

Constructive Journalism: Applying Positive Psychology Techniques to News Production

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We propose to expand the boundaries of the news process by introducing and defining the interdisciplinary concept of constructive journalism — an emerging form of journalism that involves applying positive psychology techniques to news processes and production in an effort to create productive and engaging coverage, while holding true to journalism’s core functions. First, we review the critical issues in journalism that highlight a need for this approach. Next, we define constructive journalism, discuss the history of news as it pertains to the development of constructive forms, and describe four branches of constructive journalism. Finally, we outline five techniques by which constructive journalism can be practiced, including the psychological frameworks supporting these applications. This essay, which is based on McIntyre’s (2015) dissertation, attempts to introduce the concept of constructive journalism and clarify related terms in an effort to call for more

precision in constructive journalism practice and more research among scholars to test the process and effects of this innovative shift in journalism.

Keywords

Constructive Journalism, Constructive News, Positive Psychology, Positive News, Solutions Journalism.

BAD NEWS IS NECESSARY, BUT COMES AT A COST

Much of journalism has been dominated by a framework of conflict and negativity. Yet, the depressing nature of the news is not surprising. As McIntyre (2015) describes more fully in her dissertation, news serves a number of traditional purposes that explain why news stories are often negative and conflict-based. Among those purposes are journalists’ duty to alert the public of threats, including through the exposure of government corruption (Entman, 2005; Eriksson

& Ostman, 2013; Lasswell, 1948). Additionally, evidence suggests journalists are drawn toward conflict and drama (Niven, 2005; Patterson, 2000; Shoemaker, 1996; Shoemaker, Danielian, & Brendlinger, 1991). In fact, Bantz (1997) argued that news organizations see conflict as routine, expected, and perhaps essential. It’s therefore understandable that conflict and negativity have been identified as news values — along with others such as proximity, impact, and timeliness — that are used to train journalists to identify newsworthy information (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Galtung & Ruge, 1973; Harcup & O’Neill, 2001; Shoemaker & Reese, 2013).

Although reporters contribute to the negatively skewed news, journalists are not solely to blame. Trussler and Soroka (2014) found that politically interested news consumers chose to read negative stories despite saying they preferred more positive stories. Additionally, individuals in general are likely

to dwell on bad news, as negative events or emotions have a stronger and more lasting impact on individuals than positive events or emotions (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs 2001).

The gravitation of journalists and news consumers toward negative news can negatively impact consumers. McIntyre (2015) describes a number of negative effects of negative news:

Negative news can reduce helping behavior, decrease tolerance, lower perceptions of a community's benevolence, lower evaluations of strangers, and cause depression and helplessness (Galician & Vestre, 1987; Veitch and Griffitt, 1976). In addition, negative news can lead to distrust of political leaders (Kleinnijenhuis, van Hoof, & Oegema, 2006). And specifically compared to positive news, negative news can make viewers feel less emotionally stable and more apprehensive about potential harm to themselves (Aust, 1985). Similarly, long-term exposure to television generally, which frequently broadcasts violent news, has been found to cultivate images of a mean and dangerous world in which people are only looking out for themselves and cannot be trusted (Gerbner, 1998). (McIntyre, 2015, p. 5)

Evidence suggests some individuals are disengaging with the news because they recognize it makes them feel bad. In a national survey, Patterson (2000)

found 84% of respondents perceived the news to be depressing. In another survey, Potter and Gantz (2000) found that individuals consciously decided to watch less local broadcast news because the stories were too negative, too often about crime, and seldom presented positive information. Media sociologist Michael Schudson (2011) has also pointed to individuals' declining interest in newspapers, newsmagazines, and the "serious" news on TV. Even those who still choose to consume news are disengaging with its content by experiencing compassion fatigue – the belief that audiences are left feeling unmoved after consistently hearing about human suffering (Höjjer, 2004). Kinnick, Krugman, and Cameron (1996) suggest that the media contribute to compassion fatigue through their sensationalism, constant "bad news," lack of context, and lack of solutions to social problems.

Although individuals' worldviews are not shaped exclusively by traditional media and can also be molded by social media and other influences, traditional media play an important role in individual and societal well-being and journalists feel they have a responsibility to accurately portray the world (McIntyre, Dahmen, and Abdenour, 2016). A problem-focused news style has detrimental effects that not only are bad for business but also are inconsistent with journalists' ethical responsibilities to be fair,

accountable, and to minimize harm – principles put forth by the Society for Professional Journalists (SPJ, 2014).

This paper suggests an approach for journalists to shift their focus from conflict and negativity while fulfilling their core functions. This approach, called *constructive journalism*, offers a way for traditional journalists to report and produce more productive stories – stories that present vital information while engaging news consumers and portraying the world more accurately. What follows is first a brief discussion of the history of journalism as it pertains to the development of constructive news forms, followed by a definition of constructive journalism – a concept that McIntyre (2016) introduced in her dissertation but that has not, until now, been published in an academic journal. Next we describe journalistic forms considered to be branches of constructive journalism. Finally, we suggest five techniques rooted in positive psychology in which constructive journalism is, or can be, practiced in the industry, including anecdotal and empirical evidence of its impact on news consumers. Through this essay, our greater aims are to promote precision in constructive journalism practice and encourage research among scholars to test the process and effects of this innovative shift in journalism.

CONSTRUCTIVE JOURNALISM: COINING THE CONCEPT

Historical Development

In the mid-20th century, the world became increasingly complex and the need for an informed account of world events, such as the Great Depression, grew, resulting in more interpretive journalism (MacDougall, 1957). As journalists took on a more interpretive role and, simultaneously, newsrooms expanded and the need for educated practitioners rose, the professional status of journalism was elevated, which sparked discussion about the principles that should guide the profession (Ward, 2004). In the 1940s, during a time of heightened media criticism and mistrust, Henry Luce, the publisher of *Time* and *Life* magazines, and Robert Hutchins, the University of Chicago president, formed the Hutchins Commission and tasked its members with determining the functions of the US news media. The Commission decided news media are crucial to a functioning democracy and, as such, have a duty to consider society's best interest while making journalistic decisions (The Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947). The idea that journalism is a vital component of democracy is consistent with Jürgen Habermas' concept of the public sphere. Habermas asserted that individuals need to come together to discuss society's problems, and subsequently influence political action, and that this for-

mation of public opinion helps to create a democratic society (Habermas, 1991). The idea that followed was that journalists could facilitate this public debate in an effort to contribute to a functioning democracy.

Since the social responsibility theory of the press was established, various forms of journalism have expressed a commitment to society's well-being. Constructive journalism is one of these, but although constructive journalism is a new form of news, it has roots in an older form of journalism, namely, civic journalism. Jay Rosen (1999) argued that civic journalism aimed to contribute to a "healthier public climate" (p. 4), which is a goal shared with constructive journalism. Another similarity between civic journalism and constructive journalism is the more active and involved role of the journalist in shaping the story, as opposed to the traditional detached journalist. Bro (2008) described the passive journalist as concerned with disseminating stories regardless of their effects and thus concerned with what information *preceded* the news report (i.e., fact gathering). Contrarily, the active journalist serves more fully as a participant in interpreting the story and thus is concerned about the effect of the news or what happens *after* the report. Constructive journalism, like the civic journalism movement that preceded it, requires journalists to take a more active, participatory approach.

Global Definition

It is necessary for scholars to study constructive journalism given that newsrooms and journalism schools are experimenting with this style of news. In December 2015 the School of Journalism at Windesheim University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands integrated constructive journalism into its curriculum (*Constructive Journalism*, 2016). Moreover, McIntyre (2015) acknowledged that reporters have discussed this topic in international news outlets such as *The Guardian*, *The Huffington Post*, *Columbia Journalism Review* and *All Africa* (Albeanu, 2014; Gyldensted, 2015a; Haagerup, 2014; Pilane, 2014; Sillesen, 2014; Tullis, 2014). However, practitioners do not use consistent terms. This type of news has been called solutions journalism, impact journalism, contextual journalism, and more. In some form, constructive journalism is being purposefully practiced on every continent (Gyldensted, 2015a), yet has not, until now, been defined in an academic journal. A thorough definition of the concept is needed, considering that practitioners are increasingly using the term without agreement about what it means or how to do it (Gyldensted, 2015a; Tenore, 2014a). Therefore, we introduce and define the concept in this paper.

Among industry practitioners who have attempted to define constructive journalism is Seán Dagan

Wood, editor of UK-based *Positive News*, which aims to publish constructive stories. Dagan Wood said in a TEDx talk that constructive journalism “is about bringing positive elements into conventional reporting, remaining dedicated to accuracy, truth, balance when necessary, and criticism, but reporting in a more engaging and empowering way” (Dagan Wood, 2014).

McIntyre (2015) met with a Danish journalist who had another definition:

Jesper Borup, a radio news anchor for the Danish Broadcasting Corporation, said he views constructive journalism as taking a more productive angle on a story than a reporter might usually use. For example, a reporter could ask a question that focuses on a solution rather than asking a backward-looking question. These kinds of questions tend to foster collaboration rather than conflict (J. Borup, personal communication, Oct. 9, 2014). (McIntyre, 2015, p. 8)

In an effort to incorporate the key elements of constructive journalism as it is being practiced in the field, we coin the concept, by slightly tweaking McIntyre’s (2015, p. 9) definition, as *an emerging form of journalism that involves applying positive psychology techniques to news processes and production in an effort to create productive and engaging*

coverage, while holding true to journalism’s core functions.

Though techniques from related fields can contribute to constructive journalism, the field of positive psychology was built on the recognition that psychologists have traditionally focused on treating mental illness and otherwise understanding “how people survive and endure under conditions of adversity” while ignoring “how normal people flourish under more benign conditions” or generally lead fulfilling lives (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). The goal of positive psychology is to study, measure, and apply the conditions that allow individuals, communities, and societies to thrive (Seligman, 2011), and this goal is in line with the ultimate goal of constructive journalism – to improve individual and societal well-being by applying positive psychology tactics to news work.

Branches of Constructive Journalism

Constructive journalism shares qualities with civic journalism, but it is distinct in its methods. To be considered constructive journalism as defined in this paper, a positive psychology strategy must be applied to a news story. Other forms of journalism employ positive psychology techniques and could therefore be considered branches of constructive journalism, as constructive journalism has been used as an um-

rella term in practice. We identify four branches, for which we will later describe the positive psychology techniques used: Solutions journalism (and its offshoot, problem-solving journalism), prospective journalism, peace journalism, and restorative narrative. The relationship between these forms are represented in Figure 1.

Solutions journalism involves “rigorous reporting about how people are responding to problems” (Solutions Journalism Network, 2016). Little academic work has been published on solutions journalism specifically, but the popular press has covered it. Benesch (1998) wrote about the rise of solutions journalism nearly 20 years ago, and the field has grown since then. The Solutions Journalism Network, based in the US, has compiled more than 2,000 stories considered to be solutions journalism, and the Network has teamed with more than 80 newsrooms in training journalists on how to effectively report solutions-based stories (Solutions Journalism Network, 2017a, 2017b). Examples of solutions stories can also be seen in the *New York Times*’ blog series “Fixes,” which launched in 2001.

Solutions-focused news stories can also be found in the *Huffington Post* which recently decided to publish more constructive stories through an initiative called “What’s Working?” Founding editor Arianna Huffington said:

Swedish broadcaster had a role to play when it came to the public’s outdated view of Africa, and sought to include constructive journalism in their coverage of the continent.

It is important to note that:

A news story that mentions a solution to a social problem can be considered constructive; however, including a solution is just one of a handful of positive psychology techniques that can be applied to news to make it constructive. Therefore, a solution-based news story is constructive, but a constructive news story does not require the inclusion of a solution. (McIntyre, 2015, p. 16)

In other words, the story may employ other constructive techniques, including those that follow.

Prospective journalism is another branch of constructive journalism. Simply put, it involves journalism that focuses on the future. The psychological underpinnings come from the relatively new concept of prospection, which refers to the mental representation and evaluation of possible futures, including such functions as planning, prediction, and day-dreaming (Burns, Caruso, & Bartels, 2012; Gilbert & Wilson, 2007). This ability to imagine the future can fundamentally shape human cognition, emotion, and motivation (Imagination Institute, 2013). Journalists can apply prospection to their news work by directing their conversations with sources toward the future.

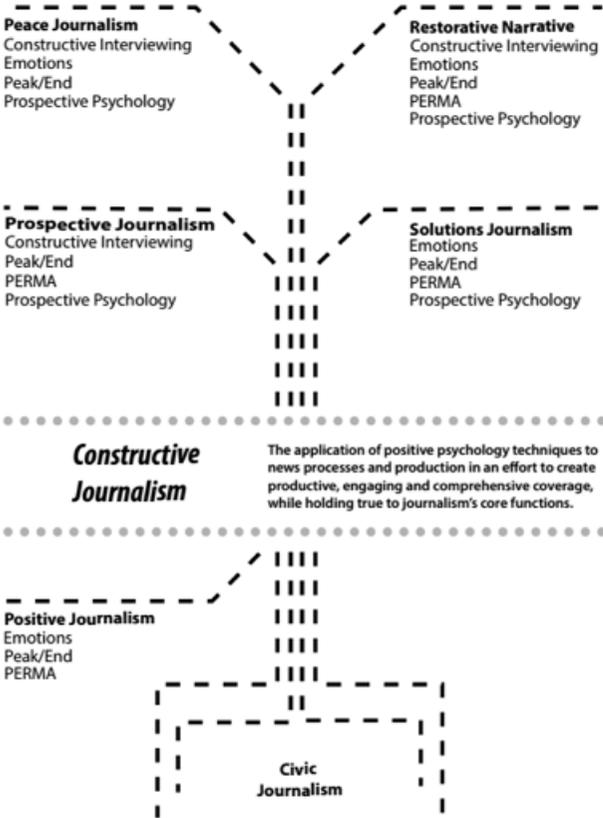


Figure 1: The branches of constructive journalism and psychological techniques used in each

While we will continue to cover the stories of what’s not working – political dysfunction, corruption, wrongdoing, violence and disaster – as relentlessly as we always have, we want to go beyond “If it bleeds, it leads.” And to be clear, I’m not talking about simple heartwarming stories, or aw-shucks moments, or adorable animals (although don’t worry, we’ll still give you plenty of those as well). What I’m talking about is consistently telling the stories of people and communities doing amazing things, overcoming great odds and coming up with solutions to the very real challenges they face. (Huffington, 2015)

Swedish National Television (SVT) has been producing constructive journalistic stories from world hotspots since 2009, most visibly covering progress in Africa. Ingrid Thörnqvist, head of foreign news, said she committed to solutions-based reporting when she heard Hans Rosling, professor of international health at the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, speaking about the world’s many “poor” countries and how these countries have in fact improved on democratic elections and living standards (Gyldensted, 2015c). Around the same time a survey came out in which Swedish citizens were asked about African issues. The majority of Swedes expressed outdated knowledge. Their views correlated better with reality in Africa 30-40 years ago. Thörnqvist took this to heart, feeling that foreign news reporting at the national

Specifically, reporters can ask questions about how problems might be solved, how people might collaborate, or what kind of progress their sources envision. Although individuals' imaginations do not always accurately represent the future, Seligman, Railton, Baumeister, and Sripada (2013) offer evidence to support the idea that goal-based behavior, which focuses on the future, is more effective than habit-based behavior, which focuses on the past.

A relevant example of a prospective interview question can be taken from McIntyre (2015). This question was asked during a 2013 press conference when the U.S. military was preparing an attack after a team of Syrians killed more than 1,400 of their own people using chemical weapons.

CBS News State Department correspondent Margaret Brennan asked U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry at a news conference, "Is there anything at this point that his [Bashar al-Assad's] government could do or offer that would stop an attack?" This question pointed to the future and focused on a solution rather than recounting the past and highlighting the conflict and negativity inherent in the event. The result was that Syria gave up control of its chemical weapons and avoided a U.S. military attack. One cannot say that Brennan's question *caused* the solution that followed. However, at the very least, her question brought this deal to the public's attention. (McIntyre, 2015, p. 8)

Dutch news site *De Correspondent* has begun practicing prospective (future-oriented) journalism by creating additional beats. Reporters not only focus on politics, health, entertainment, and other traditional beats, but the news outlet has named a *correspondent vooruitgang* which translates to "progress correspondent whose stories very often look at utopias – future societal scenarios." Additionally, they have a *correspondent vindingrijkheid & vernieuwers*, which is a "curiosity and innovators" beat. This dedication of resources to forward-looking stories about growth and advancement shows the news organization's commitment to prospective journalism as a way to execute constructive storytelling. The editors think this type of reporting is valuable and consistently highlight their constructive journalism approach when outlining their goals (Pfauth, 2015).

Peace journalism can overlap with prospective or solutions journalism. In their book about the subject, Lynch and McGoldrick (2005) said "Peace journalism is when editors and reporters make choices – about what to report, and how to report it – that create opportunities for society at large to consider and to value non-violent responses to conflict" (p. 5). In other words, peace journalism requires a journalist to look at conflict not as a two-party battle where the focus is on winning and losing but rather as a challenge and an opportunity for human progress (Galtung & Fischer, 2013). Peace journalists report information

about conflict, but they additionally report information about the roots of the conflict, who is working to prevent violence, and who is benefitting from reconstruction (Galtung & Fischer, 2013).

While peace journalism typically involves national and international conflict, a similar branch of news focuses on covering community conflict more constructively, that being restorative narrative. Images & Voices of Hope (IVOH), a non-profit media group, defines restorative narrative as a form of journalism that involves stories of "recovery, restoration and resilience in the aftermath, or midst of, difficult times" (Tenore, 2014b). Proponents of restorative narrative avoid instances when journalists "parachute" in and out of a city to cover a disaster or tragedy; rather, they encourage news that covers the deeper roots of such conflicts as well as the recovery effort that follows them.

It is important to note that the aforementioned branches of journalism are not mutually exclusive. A story with a restorative narrative might also be considered an example of solutions journalism. These styles of journalism are distinct in their specific processes and aims, but they might use the same or similar storytelling techniques. We consider them all to be branches of constructive journalism because they use psychologically-based techniques during the news process and strive to contribute to a healthier public climate, while remaining committed to journalism's

core functions by reporting stories with widespread social significance.

Paddi Clay, head of editorial training and development at Times Media Group in South Africa, is rolling out constructive journalistic formats that demonstrate peace journalism elements throughout her organization. TMG runs several online media outlets and a range of national newspapers including *Sunday Times*, *The Times*, *Sowetan*, and *Business Day*. Clay said she wants her reporters and news editors to take on a new responsibility to report on how South Africa is doing as a society (Gyldensted, 2015b).

Positive news is represented in Figure 1, but is not considered a form of constructive journalism. McIntyre (2015) asserted that positive news can be seen in media outlets that publish uplifting and upbeat stories – outlets such as *Good News Network*, *Happy News*, and *HuffPost Good News*. Stories on such sites may be called “fluff” as they lack meaningful information. We mention positive news only because some practitioners use the terms positive news and constructive news interchangeably. However, as McIntyre (2015) pointed out, they are distinct. Individuals who read positive news said they do it more to improve their mood than to be informed (McIntyre & Sobel, 2014). This makes sense given that news stories on good news websites are highly emotional and entertaining, but lack some core functions, like conflict and impact, that are typically inherent in main-

stream news (McIntyre, 2016). “This lack of commitment to traditional journalism’s core functions is the key difference between positive and constructive news” (McIntyre, 2015, p. 15).

APPLYING POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY TECHNIQUES TO NEWS

As discussed, practitioners have not agreed on a single definition of constructive journalism. The term has been used to reference different types of news forms. Journalists have also not agreed on how to implement this new approach. What follows are five techniques by which constructive journalism can be practiced and the theory-based psychological frameworks that support their use. These techniques can be applied to several stages of the news process, including story generation, information gathering, and production, and some news organizations are already applying them. Although the terms and execution are inconsistent in the industry, practitioners report optimistic findings from their experiences (Gyldensted, 2011; Hammonds, 2014; Maymann, 2013; Noack, Orth, Owen, & Rennick, 2013; Yarow, 2013).

Consider the Well-Being Model of the World

Journalists who wish to work more constructively should aim for more balanced coverage in terms of positive and negative events and information. The positive psychology concept supporting this goal re-

fers to the so-called well-being model of the world. Positive psychology scholars generally refer to the world of well-being as what they seek to uncover, explore, and measure (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Gyldensted (2011) introduced the intersection of positive psychology to the innovation of journalism and applied the well-being model to news reporting. She asserted that the well-being model of the world contrasts with the disease model of the world, which is made up of negative matters such as negative emotions, bad relationships, conflict, dissent, post-traumatic stress, and victimizing. Contrarily, the well-being model of the world is made up of positive matters such as accomplishment, growth, meaning, good relationships, engagement, positive emotions, post-traumatic growth, and resilience. Reporters traditionally focus on items that represent the disease model, and in doing so they misrepresent the world by inducing prejudice through their choice of questions. It is, of course, possible to explore both negatives and positives without adding bias. Here is an example from an actual interview with a homeless woman (Gyldensted, 2011):

Q: How do you perceive the help offered here at the homeless shelter?

A: It has been both good – but also bad.

Q: What do you mean by “bad”?

A: (The source explains.)

Q: You also said that it was good. What has been good?

In this case, portraying an accurate world consisted of asking about both parts rather than continuing with a question like, “What are you most unhappy about?” It is the journalist’s choice where to zoom in during the interview. Both directions are equally “true” for the homeless woman. For the audience, it is crucial that both parts are reported for complete and nuanced coverage.

Questions act like a spotlight; depending on where journalists direct that light, they see and navigate through the lit-up area. Constructive interviewing illuminates areas too often left in the dark. It adds more lighting to the stage because the interviewer aims to look at both negatives and positives of a situation whereas classic news interviews focus on conflicts and dissent. Lasswell (1948) identified the disclosure of threats *and opportunities* as a core function of communication. Journalists are doing the public a disservice by ignoring many of the opportunities that occur in society. It’s important to point out that constructive journalists should not ignore threatening world events and only report on items that represent the well-being model. Rather, they should represent the world more accurately by publishing both negative and positive events and issues.

Evoked Positive Emotions in News Stories

The use of positive emotion is another positive psychology technique that can be applied to news stories to make them more constructive, and news organizations are purposefully using this technique. But before a discussion follows of how news organizations are using positive emotions, the psychological theory supporting the use of positive emotions is provided.

Positive emotions are indicators of flourishing – a concept taken from Seligman (2011) to describe well-being. Contributing to individual and societal well-being is a goal of constructive news, and positive emotions are central to attaining that goal. Fredrickson (2001) suggests in her broaden-and-build theory that positive emotions are not just *indicators* of flourishing, but can actually *produce* and *extend* flourishing. Fredrickson (2001) found that positive emotions can facilitate approach behavior, broaden the mind, and even build individuals’ personal resources (intellectual, social, physical, and otherwise) to be used later. For example, joy can create the urge to be creative, push the limits, and play (Fredrickson, 1998). Interest can create the urge to explore and take in new information, and pride can create the urge to share achievement with others and envision future achievements (Fredrickson, 1998). Fredrickson and her colleagues also found that positive emotions can undo the negative effects of negative emotions, fuel psychological resilience, and trigger upward spirals

toward more positive meaning (Fredrickson, 2001; Fredrickson, Mancuso, Branigan, & Tugade, 2000). Finally, research indicates that positive emotions might have a greater impact if felt during the peak and end of an experience, as individuals use their perceptions of the peak and end of an experience to evaluate the experience as a whole (Fredrickson, 2000; Fredrickson & Kahneman, 1993; Kahneman, Fredrickson, Schreiber, & Redelmeier, 1993). Taken together, these findings suggest positive emotions might be key ingredients to helping constructive news stories achieve their goal of energizing and engaging readers.

Research shows positive information and emotions can be used in news stories with positive effects. For example, McIntyre and Gibson (2016) found that adding a silver lining to an inherently negative news story caused readers to feel significantly more positive than if they had read a solely negative story. This suggests news practitioners can maintain their surveillance function and report negative information while avoiding some of the negative effects of bad news by including a silver lining. Additionally, McIntyre (2015) found that individuals who read a news story about homelessness, an inherently negative topic, experienced positive emotions such as hope, elevation, pride, joy, happiness, and excitement while reading the story. Individuals who experienced these emotions had more favorable attitudes toward the story, and were even more likely to report intentions

to “like” the story on Facebook, sign a petition supporting a program that supports the homeless, and donate money to a charity parking meter that raises money for homeless programs than those who read a story that did not evoke these positive emotions or that evoked negative emotions (McIntyre, 2015). The studies described suggest journalists can engage readers when they choose to evoke positive emotions in their news stories, even while reporting on inherently negative events.

Include the PERMA Elements in News Work

Journalists can produce more constructive coverage by including **p**ositive emotion, **e**ngagement, good **r**elationships, **m**eaning, and **a**chievement in the news process. These five elements come from Martin Seligman, who studies well-being or “the enabling conditions of a life worth living” (Seligman, 2011, p. 1-2). Regarding *positive emotion*, Seligman (2013) draws from Fredrickson’s work that suggests individuals need more positive emotion than negative emotion (Fredrickson, 2013). Regarding *engagement*, Seligman (2013) talked about finding one’s strengths and employing them, particularly during difficult or unwanted tasks. In terms of *relationships*, Seligman (2013) suggested focusing on how individuals celebrate together rather than how they fight. Regarding *meaning*, Seligman (2013) referred to belonging to or serving something bigger than the self. He pointed

out that when one experiences a fun activity, the feeling of happiness doesn’t last beyond that fun activity. However, when one experiences something altruistic, the positive feeling attained from it is a lasting one. Finally, when it comes to *achievement*, Seligman (2013) suggested doing something for one’s own sake – something that takes self-discipline.

Journalists who are mindful of the PERMA construct can more successfully embrace a constructive news style. Specifically, reporters can apply this construct when they are generating story ideas. Gyldensted (2015) suggests asking questions such as, Who has collaborated? Who has solved a problem? What has been gained? rather than questions such as, Who is suffering? Who is at odds? Who has caused a problem? What has been lost? For example, a story idea might arise when two competing politicians disagree on how to address a problem. A traditional reporter unaware of the PERMA construct might produce a story focusing on how the politicians differ in their views. In contrast, a reporter who considers the PERMA construct might choose to produce a story focused on where the politicians agree and how they could potentially collaborate, which moves the story forward and is likely to leave audiences feeling more hopeful than the predictable problem-focused story. If journalists develop story ideas based on individuals’ strengths and collaborations rather than their weaknesses and conflicts, they could share stories of

progress and productivity rather than stories focused on disaster and hopelessness. Some news organizations and journalists are applying the PERMA construct to their work (Gyldensted, 2015a). It’s important to underscore that in order for the coverage to be constructive journalism and not positive journalism, the stories should have strong societal relevance and adhere to core functions in journalism: serving as a watchdog, disseminating important information to the public, and accurately portraying the world. The technique is worthy of being empirically tested for its impact, and future research should identify a systematic method for measuring its use.

Use Constructive Interview Techniques

Journalists can work more constructively by integrating psychological techniques in their interviews and other source conversations. Psychiatry Professor Karl Tomm (1988) talked about how the therapeutic interview is meant to drive constructive change, which makes his work ideal for journalists aiming to drive constructive change. He offered four types of interview questions based on the therapists’ intentions and assumptions. These techniques are briefly explained in terms of their application to reporters and sources.

(1) Lineal questions are what Tomm (1988) calls reductionist, cause and effect questions (p. 4). When asking them, the reporter acts like an investigator or

detective. For example, a reporter might ask the traditional five W's (who, what, when, where, and why) with the purpose of solving a mystery. This style of questioning has a conservative effect, often strengthening existing beliefs. It can evoke defensiveness, make sources critical, and promote negative judgments (Tomm, 1988).

(2) Reflexive questions are also meant to influence the interviewee, but in a more facilitative, less direct manner (Tomm, 1988, p. 6). When asking them, the reporter functions as a guide in the style of an anthropologist with the intention of encouraging sources to mobilize their own problem-solving resources. Questions are directive, but in a nuanced, noncontrolling way. An example might be: "If you were to share with your neighbors how worried you are, what do you think they would do?" This style of questioning allows sources to reevaluate problems and entertain new perceptions and directions (Tomm, 1988). These new possibilities or potential solutions become part of the information the reporter gathers and uses in his or her story and are thus passed on to news audiences who might otherwise not have been exposed to such ideas, reasonably resulting in greater awareness and potential action.

(3) Circular questions seek to reveal recurrent circular patterns (Tomm, 1988, p. 5). When asking them, the reporter acts like an explorer or scientist with the intention of making a discovery. Questions are more

unbiased and accepting with the intent of searching for patterns or connections. Examples might be: "Has anything like this ever happened in the past? What happened then?" This style of questioning has a liberating effect, where reporters facilitate a conversation in which sources can become aware of connections and patterns and view their situation from a fresh perspective (Tomm, 1988).

(4) Strategic questions are intended to influence the interviewee (Tomm, 1988, p. 5). When asking them, the reporter acts like a captain, trying to commit and steer a course. Questions are influencing like a lawyer's. Examples might be: "Can you see how your policy has affected the middle class? How come you're not willing to try harder?" This style has a constraining effect, where sources are controlled (Tomm, 1988).

Traditional journalists, with their emphasis on conflict and negativity, tend to employ the interviewing styles that mimic detectives and captains, which can cause them to be judgmental and oppositional. Schudson (2011) argued that reporting styles around the world have become increasingly critical and cynical, which started out as a good thing as journalists became more critical and thus credible, but have gone too far. Constructive journalism calls for reporters to act more like scientists or guides, which can cause them to be more comprehensive and open to new perspectives. These styles of interviewing might al-

low journalists and their sources to view issues from a perspective that drives productive change. Of course, reporters are already asking circular and reflexive questions, but largely unintentionally or randomly. This technique is being practiced with purpose by a small number of mainstream journalists and is worthy of being systematically explained and empirically tested for its impact.

Focus on Solutions

Providing information about potential solutions to social issues is another positive psychology technique that can be used to create a constructive news story:

While some media professionals may argue that it is not the media's job to examine solutions to social problems, proponents of constructive journalism suggest that the media should, after they confront audiences with information about conflict and controversy, provide individuals with productive ways to engage and act on what they read, listened to or watched. (McIntyre, 2015, p. 32)

Additionally, the idea of exploring solutions to society's problems is in keeping with the social responsibility theory of the press, which asserts that journalists have an obligation to consider society's best interest when making news decisions.

Journalists can craft a solutions-focused story by

following the tips described in the Solutions Journalism Toolkit (Solutions Journalism Network, 2015). This includes asking questions such as: Does the story explain the causes of a social problem? Does the story present an associated response to that problem? And, Is the problem-solving process central to the narrative?

News organizations that focus on solutions-based journalism report anecdotal success. Keith Hammonds, chief operating officer of the Solutions Journalism Network, described the success of SJN's partnerships with U.S. newsrooms. "It's not just that online traffic to solutions stories seem to be higher; readers' comments are more positive and constructive, indicating a changed, more hopeful conversation" (Hammonds, 2014, n.p.).

Academic literature on solutions journalism is sparse. Two systematic studies testing the effects of solutions-based news have been conducted, and they provided conflicting results. Solutions Journalism Network together with the Engaging News Project conducted a quasi-experiment in 2014 in which individuals were assigned to read a news story that involved a social issue and either included or did not include a potential solution to the problem. In a resulting survey, respondents who read the solution-oriented stories reported more perceived knowledge about the topic, higher self-efficacy in regard to a potential remedy, and greater intentions to act in sup-

port of the cause (Curry & Hammonds, 2014).

A later study tested the effects of a solution-oriented news story using a true randomized experiment – as opposed to a quasi-experiment – reducing the likelihood that findings could be due to chance. McIntyre (2017) found that individuals who read a story that offered an effective solution to a social problem felt more positive affect and had more positive attitudes about the story than did those who read a story that offered an ineffective solution or did not offer any solution information. However, they did not report higher levels of perceived self-efficacy, report more favorable attitudes about the story topic, report greater intentions to act, or actually engage in more prosocial behaviors. More research on solutions journalism is needed before robust claims can be made about its impact.

CONCLUSION

The current research takes an interdisciplinary approach to studying constructive journalism. By combining behavioral sciences like positive psychology and prospective psychology, we document characteristics of constructive journalism and its various branches.

As McIntyre (2015) noted, researchers face complexity in conceptualizing and operationalizing constructive journalism given the inconsistency of the terms and techniques used in the industry. Consis-

tent definitions and applications of constructive journalism are needed in order for communication scholars to study the topic using sound empirical research. This essay, drawing from McIntyre's (2015) dissertation, attempts to introduce and clarify the concept in an effort to call for more consistency in constructive journalism practice and more research among scholars to test its process and effects.

Our findings make several contributions to the literature. This paper was the first to coin the umbrella concept of constructive journalism and distinguish it as a larger domain with solutions journalism, peace journalism, prospective journalism, and restorative narratives as branches. We also outlined the distinct difference between constructive journalism and positive journalism, two forms of content that are used synonymously in the industry. Conventional thinking in the journalistic profession tends to bundle the concepts together, thus reducing validity of constructive journalistic stories by labelling them as fluff or uncritical.

The techniques discussed in this paper are not mutually exclusive and are not intended to be a comprehensive list of the ways to practice constructive journalism. They are merely a first attempt at providing suggestions for how to conceptualize and operationalize the concept. Due to the fact that constructive journalism is based on eternally evolving scientific fields – both in psychology and media – its

methodology and practice will also grow and change; hence it's not a static domain and more research will be needed to anchor this emerging field.

In conclusion, this paper illuminates how key constructive journalism techniques are backed by theory, applicable to journalists, and consistent with the concept's mission: to craft productive news stories that engage readers in an effort to improve well-being and accurately portray the world. By coining this construct of constructive journalism, we aim to provide researchers and practitioners a solid foundation to conduct research and to apply constructive journalism methods to news production.

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