



Journalist Fellowship Paper

Constructive correspondence: a new approach to foreign assignments

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July 2023
Trinity Term
Sponsor: JP Politikens



Families at a Ramallah checkpoint in 2002. Credit: Reuters

The sound of automatic rifles is not that loud: more like cracks than explosions. But I am terrified anyway as I throw myself between cars queuing at an Israeli army checkpoint on a road between Jerusalem and Ramallah.

The bullets fly above my head.

It all lasts a few moments, then there is silence.

As quickly as the gunfire started, everybody gets back to some sort of normalcy. The bullets haven't hit anybody this time. I'm told they are probably warning shots fired because someone was reluctant to do as the soldiers commanded. Now that the young Israeli guards feel back in control, the Palestinians take their places back in a line to pass through the muddy check point.

To them, it is just another day on the West Bank.

It's 2002, and I am equal parts scared and fascinated to witness this scene unfold during the second intifada. This is the story I want to tell my readers back in

Denmark about the ongoing conflict: show what it does to people on both sides. The drama, the tragedy, the terror when political violence becomes everyday.

There are also stories of hope and solution. And I want to report them, too. But I have to fight to get them in print. It is when Israeli tanks and helicopters converge on the streets of Ramallah that my work is most wanted, not when there are demonstrations for peace in Tel Aviv, or a new initiative brings Palestinian and Israeli students together. ‘When it bleeds, its leads’ is the prevailing motto.

My experience of the conflict in the Middle East provides an extreme example of why the conversation we are about to have here about how correspondents cover the news will require nuance.

Of course, we cannot stop reporting news of violent conflicts and clashes – they cannot and should not be trivialized or accepted as routine. But I will argue here that constructive solutions journalism has its place in a correspondent’s toolkit, too. It is vital to tell the whole truth – not just the tragic part.

Why? First and foremost, because it is our duty to provide all the information that enlightens readers. But also because reporting only the tragedy risks making our audience immune.

Jeffrey Gettleman, the former East Africa Bureau-chief for the *New York Times*, put it this way in a video made by the Danish organisation Levende Menneskerettigheder: “I want to show people that Africa is not all about AK47s and kids, where you can see their ribcage because they don’t get enough food.”

The conversation I hope to provoke here revolves around one question:

How can correspondents find a balance between reporting calamity and hope when reporting on world affairs?

Why me, why now?

What Gettleman speaks of above, and what I am proposing below is incredibly difficult to execute for correspondents on the frontline. To quote a former editor in chief: “Nothing is impossible for someone who is not supposed to do it himself.”

Allow me to assure you that this is something that I do myself. I’ve been a vocal supporter, student, and practitioner of constructive journalism for the past decade – including a year-long stint at The Constructive Institute at Aarhus University in 2017.

And I write from experience reporting in both the Middle East and in the former Yugoslavia immediately after the civil war ended in 2001.

I also write as a journalist on the cusp of a new assignment: from September 2023, I will be *Politikens'* new U.S. correspondent based in Washington D.C. – and when I applied for the position as correspondent, I promised boldly that I would use my experiences within constructive journalism while stateside.

That won't be an easy task in the U.S. today. “Good luck with that,” is how my American co-fellow at the Reuters Institute, Ayen Deng Bior Patinkin responded.

To weigh up the question, we'll look briefly at what the literature has to say about constructive solutions journalism, then ask five Danish correspondents reporting from different parts of the world about their experiences.

Finally, I will propose a way to make constructive solutions journalism a more natural part of correspondents' coverage of the world.

What's in a name?

I am choosing to focus on what a constructive solution approach might look like for correspondents, not the “if” or “why” of constructivism. The latter has been studied, discussed, and proselytized by others for many years, and I've included a reading list below for those who want those answers.

But there is one element of theory we must tackle before we get to the “how”: that is, what to call the approach that I've thus far referred to as constructive solutions journalism?

The two most-used names for this approach are “Constructive Journalism” (used predominantly in Europe) and “Solutions Journalism” (used predominantly in the U.S.). The definition and methodology of both differ slightly, but the motivation and results are largely similar.

Tina Rosenberg, co-founder of the Solutions Journalism Network in the U.S., told me: “Solutions journalism has really exploded. People all over the world now know about it and are trying it. Journalism has historically been a very defensive profession that doesn't change easily. But it does now because the media are going through both economic and existential crises: nobody wants us and nobody trusts us. So, people are open to new ways of doing journalism in a way they weren't 10 years ago.”¹

¹ Interview with Tina Rosenberg, 16 May 2023.

Her sentiments are backed up by academic research: a [recent paper](#) by Karen Elizabeth McIntyre and Kyser Lough found that solutions journalism has a growing appeal in the professional work of journalists and newsrooms.²

They also stress that the definition is far from clear: academics have yet to reach consensus on the theoretical and conceptual definitions, or a concrete operationalisation of the practice.³

Does it work to attract new audiences and revenue? We don't know yet. There are several examples in Denmark and abroad of successful media taking a constructive approach.⁴ But despite the increasing popularity of solution journalism, there is a lack of empirical evidence that it can lead to higher newsroom revenue.⁵

The Solutions Journalism Network offers this definition: "Solutions journalism is rigorous news reporting about how people are responding to social problems."⁶

Constructive journalism describes itself as a broader and more practical approach, but definitions, again, differ slightly between countries.

My own approach is probably closer to the Danish definition, but for the sake of making this conversation as relevant to as many as possible, I'll continue to refer to a constructive solution approach with the aim of encompassing all journalistic practice that seeks to report more than just the problems at hand.⁷

² Elizabeth McIntyre and Kyser Lough, 2019, '[Toward a clearer conceptualization and operationalization of solution journalism](#)'.

³ Peter Bro, professor and director of the Centre for Journalism at University of Southern Denmark, published a book shortly after the completion of this essay that fills many of the gaps. The book is an overview of constructive journalism, setting out the guiding principles and practices for a journalism that aims to do more than inform about problems. See: [Peter Bro, 2023, 'Constructive Journalism. Precedents, Principles, and Practices'](#).

⁴ For example Børneavisen, Published by JP Politiken and 'Zetland' and De Correspondent in Holland.

⁵ Jacob L. Nelson & Nicole S. Dahmen (2023): Appealing to News Audiences or News Funders? An Empirical Analysis of the Solutions Journalism Network's Revenue Project, Journalism Practice

⁶ <https://www.solutionsjournalism.org/>

⁷ At [Constructive Institute](#) in Denmark, the definition is 'It is not positive, uncritical news, an alternative to watchdog reporting or a quick fix to the media industry's problems. Instead, it recognises that in order to serve democracy, quality reporting must be critical, inspirational, nuanced and engaging'.

Reading list

- Peter Bro, (2023), [*Constructive Journalism: Precedents, Principles, and Practices*](#) (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003403098>
- Lisbeth Hermans & Tineke Prins (2020), [*Interest matters: The effects of constructive news reporting on Millennials' emotions and engagement*](#). Journalism, 23(5), 1064–1081
- Karen Elizabeth & Kyser Lough (2019), [*Toward a clearer conceptualization and operationalization of solutions journalism*](#). Journalism, 22(6), 1558–1573.
- Karen Elizabeth & Kyser Lough (2021), [*Transitioning to Solutions Journalism: One Newsroom's Shift to Solutions-focused Reporting*](#). Journalism Studies, 22:2, 193-208
- Jacob L. Nelson & Nicole S. Dahmen, (2023), [*Appealing to News Audiences or News Funders? An Empirical Analysis of the Solutions Journalism Network's Revenue Project*](#), Journalism Practice.
- Elia Powers & Alex Curry (2019), [*No quick fix: How Journalists Assess the Impact and Define the Boundaries of Solutions Journalism*](#). Journalism Studies, 20:15, 2237-2257
- Benjamin Toff & Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, (2022), [*How news feels: Anticipated Anxiety as a Factor in News Avoidance and Barrier to Political Engagement*](#). Political Communication, 39:6, 697-714
- Simi Jan (2022), [*Kære Kabul*](#), People's Press.

Like me, the five correspondents I spoke to are not that bothered about definitions or empirical research. They simply want to challenge the notion, “if it bleeds, it leads”. They know only that their audience’s behaviour has changed rapidly, and the information people want and need in 2023 goes beyond just an accurate summary of problems that can be accessed on so many other information platforms.

They also know that the definition of what they do in the field is a lot more fluid than textbooks suggest: journalism is what is possible under the given conditions. It’s unlikely that every story filed will conform to the strictest definitions of a constructive solution approach, which typically calls for evidence-based analysis.

Correspondents are typically alone in the task of covering a country – sometimes even an entire continent. They have limited time and resources, and their editors are looking for a combination of breaking news and features.

But their motives and depth of experience is shared. We’ll meet Søren Bendixen who reports for the Danish Broadcasting Corporation (DR) from Africa, Simi Jan, who reports for TV2 from the Middle East and Afghanistan, Matilde Kimer who reports for DR from Russia and Ukraine, Jesper Steinmetz who reports for TV2 from the U.S., and Jørgen Ullerup who reports for *Jyllands-Posten* from France and Russia.

The benefit of hindsight

But, first, meet Steffen Jensen, who recently retired after 35 years of reporting from the Middle East for TV2.

Speaking to Danish magazine, *Journalisten*, about his three decades in the field, Jensen said: “All the news I have made daily is just a ripple on the surface of what really matters”.⁸



Steffen Jensen, Credit: Press Photo

There were a lot of good stories about progress and development from the Middle East, he said, that he has not been allowed to cover.

“It annoys me that I have only covered war, chaos, fanaticism, and violence, when there are so many interesting things going on in the Middle East in the field of art, social politics, yes, in all possible fields. The stories about war, terror and misfortune completely block out other nuances of reality.”

With retirement approaching, he went to his boss with the hope of correcting the imbalance he felt his conflict-centric coverage of the Middle East had helped create.

“I told my boss that for over 30 years I have been covering the Middle East according to the same old, distorted news criteria that force us to go wrong. I think this is a problem, because I have helped increase fear and lack of understanding of what is happening in a region where a lot of different things are going on. I would like to do something about these things,” Jensen said. “My boss smiled and said, ‘Yes, that sounds really interesting, but where do you intend to publish it?’ By implication: not on the national TV channels.”

⁸ Journalisten, March 8th 2023, 'Efter 35 år i krigzonen kaster Steffen Jensen lange blikke efter en helt anden type journalistik'

Jensen's story is not unique; ask correspondents from that period and many will have been given similar marching orders. That's why it's so remarkable that a silent revolution seems to be happening in Danish media now. All the correspondents I spoke to say their editors are open to hearing constructive solution pitches. To different extents, of course – and, for some, only after the daily breaking news is done. But the attitude that Jensen fought against is not what correspondents say they face today.

A fresh addition to the correspondence toolkit

Africa correspondent Søren Bendixen has had a change in perspective. “I can't sell bad news. If I don't find the constructive approach, it is very difficult for me to argue for a story,” he told me.⁹



Søren Bendixen, Credit: DR Nyheder, Type 1

“When the request for more constructive news was promoted by [Denmark's biggest public service radio operation] DR back in 2008, I was annoyed. I had just returned from Congo and there was misery all over the place. But today, 15 years later, I'm in a different place.

“When I am doing the daily news and people, for example, start shooting at each other in Sudan, I can't take a constructive approach. But when I plan to go out on reportage it will be with a constructive aim. I meet those who try to do something different. It is a big part of what I see in Africa. I see a lot of misery, but I also see people who are trying to make a positive change,” he said.

“I don't need to turn my perspective upside down or try to sell something I can't vouch for. But the two aspects are a good combination,” he said, adding that pitching constructive solution stories is now a better path to getting resources assigned.

“If I suggest a story without a constructive element my editors are not likely to approve. I don't need to do a detailed budget for every story, but I need to be rather

⁹ Interview with Søren Bendixen, 22 May 2023.

precise about what I imagine the outcome will be. These are expensive productions, and I don't have unlimited access to [fill DR outlets airtime] in a week," he said.

The same is true at TV2, Denmark's second biggest public service media outlet.



Jesper Steinmetz, Credit: Supplied

"The reaction from my editors to constructive news is very positive. They love stories that surprises. It isn't hard to sell," said Jesper Steinmetz, who has been a correspondent in the U.S. for 13 years.¹⁰

"I have never met a 'no' when I came with an idea from a constructive angle," he said. Particularly if the constructive or innovative approach is one that TV2 audiences can relate to.

"My news station wants people who say 'I'. We don't want generalists or experts who talks about other people and haven't got anything at risk. We need to be so close that you can smell the smoke of powder," he said.

Jørgen Ullerup is one of the most experienced correspondents in Denmark and has been reporting for one of its biggest daily newspapers, *Jyllands-Posten*, for more than 30 years.



Jørgen Ullerup, Credit: Supplied

¹⁰ Interview with Jesper Steinmetz, 17 May 2023.

“The newsroom very much likes to publish stories that can inspire the Danish readers and politicians,” he said, adding that the approach to constructive solution news has changed.¹¹

“There was a misunderstanding about constructive news. It was seen as positive news, or news in favour of the government (as it is known in totalitarian countries). But that attitude has changed, and it is no longer the case. When I suggest a story that might inspire or tell about something innovative my editors are pleased.”

Simi Jan, who has been a correspondent for TV2 in Pakistan and Afghanistan since 2006, said she had seen the same development.



Simi Jan, Credit: Supplied

“Many media organisations and prominent journalist realise that we must be more constructive. We will lose our viewers if we don’t. There is an appetite for constructive news, and we need to do more,” she said.¹²

Even in a warzone like Ukraine it is possible to do constructive news. Matilde Kimer has been reporting from Russia and Ukraine for DR for the past 20 years.



Matilde Kimer, Credit: DR/Lau Svensson

¹¹ Interview with Jørgen Ullerup, 24 May 2023.

¹² Interview with Simi Jan, 30 May 2023.

“I remember when constructive journalism was introduced. People’s perception was that it was positive stories such as funny cats and so on. But today there is a quite different focus, and I would say that we talk about it a lot,” she said.¹³

“There is a limit to how much misery a normal human being can take. If we keep throwing bullets and blown away arms and legs in the face of the viewers, they will shut their attention down. Of course, they do. And I do myself too, by the way. There is a risk of the viewers could get a kind of filter in front of the eyes because they can’t deal with more misery,” she said.

“Too often we have aggravated the ‘it’s-all-gone-to-hell’ feeling. Reporting from war can be very interesting and dangerous. But then what? Why is that important? Does it move me for the 90 seconds it runs past the screen?”

“In Ukraine we have tried to look for constructive angles. I don’t think that we have succeeded all the time, but we have tried. We have tried to do stories about the nature of human beings and their everyday life,” she said.

Showing their receipts

We’ve established by now that I am a fan of constructive solutions, but I was still surprised to find that every correspondent I spoke to had embraced the notion that stories needn’t just bleed to lead – those that ignite hope can also be in scope.

When I asked the correspondents for evidence that they’d implemented the constructive solution approach, they all had examples.

When Bendixen covered extreme drought in Kenya, he interviewed a couple producing and selling milk from camels. The drought had made it near impossible to provide enough water for cow herds, so they had found a more sustainable approach. The story was aired in a primetime slot.

“The background was tragic, but I was allowed to tell the full story in our special news broadcast on a Sunday, which is our most important of the week. That would never have happened if I hadn’t found a constructive angle. You can argue I devoted too much time on their story instead of reporting about the catastrophe. But on the other hand, I got twice as many to watch the story. And I think both parts of the story are important,” Bendixen said.

Steinmetz told me about a story that provides an interesting example of what is seen as constructive solution journalism from the Danish perspective. He covered a firm in Alabama that produced bulletproof classrooms to be ready for school shootings.

¹³ Interview with Matilde Kimer, 26 May 2023.

“Seen from a Danish perspective it is crazy to introduce such classrooms instead of reducing the number of guns. But it also tells a story about America. We know there will be more shootings and school kids who are in danger of being killed. So, what do we do to prevent this from happening? This firm has come up with a solution, that also from a television perspective is a great story,” Steinmetz said.

“It is constructive since it is an image of what the Americans do to solve their basic problem. When it is shown in Denmark it will surprise and shock some of the viewers. It’s my most important task as a correspondent to tell the viewers what they didn’t expect or what doesn’t fit with their picture of the U.S.,” he said.

Jan often looks for constructive angles, even amid misery. For example, when reporting on the Syrian refugee crisis, “I portrayed a small Turkish organisation who collect money and send bread to refugees on both sides of the border.”

“I started the story by showing how they baked the bread in the way they like it in Syria. I showed that these people helped by making something that was important to the refugees. It was inspiring that people were doing something constructive,” Jan said.

She had examples from Afghanistan, too: “I have also covered a home for women in crisis in Kabul. The women learnt to sew and will be able to earn money and shape their own future. I choose to [report on] the women to show how sewing gives them hope, unity and possibilities in life.

“The world is not all about people crying. I meet people in the worst situations imaginable and I am always fascinated because people survive and still hope for a better future. Hope is the only tool to survive all these difficult situations,” she said.

“When Kabul fell [in 2022] teachers started to help girls go to secret and forbidden schools. I talk to the teachers who said we need to do something to help our daughters and our students. We can’t just give up because Taliban has taken Afghanistan. Is it constructive? Hell, yeah. It is important so the viewers don’t think: they are all victims.”

Many of her colleagues echo that sentiment: they want to tell stories that challenge stereotypes and prejudice, and give their audience a chance to empathise with humans wherever they report from.

Kimer said constructive stories are the most satisfying to work on. “I have two examples. There was a bunch of Russians students who paired young linguistic students with retired Russian women to practice the language. The students and

women typically talked for two hours a week.” Her story reflected ingenuity that not only met the needs of the students but lessened isolation of the elderly.

“I also did a story about a Russian veteran who made a pizzeria where only veterans could be employed. I think it presented a solution to the problem that veterans couldn’t find work. The stories are a contrast to the common perception of the country,” said Kimer, who has won several prizes for her work, including one for coverage of a wedding in the midst of bombing in Kharkiv, Ukraine.

That story was not strictly constructive solution journalism, but it is a story about hope and will to keep living in wartime. Or, as the bride puts it: “Russia should know that they can’t kill love.”

In August 2022, Kimer was expelled from Russia. The reasoning was unclear, but it’s likely the government wanted to suppress coverage of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Back in Denmark, she and her colleagues conceptualised a new programme, *Moskva-kontoret* (The Moscow office) to introduce nuance to the war coverage.

“[The war] has provoked me enormously. I have a great affection for Ukraine. But when people hate all Russians and seem to think that the Russians have some sort of genetic weakness for being violent and evil, it makes me a little mad. It is a simple and lazy way to see things. It is also dangerous. I have tried to make it my mission before and after the war to focus on the nuances,” she said.

Ullerup’s most recent example was from an interview with a Russian now living in Paris. “It was constructive in the sense that he had started an NGO and works together with 300 lawyers to defend Russian citizens when they have trouble with Putin and the authorities. I chose him because there was a constructive aspect to his work,” he said.

What are the barriers?

I would love to end this paper there: constructive solution journalism is being welcomed in all sorts of newsrooms, and even correspondents working in the most prohibitive environments are finding way to implement it – and are being supported to do so by commissioning editors.

But that’s not the constructive solution way. We must consider the obstacles and challenges to using this approach, too.

The most obvious one, as Kimer put it: “To be honest, these are the stories you can do after you have delivered what you need to do [straight news]. Is it good, is it bad? It’s the reality. You are seldom allowed to do research for a week for a constructive story,” she said.

So, while editors at DR want more focus on constructive news, it is often up to the correspondent to find the time to do it.

Several of her colleagues mentioned the same obstacle: when news is breaking, there isn't always time to find the constructive angle.

"I've covered many school shootings unfortunately," said U.S. correspondent Steinmetz. "Often we go there, and people are gathering around the school or the supermarket. It's relatively easy to find someone who wants to talk [but] in these situations, there is no time to do constructive angles. It comes later."

Jan added: "On the first and the second day it is the actual breaking news. And then after a few days there is an openness towards other angles."

Ullerup said the pressure on correspondents is another important barrier to doing features and constructive solution news. "When I started at *Jyllands-Posten*, we were 25 correspondents. Now we are around a handful left," he said. That means a correspondent in Paris must be ready to pivot to news on topics in other parts of the world. "Every third story I do is still on Ukraine," he said.

These answers resonated well with what Tina Rosenberg from the Solutions Journalism Network said when I interviewed her: "Solutions journalism is not a tool for breaking news. If you are covering 'here is what happened today with the Biden administration', you can't use solutions journalism. It a tool for doing feature stories. You can choose an issue – for example, something to do with climate, health, or poverty – and look for some solution," she said.

This leaves editors and management with a choice: if they want to give the audience more constructive solution stories and more nuanced coverage of the world, they should rely to a higher degree on wires for breaking news and let the correspondents focus on doing features. And why not? The coverage from the wires is almost identical to what their correspondents will duplicate anyway.

I asked the correspondents I spoke to about what percentage of their time was spent covering breaking versus constructive solution stories.

"It is difficult to measure how much constructive reporting I'm doing," said Bendixen, "because I do different things on radio, online and TV. But when I'm going out in the field it is close to 50/50." His colleague Kimer had the same estimate, but warned this might vary depending on what one considers counts as constructive solution journalism.

Rosenberg said the opportunity to engage in more feature work might depend on where you are assigned. “I always thought that the best job would be to be a correspondent in [a region under-reported by the *New York Times*], where there are fewer demands for breaking news. In these regions you can spend more time doing feature stories, which are a lot more interesting,” she said.

The (constructive) revolution will be televised

Returning to my starting point and the Israeli checkpoint where I hit the ground more than 20 years ago, it is clear that things have begun to change.

For decades, as Jensen can attest, we told the same stories of despair, terror, war, and tragedy from the Middle East. But the correspondents I spoke to suggest a growing awareness of the need for telling a broader story – the whole story. Not just in the Middle East, but around the world.

There is an awareness that constructive solution stories need to be told because they are an important part of reality. And they aid in one of the most important jobs of a correspondent: tackling stereotypes and prejudice.

Correspondents who want to adopt this route will have an easier time than Jensen and me: for starters, editors are showing an appetite for constructive solution angles. Second, the audience is rewarding these narratives with attention.

It’s nothing short of a revolution in what Rosenberg rightly described as a “very defensive profession”.

With more leeway to rely on wires for breaking coverage, correspondents will have more time to deliver stories from the other side of the coin.

I, for one, cannot wait to get started.

Acknowledgements

Three months at Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism are amazing to say the least. Words cannot express my gratitude towards JP Politiken who gave me the chance. It has been a true privilege to be given time, advice, and financial safeguarding to be able to devote time to the fellowship.

The same goes for the staff at Reuters who made the fellowship truly rewarding. Especially Caithlin Mercer for making an atmosphere ideal for leaning and thriving.

Also, I have learned much more than I hoped for from the rest of the fellows – no one mentioned, and no one forgotten. It has been a truly international and inspiring group and I'm happy and humble to have been a part of it.

I would also like to acknowledge my friends at the Constructive Institute in Denmark. Especially Orla Borg and Ulrik Haagerup for help with this paper. But most important it is worth acknowledging them for the courage to establish the institute back in 2017 at a time when Constructive Journalism was neglected and ridiculed.

Finally, thanks to my partner, Hanne Sundin, for patiently reading my text and correcting mistakes. I have lived and worked in the Danish language for decades and writing in English was a challenge. I couldn't have done this without you.