By advocating for autonomy – not just politically but also in knowledge production – buen vivir seeks to decolonize both nature and epistemologies. It prioritizes indigenous wisdom alongside Western science, offering a radically different vision of the future based on reciprocity, interconnectedness, and respect for all life forms.

Degrowth: Rethinking Value Beyond GDP

The concept of degrowth challenges traditional economic values by shifting focus from GDP growth to culture, relationships, and well-being. While often criticized as vague, degrowth is one of the few economic approaches that fundamentally questions the values underlying modern society.

Serge Latouche, a leading thinker in the degrowth movement, outlines key steps toward a post-growth society. But beyond theory, the personal experience of embracing degrowth reveals its transformative potential. Many who have transitioned from urban, career-driven lifestyles to more community-oriented, self-sufficient ways of living report greater fulfillment. Prioritizing friendships, nature, and creative production over career ambition fosters a deeper sense of connection and sustainability.

Degrowth teaches that systemic change is not just about holding corporations accountable – it requires individuals to reconsider their actions, even when they believe they are acting ethically. For instance, travel for humanitarian work may still be embedded in a growth-driven system.

Reimagining Care: Beyond the Capitalist Wellness Industry

Care is often viewed through a capitalist or colonial lens, focused on personal well-being rather than collective or ecological well-being. The "Care Manifesto" proposes a radical rethinking of care, advocating for "promiscuous care" – an approach that extends beyond intimate or institutional relationships to embrace diverse, inclusive, and experimental forms of caring. This vision of care is feminist, queer, anti-racist, and ecological, encompassing not only human communities but also non-human life forms.

By expanding care beyond the confines of the wellness industry, we can foster a more just, interconnected, and sustainable world – one that truly values all beings, not just within the empire's framework but beyond it, in a Pluriversal, decolonial, and symbiotic future.

Selected Published texts

A day in the life of a bottle collector at Northern Europe's biggest music festival

Autor: Giulia Gotti
Mentoring organization: Kurziv
Originally published in English

Intro:
Roskilde Festival
is more than "just a music festival" — they say

There's an ongoing joke in Denmark: once a year, 'Roskilde Festival' becomes the fourth largest city in the country. What started as a small student gathering in the 1970s, the music celebration – held not far from Denmark's capital, Copenhagen – has grown into one of the largest temporary cities in the world, with 130,000 tickets sold last year.

The festival is widely regarded as a national cultural staple, a symbol of friendship, liberation, and freedom, part of the coming-of-age of many young Danes. For instance, in the words of Hanna (fictional name), a young university student at Copenhagen Business School, who writes in her exam paper: it is so much more than just a music festival. It is a place where you go to bed in a freezing cold tent, only to wake up gasping for air in a sauna [...] It is a place where you promised yourself you'd save money and only eat mackerel (ed. Danish herring, a popular canned meal) in tomato sauce but somehow find yourself chasing the food trucks as soon as the festival site opens. It is a place to return to year after year, and where you can be who you really are or become someone new [...] because Roskilde Festival is a free space."

How could one not feel drawn to such a romantic narrative? Roskilde Festival seems to feel like the place where boundaries dissolve and the potential for self-discovery thrives. Perhaps, for some, the most authentic version of themselves is waiting in a tent at the campsite.

Roskilde Festival presents it as a sort of Arcadia version 2.0, shaped by contemporary priorities and progressive ideals. True to the essence of utopian visions, this "new pastoral utopia" offers a space to focus on life's pleasures: forming human connections, dreaming with music, and experiencing a boundary-free environment. At the same time, the festival integrates easy-access activism, branding itself as "a movement" while operating with the legal status of a non-profit organization.

Various media outlets have described the festival as being at the forefront of the seemingly perfect intersection of art, innovation, and people: "[Roskilde Festival] is an experimental space for art, sustainability, cultural projects, new ways of creating community and addressing societal issues. A free space where young people explore new perspectives based on art and creativity. And a real-time innovation lab for testing out new products and ideas." (creativedenmark.com, link)

What many do not realize is that while the locals are partying, hundreds work in the shadows – playing a crucial role in keeping the festival from imploding under the weight of trash. Each year, a growing number of individuals from marginalized communities, primarily from Romania and West Africa, travel north to collect empty beer bottles, cups, and cans discarded by thousands of festival-goers, exchanging them for cash through the Danish refund system. Roskilde Festival acknowledges that more than 300 refund collectors from about 15 countries visit the festival annually.

Bottle collectors can be found in most countries that have implemented a deposit system for bottles and aluminum cans. While this practice serves as one of the many "side hustles" for individuals living below the poverty line throughout the year, it is during the "festival season" that the scale blows out of proportion. In the case of Denmark, for instance, entire families travel north specifically to make a living from the empty beer cans thrown around by the Danes.

However, this job is far from being "easy money." It requires a physical and mental strain beyond the individual capabilities: the effort is 24/7, and after being in constant movement for a week straight with little to no sleep, collectors quickly become exhausted and sick. Facin.g fierce competition among an increasing number of people joining the festival for refund collection purposes every year, the collectors work in harsh conditions without an official acknowledgment by the festival's management.

Bottle collectors operate in a gray area of regulations. Many festival goers mistakenly believe the refund collectors are employed as cleaners by the festival, but this is not the case. They are all paying for a regular, full festival ticket.

How does this bottle collection process fit into Roskilde Festival's 'Orange feeling'? How do the collectors live the festival experience? And how does it relate to what the festival promises and promotes? To find out, I spent the entire week at last summer's festival. Between concerts and parties, I spent my time volunteering in the "Refund stations" – designated spots where empty containers can be exchanged for money – and learning about the collectors' daily lives

First Encounters with the ‘Orange Feeling’: the Crowd, the Trash, Lars, Marlene, Joe

The festival’s opening day, June 30th, had arrived, and it was time for me to board the regional train from Copenhagen to Roskilde. Joining me were hundreds of excited festivalgoers.

The festival is held south of the town of Roskilde, around 5 km away from the center and 35 km from Copenhagen. During the commute to the campsite, the atmosphere already feels electric – and slightly surreal. A significant part of this feeling comes from the comical amount of luggage everyone seems to carry.

As a reader, you would imagine that packing a hiking backpack or so would be enough in order to enjoy a music festival? Well, you will have to think again! In Roskilde, Denmark, I see hundreds of people, many looking like 16-year-olds, hauling ultra-packed dollies and IKEA bags. Speakers are pushed with shopping trolleys, while dozens of Tuborg 18-packs and various supplies are precariously stacked and creatively secured with gaffer tape, often appearing to exceed a person’s whole body weight (later, at the campsite, I would witness even funnier items, like someone deciding to bring an entire living room couch to the party – yes, an actual couch!).

On my way to the festival, I feel a stark contrast. There is this quiet Danish town, Roskilde, often described by people in Copenhagen as a boring place where nothing ever happens. Then, suddenly, a new group emerges: festivalgoers with luggage double their body weight, and everything mummified in gaffer tape (everyone seems to have adopted the same taping solution, like an unspoken rule) to keep it together. A Scandinavian “Orderly Chaos” – everyone adopting the same pattern of behavior in embracing disruption, yet being remarkably creative in finding individualized solutions.

At the festival, already on the first day, the constant noise is striking, with little distinction between day and night. Besides the music stages, most of the parties will happen on the campsite, where groups of people organize themselves in camps and blast speakers from there. The several music sources overlap and morph into something indistinguishable.

But, as a volunteer, I’m fortunate to have been given access to a reserved camping area that is much quieter than the rest. Each of my volunteer shifts will last eight hours, covering both daytime and nighttime on four separate days of the festival week, intertwining with my “regular” festival experience. Surprisingly, having to set the alarm and having to be somewhere at a particular hour will integrate smoothly, otherwise, in a festival, most days might quickly feel like blending. I guess that losing track of time is another component of the “liberation” experience; in my case, I can feel the time passing and feel like I remain more grounded.

Being a major festival, Roskilde Festival’s calendar is packed. Besides the major artists who perform here every year, the festival offers a rich program featuring smaller artists, plus a couple of stages that host talks and workshops.

Fast-forwarding a few hours, a concert is in full swing. I'm standing at the back, where small groups of people are sitting on the ground, and there are lots of people around me drinking and talking. A girl and a boy appear to be having an argument, focused only on each other. They don't notice the young woman picking up their used beer cups from the ground.

Across concerts, innovation panels, and a beer-soaked routine that blurs the boundaries between days, bottle collectors emerge as semi-invisible figures. They navigate the crowds with agility, collecting every bottle they can find. They seem serious and strategic in their work: knowing that crashed or broken objects have little to no value, they try to blow air back into the bottle or reshape crooked cans before adding them to their growing trash bags.

It is Day 1, and I am already struck by the sheer amount of trash and dirt everywhere. Part of the Orange Feeling seems to involve a quasi-hedonistic approach to living, where dealing with trash becomes something too dull to bother with: the empty beer can is simply left on the ground, so we can all move on.

This feeling is confirmed moments later: next to the stage, I meet Lars, a twenty-something-year-old who has been attending the festival for several years. When I tell him that I am trying to understand more about the role of the bottle collectors at the festival, it leaves an impression. He says that no one of his friends – no one – thinks about it, though he does. He acknowledges it as an issue but also believes that no one really thinks of it as being one. While the refund system was created to encourage consumers to be mindful of their trash, among some of the young Danes, there seems to be a sense that picking up bottles – even their own – and exchanging them is kind of shameful. Ironically, throwing it away becomes a status symbol. It's an unspoken signal: I don't need the money.

Sometime later, I speak with Marlene. Marlene is from Roskilde and is in her 50s. Roskilde Festival isn't just for younger people; it also attracts a significant number of "veterans" who return year after year.

Indeed, Marlene has been attending the festival since the 1980s. When I bring up the topic of bottle collection, she reminisces about how, as a little girl, she would enter the festival grounds and collect beer cans to exchange. Back then, collecting bottles was something kids did to earn extra pocket money – a far cry from the situation today. Marlene recognizes that it is because of the festival's growing size: maintaining that "community spirit" she fondly remembers is impossible in a temporary city of 130.000 people. She feels that something needs to change. About what, she is not sure.

Another thing you won't often see in the marketing material is how much the weather can shape your festival experience – and in Denmark, it can make all the difference. The summer of 2024 brought rain and cold to the Roskilde Festival. At night, I shivered in my tent as temperatures unexpectedly dropped to 7–10°C. I think about how I would have never imagined being concerned about getting sick at a music festival in July.

Another implication is that while many describe the festival as notoriously dusty, this year's downpours turned the grounds into a muddy hellscape. Rubber boots and raincoats became essential gear, with festivalgoers splashing through the flooded terrain, making the best of the soggy chaos. Amid this scene, I notice bottle collectors moving through the crowd. For protection, they use trash bags and whatever objects they can find.

One man wears a makeshift plastic coat branded with the Copenhagen Metro logo, while most rely on scarves and muddy caps – likely scavenged from the ground. They are, too, festivalgoers, expected to rely on their own resources. I wonder how they are managing.

When I ask one of the bottle collectors about these struggles – I refer to him as Joe since he prefers to remain anonymous – he just shakes his head and keeps repeating, "It is shit, this year is shit." We speak a mix of Italian and English: Joe currently lives in Italy and works at a pizzeria near Rome. He comes to the festival yearly "to make money" and puts in his hardest effort collecting bottles. On average, he earns 1 DKK (0,13 EUR) for every container or cup he gathers. For comparison, a dishwasher or restaurant worker in Denmark can expect to earn 130–170 DKK per hour before taxes. To match that, since the refund is tax-free, Joe would need to collect around 75 items per hour – not counting the countless hours spent waiting in line to exchange them. When I ask if he manages to sleep despite the cold and the noise, he simply says he doesn't sleep, only works – and laughs.

The stoic mentality of "it is what it is" is an invisible force that keeps a part of the festival's waste cycle in motion. It is interesting to observe how, while the 'Orange feeling' is all about liberation, it seems to rely on a dynamic that is far from free. The festival's carefree revelry depends in part on the relentless labor of others – a quiet contradiction in its ethos.

Photo:Giulia Gotti

Trash is Treasure: Hanging Out at the Refund Stations

Even though Roskilde Festival spans an impressive 2.500.000 square meters, and is estimated to host 50.000 tents, there are only three refund stations, plus one Drop&Go refund machine. These refund stations are the main stage of my volunteering experience supporting the bottle collectors. The work is relatively centralized since everyone collecting will need to come by one of these three refund stations, sooner or later, to have their containers exchanged. As a result, I feel like I am quickly getting acquainted with the collectors' community.

Surprisingly, the refund stations operate manually. The operations are run by youth associations and volunteers as young as 17 years old. They count and sort the deposits manually, then upload the money digitally to the user's wristband. While these stations are open to everyone, in practice, they primarily serve the bottle collectors.

The refund stations have adjusted their opening hours over the years. While they used to stay open until dawn, in 2024, "West City" and "Agora L" operated daily from 08:00 to 02:00, while "East City" was open from 10:00 to 04:00. This significantly impacts the workday of the collectors: daytime tends to be relatively quiet, but the nights are intense, with everyone rushing to make their exchange before the station closes, trying to maximize the "best hours." As the festival progresses, the volume of bottles, aluminum cans, and other refundable items grows larger and larger, and the handling time for every person increases proportionally – the more containers to count, the longer it takes, especially as the counting process is entirely manual. Dollies and baby strollers are popular tools for maximizing the number of bottles a collector can carry, and gaffer tape makes a reappearance – this time securing cans for transport, just as it held supplies together on the way to the

festival. Midway through the festival, people typically faced a 4-6 hour wait to have their refunds counted – a necessary step before heading back "on the field" to start the process all over again.

The festival offers numerous volunteering opportunities for those eager to contribute in various ways. Earlier in the text, I mentioned my decision to volunteer to get closer to the bottle collectors' experience. I owe most of my contact to the social project "Responsible Refund," a grassroots volunteer initiative aiming to help and celebrate the refund collectors during the festival. Through Responsible Refund, I was engaged as an "intercultural mediator." Based at the refund stations, my role involved spending time there, assisting the bottle collectors queuing with any questions they might have, and managing potential conflicts. This was a support role distinct from that of a security guard or an info point representative. The project's vision was to bridge the often-overlooked communication gap between refund stations and collectors. Refund stations were responsible solely for counting bottles and were not expected to consider the challenging and messy conditions in which collectors worked or the specific needs they might have.

But what happens to all these items after they're handed over? On the final day, after a week of music, mud, and refund items, I speak with Janne, a 25-year-old student and a team leader in one of the refund stations. He explains that while products with the Danish standard refund labels 'Pant A,' 'Pant B,' 'Pant C' are picked up daily – entering into the nationwide machine of Dansk Retursystem – the festival-specific bottles and cups are sent to a washing facility to be cleaned and reused the following year. The categories of items that neither hold a deposit outside the festival nor can be reused – like crushed bottles or foreign beers – are simply gathered and sent to the trash recycling system. However, at Roskilde, these items have a refund value priced at 0,2 DKK (in EUR, 3 cents), which is pretty much irrelevant to the business-minded collectors (and understandably so). I don't see any of these items in the red refund bags at the back of the stations.

Janne takes pride in the impact of the refund stations. They processed 2 million refund items in 2024, 2.9 million the year before. I try to picture 2 million beer bottles in my mind, but how can I? It just feels like too much.

Imagine this site without bottle collectors. As festival-goers drink and scatter their cups around like farmers planting crops, the discarded items would simply pile up, turning the grounds into an even trashier – and perhaps entirely unmanageable – landscape.

The flow of capital is equally striking. While many collectors prefer not to disclose their earnings, word on the street claims someone made 50,000 DKK (around 6,700 €) net in just one week. But don't take my word for it – let's break it down. To earn 50,000 DKK, they would need to make an average of 7,100 DKK daily, collecting about 700 items per hour over a 10-hour, non-stop workday. That's roughly 11 items every single minute. While this figure seems highly unrealistic, it highlights how the blurry promise of "good money" persuades bottle collectors that it's all worth it. An average shift is generally quiet. The queue moves slowly as collectors sit on broken camping chairs, smoking and waiting their turn. At night, many huddle by the wooden structure of the refund station for shelter, dozing off on the damp ground. When their turn comes, someone in line wakes them, following what seems to be an unspoken rule of mutual solidarity.

A "village feeling" lingers in the air – almost no one comes alone. Many collectors, like Joe, return year after year, often residing nearby in the Copenhagen area. I speak with Prince, originally from Ghana but now an Italian resident, who expresses his frustration. It's his first time at the festival, lured by the promise of "good money," but he finds the competition overwhelming. "The Romanians take everything," he complains.

He refers to Romani families, who are a dominant presence among collectors. Tensions simmer between the African and Romani groups, fueled by accusations of breaking unspoken rules, such as waiting in line. The stakes are high – for the Romani, many have told me that this income can support their families in Romania for months. They often push boundaries, cutting in line with fresh bags of bottles while another family member holds their spot. These moments of conflict highlight the importance, for me, of having mediators present, ready to step in when the tone becomes heated.

People sleep, smoke, and chat in their circles of crooked camping chairs, as the festival swirls around them. Their "Invisible" presence is an essential part of the festival environment. Surviving on the fringes, they are, in many ways, the unrecognized dustmen of the 'Orange feeling.'

Outro:
The many faces of the refund system.

Festivals can serve as a window to the future; each edition is slightly different, showing that change is both possible and necessary. These values have shaped Roskilde Festival's brand, but as my week at Roskilde Festival unfolds, its contradictions become impossible to ignore.

Of course, Roskilde Festival's organizers are well aware of its environmental sustainability issues. According to Statista, Denmark recently ranked as the top waste producer per capita in Europe, at 787 kilograms per inhabitant – so perhaps it makes sense to think that consumerism is engrained in the country's culture. At Roskilde, the impact of individual behavior even exceeds the impact of the festival's production: according to reports, this campsite waste makes up 75% of the total volume of 2,2 thousand tons of trash generated by the festival. Currently, it is common practice for festivalgoers to leave behind large amounts of personal belongings, including their tents, on the site; it constitutes a mass of unrecyclable waste that can only end up at the nearest incineration plant.

There are already plenty of case studies and research available online about Roskilde Festival optimal waste management; the real challenge lies in changing the underlying culture. Roskilde Festival's current attitude towards consumerism focuses on "influencing behavior and inspiring." Some of the initiatives that the festival has been taking in recent years have included a dedicated page on environmental responsibility (among others) on its website, the creation of a "Circular Lab" to provide a PR platform to circularity-focused startups, and the establishment of eco-conscious campsite communities – "Leave No Trace Camp," "Clean Out Loud Camp" and, starting in 2022, "Common Ground" – where people would access through an application process.

Nevertheless, these communities, which create a sort of counterculture within the festival, remain a minority. The event primarily relies on its own grand cleaning machine activated in the last few days, with trucks and heavy machinery going around the campsite. And it moves swiftly: on July 19th, less than two weeks after the festival closed, I visited the site, and everything was spotless.

It is also worth commenting on how the management appears to acknowledge the presence of bottle collectors, as the refund stations' operations are designed to accommodate the collectors' workflow rather than focusing solely on individual customers. Despite that, no meaningful "benefits" are provided. For example, providing a quieter resting area for bottle collectors – something that already happens for the festival volunteers – could be a positive step. Currently, they are left to sleep at the main campsite.

At the end of the day, the systems and structures that festivals rely on are shaped by their surroundings, meaning festivals often reflect the same systemic problems as society at large. It is fascinating to observe the behavioral differences festivals can inspire and to consider which behaviors are – or aren't – supported by their specific systems.

Trash is a significant issue at the festival, one that the largely unacknowledged collectors play a crucial role in managing. The 'Orange feeling' thrives on the idea of freedom and community, yet it is built on contradictions. While festival-goers celebrate liberation, the invisible labor of bottle collectors plays an essential role in maintaining the festival's cleanliness and sustainability. Their overlooked efforts expose a deeper tension: the festival's ethos relies on systems that marginalize those who sustain it.

Roskilde Festival might have grown to the point of benefiting from policy interventions, just like a real city. As it continues to navigate its complexities and strives to align more closely with its values, acknowledging and addressing these underlying dynamics could be the next step in aligning its ideals further with its reality.

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