



Journalist Fellowship Paper

The potential for constructive journalism in Trade Union reporting

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Introduction

The solution to the problem you see in life is to live in a way that makes the problematic disappear – Ludwig Wittgenstein

Journalists are supposed to be critical by nature, but has our profession become so jaded that we can no longer report on hope and progress without being labelled propagandists or cult members?

Over the past six months, while researching the potential of constructive journalism for the Norwegian trade magazine where I work, it has seemed that way. I have constantly found myself defending the principles of constructive journalism, only to be met with scepticism and dismissal: “That’s not news; it’s just PR!”

Most frequently, I find myself explaining what constructive journalism is not: it is not a replacement for investigative or breaking news, it is not toxic positivity, it is not superficial “happy” or “feel good” news.

It is a method of reporting about what works in our society through a suitably critical journalistic lens.

Fagbladet, my newsroom, serves members of a trade union of public sector workers. They need to hear about the highly qualified people among them who have achieved good results when it comes to ensuring our everyday safety, wellbeing, and the government’s bottom line. That is the very DNA of a trade union.

Of course, they also need to read about what politicians, the administration, the courts, and other actors in the organised and unorganised labour market are doing. They need to know how it will affect the working conditions of Norwegian workers.

That is the role of journalism: to equip people with the information they need to make good decisions. But just as they need information about what isn’t working so that they can counter it, they also need information about what is working so that they can emulate it.

I am an optimist. I want to write about what might take society a little further. When we chronicle only the problems – “increase in school violence”, “libraries shorten opening hours”, “housing crisis intensifies” – we inadvertently support the rise of authoritarian tendencies that seek immediate, simplistic solutions.

To complete this project, I have taken a constructive approach. Who makes constructivism work, and how do they manage it? What are the lessons we can learn from them? What do they think constructive journalism is, and how can we reach agreement on what it is to facilitate better discussions about when we should use it?

Trade unions in Norway

“We can thank God for the Christmas and Easter holidays, but we must thank the union for the rest of them.” – Anonymous Norwegian witticism

Fagbladet, the trade union magazine where I work, is a crucial voice for public sector workers in Norway. Our mission is to serve members of [Fagforbundet](#), the Norwegian Union of Municipal and General Employees, which is the largest trade union in Norway.¹ Fagforbundet is a part of the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO) and represents a wide range of professions in the public sector, including local and county government, healthcare, and education.

With the help of constructive journalism, our newsroom finds and presents ideas and the people behind them who, in a time of cutbacks and pressure, still achieve remarkable results.

We write about the [chef at the health centre](#) in the municipality of Løten, whose cooking sends the smell of food wafting down the hallways, making residents hungry and offering the promise of company during meals.² We write about the [health worker](#) in the municipality of Finnsnes, who takes a resident moose hunting, despite the fact that the resident is in a heavy electric wheelchair and the trails are difficult to manoeuvre.³

Both go above and beyond to deliver and enhance the quality of life. They are proud of their profession and show what is possible. It does not cost the municipality anything extra, yet the value of the service improves, and both the municipality and residents reap the benefits: better services for the users and higher professional pride for the employees. Some make it happen.

In Norway, there is broad cross-party political agreement that having a high proportion of unionised people in society is a good thing, and that strong trade unions should remain independent of party politics. In [the Norwegian model](#), trade unions are co-players in the development of society; government, employers’

¹ <https://www.fagforbundet.no/international/>

² <https://fagbladet.no/sykehjem/pa-dette-sykehjemmet-lager-de-lukten-av-barndommens-jul-6.91.652985.54ee2ba6e1>

³ Fagbladet, 2022. Fagbladet 2022 09. Issuu. pp. 22-25. Available at: https://issuu.com/fagbladet/docs/fagbladet_2022_09 [Accessed 1 August 2024].

associations, and labour unions collaborate in a tripartite system.⁴ This system aims to balance economic growth, social welfare, and labour market stability.

The three main ingredients for success are a strong welfare state, collective bargaining with negotiations between employers and employees on wages and working conditions, and inclusive policymaking with joint decision-making processes involving all three parties to ensure fair and balanced policies.

Companies that cooperate with the trade unions and provide good working conditions – including health and safety, fair wages and ample holidays – do well in Norway. Their employees feel a sense of professional and company pride. Some companies go further, offering further education, scholarships and [co-determination](#) in the workplace.⁵

The role of journalism in Norway's trade union model

Quality journalism about work life and working conditions can contribute to social development by both serving as watchdog to the values outlined above, and highlighting workplaces that deliver on the work that a union stands for.

At *Fagbladet*, we believe that credible journalism can increase members' knowledge of their own profession, showcase the importance of their work, and provide a platform for addressing injustice and bias – both in our members' own workplaces and in society in general.

Often, our outlet doubles as a connection between union members and various associations' decision-making bodies – we are a channel of information.

In this context, what is the role of constructive journalism? More to the point: what is constructive journalism?

⁴ <https://www.norden.org/en/info-norden/trade-unions-norway>

⁵ Saxena, A., 2020. The Case for Codetermination: Advantages of Worker Representation. *Brown Political Review*. Available at: <https://brownpoliticalreview.org/2020/12/the-case-for-codetermination-advantages-of-worker-representation/> [Accessed 1 August 2024].

What is constructive journalism?

“Whatever a patron desires to get published is advertising; whatever he wants to keep out of the paper is news.” – The Fourth Estate newspaper trade journal, 1918

Journalistic icons like Joseph Pulitzer, William Randolph Hearst and Lord Northcliffe, who owned scores of English newspapers at the turn of the last century, are among those most often credited for various iterations of this quote.

Peter Bro, who leads the Centre for Journalism at Syddansk University in Denmark, has chronicled how figures like Pulitzer, Hearst, and Northcliffe amassed huge fortunes by presenting the world with its problems and dramas.⁶ Together these men crafted the earliest model of successful journalism, and their approach became a fixture for the first generation of journalists – a tradition that remains strong today.

This might be one reason a term like “constructive journalism” is so easy to misconstrue and mock. It is not easy to grasp a new model when it seems to fly in the face of foundational principles that were once profitable. However, as Bro writes, Pulitzer and Hearst were both proponents of an early form of constructive journalism called “action journalism”.

Ida Løvdahl Alvsen, a doctoral candidate researching journalism at Nord University in Norway, said constructive journalism is about “seeing the world with both eyes” instead of just one. But she has had trouble getting journalists to grasp that.

“The challenge is constantly trying to get people to understand what I am actually talking about,” said Alvsen, “to get them out of their trench, where they think I am attacking them and threatening everything they know. The classic misconceptions are that I want us to stop being critical; that I think we should [...] just write positive stories; and that ‘constructive’ stories cannot be critical.”

⁶ Peter Bro, (2023), *Constructive Journalism: Precedents, Principles, and Practices* (1st ed.). Routledge.

Writing for [Aftenposten Innsikt](#) magazine, Alvsen identified six different approaches to constructive journalism.⁷

1. Explanatory journalism: Goes deeper and into more detail on important topics and events and can be seen as a counterweight to breaking news.

2. Prospective journalism: Discusses possible future scenarios. Deals with planning concrete possibilities, predictions or thought experiments about the future.

3. Peace journalism: Takes war or conflict as a point of departure, and looks, for example, at the root of the problems: who works preventatively, and what opportunities exist for the future?

4. Restorative narrative: Similar to peace journalism, but is more about social problems and addresses underlying factors that have led to the situation and describes measures that can be taken.

5. Solution journalism: Deals with people, institutions or societies that work towards solutions. Also considers the solution itself – whether it works, how it works and what limitations it has.

6. Civic/public journalism: Seeks to involve the journalist and the public in the political process. The aim is to inspire political commitment. Examples could be facilitating a public debate or meetings between those in power and the public.

It's hard work, too. As the editor of the BBC's *The Happy Pod*, Karen Martin, put it: "There are no press conferences for good news. You have to look for them yourself."

The Constructive Institute

The Constructive Institute was established in 2017 at Aarhus University in Denmark by Ulrik Haagerup, a Danish investigative journalist who spent two decades leading top newsrooms across Denmark. He felt that an overemphasis on negative news was giving audiences a limited world view.

Today the institute arranges conferences, workshops, and other events around the world. It also hosts a fellowship programme where journalists experiment with new

⁷ <https://www.aftenposteninnsikt.no/kulturtrender/konstruktiv-journalistikk-se-verden-med-begge-ynene>

ways of working with constructive journalism, for example, in the coverage of politics, sports, and science.

Haagerup is always at pains to stress: constructive journalism is *not* an alternative to investigative reporting. Instead, it is an additional tool and a mindset. After all: a journalist cannot practice constructivism in the first place if there is not a well-documented problem or challenge to be constructive about.

“My biggest fear is that constructive journalism will be equated with positive journalism, or activism,” Haagerup said, “where the media tells us what needs to be done. It is for this reason that I have been so cautious and precise with the definition: constructive journalism builds on documented problems.”

Constructive journalism should be rigorous and critical in its approach, both when it comes to reporting on problems and on progress. It covers responses to well-documented problems, changing the focal point of the story from the problem itself to efforts to solve it.

Conceptual clarity

As Bro writes, the early proponents of the constructive journalism approach did not do much to contribute to its “conceptual clarity”. Other researchers have also noted that the definition of the concept is somewhat vague. The history of journalism tells us that any time an active movement has developed, a lack of conceptual precision and authoritative accounting has eventually led to its demise.

Think about Gonzo Journalism from the 1970s. Popularised by Hunter S. Thompson, this was a style of journalism that set the journalist as a central character in the story. Because it lacked a clear and consistent methodology, it became more and more about the journalist’s experience and less about objective reporting. Its heavy reliance on the journalist’s perspective, and an emerging tendency to blend fact and fiction, left questions about its reliability and accuracy.

Constructive journalism is still a relatively new approach, and while it has not met its demise, there have been challenges wrought by its lack of conceptual precision and the definition of clear boundaries. What exactly constitutes a “constructive” story? How do journalists remain objective while highlighting solutions?

These questions, and others, were met with varied interpretations and practices among different news organisations. Without a precise framework, some constructive journalism efforts have been criticised for being overly optimistic or lacking in critical analysis.

This has fed scepticism about the movement's viability and effectiveness, hampering widespread adoption and consistent practice.

So here we have the problem defined. But, as we are taking a constructive approach to this project: where is it working, and how?

Where is it working?

“Everyone you will ever meet knows something you don’t.” – Bill Nye, science communicator

To further my ability to “see with both eyes” on the subject of constructivist journalism, I spoke to editors at in the UK, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark. Their unique approaches to constructivism lend clarity to the question of what might constitute a clearer definition of the genre.

Norway: interactive constructivism

Benedicte Fjelly, Ingrid Tinmannsvik and Vigdis Holmaas all work with constructive journalism at NRK, the Norwegian public broadcaster. Holmaas has also written the only Norwegian book on the subject. The broadcaster has stated its ambitious goal is to become the best Nordic country in the practice of constructive journalism.

Fjelly is project leader for public dialogue and constructive journalism in the District Division at NRK. She told me, “If we get too hung up on strict definitions of constructive journalism, I think we make it difficult for ourselves. There is a danger that it will be left to an ‘elite’ to have the power to define. We must make constructive journalism more widespread, not narrow it down to a select few.”

Nevertheless, the NRK definition has some unifying principles: their stories look for solutions to a problem. Where there exists a conflict or imbalance, the mission is to find and report a nuanced picture that shows different sides to a story, seeking out groups that we do not often hear from.

For this team, creating a dialogue with the public is important. One example followed reports that the [Salvation Army](#) was experiencing longer queues for food banks.⁸ The audience of NRK was invited to give suggestions on how the queues could be reduced. A story was written about all the interesting ideas gathered, and these were presented to politicians in the municipality and asked if they were inspired to take action based on them.

⁸ https://www.nrk.no/buskerud/dette-svarte-folk-om-matkoer_-_-kjenner-det-raser-inni-meg_-1.16579205

As Fjelly puts it: “I see this as a way of using dialogue with the public in a productive manner, a way of driving dialogue. This, to me, is constructive journalism.”

Fjelly also thinks there is room for more soft news to be covered constructively, such as sharing recipes or baking tips when the *Norwegian Bake Off* was airing.

NRK journalists Caroline Bækkelund Hauge and Tordis Gauteplass spend 50% of their time on constructive journalism.

“We have the definition NRK uses in the back of our minds. But we probably focus most of all on issues where there is hope and solutions. Where there is a problem, we are going to write about, we will also find a human being behind it.”

Hauge said they explain the problem, show what has improved or been solved, and then offer a twist. For example, for [World Mental Health Day](#) they put a spotlight on the high prevalence of male suicide.⁹ Their twist was to incorporate rapid mental health care in their coverage, an offering that not many people know about.

As Tinmannsvik said: “We already use it. But how can we as a newsroom do more and make more motivating journalism, as well as working on the ownership?”

Sweden: highlight individual counter forces to the issues

Eva Landahl was responsible for debates, election coverage and news programs at SVT (the Swedish national broadcaster). She said SVT produces two or three constructive pieces of news a week. Examples include reporting on gang violence by looking for [local efforts](#) to solve the problem.¹⁰

“SVT has chosen a narrow definition [of constructive journalism]. There must always be a problem to solve. We tell about opposing forces in the environment, gang crime, education failures, floods and the spread of drugs,” she said.

Landahl wants the audience to know and learn about counter forces that are set in motion by society. Failure to do so, she said, creates a false image of the world and leaves the audience disillusioned. Constructive journalism highlights remarkable individual responses more prominently than the issue or problem that is being addressed. In doing so, it brings complex problems to a human level and highlights how they are being countered.

⁹ https://www.nrk.no/video/rask-psykisk-helsehjelp-ga-vetle-29-et-nytt-liv_93d8b107-3e0d-47fc-95a5-37c300dbb5ef

¹⁰ <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/sormland/gymnasieeleven-maja-det-blir-enklare-att-veta-hur-man-ska-agera>

“We have a responsibility to tell the story and make people interested and inspired. We are not responsible for their actions; it is politicians that must take responsibility for that.”

Finland: start with a problem, look to the future

Jonas Jungar is Head of Content, Journalism and Ethics at Yle (the Finnish national broadcaster). He said their Swedish offering was the first to experiment with constructive journalism in Finland, as far back as 2013.

“But this was over 10 years ago, so the concept of constructive journalism may feel a bit like ‘yesterday’s news’. It was very much on everyone’s lips in the industry for the first few years, but has since fallen a bit into oblivion, even though it is certainly more needed than ever.”

When Yle was actively working with constructive journalism, the criteria was having a clear starting point (in the form of a problem) that can be moved by focusing on the future and contributing solutions, lessons, visions, plans, or inspiration.

Jungar was clear: constructive journalism is not “nice” or “cosy” stories about newborn lion cubs at the zoo or lottery winners; it must be related to a social problem or challenge.

United Kingdom: siloed, or used as needed?

Although I spoke to the BBC and the *Guardian*, I did not come away with a clear impression of the British approach to constructive journalism.

Martin, editor of [The Happy Pod](#) at the BBC World Service, explained her 30-minute weekly podcast is not incorporated into the BBC’s daily news strategy per se, but exists as a complementary audio product.¹¹ “The news can be a bit bleak,” she said. “Here’s half an hour of cheerful humanity that our listeners asked for. It aims to make you smile, maybe shed a happy tear and remind you there is good in the world. We don’t call it ‘constructive journalism’; no one uses that expression [outside of] media companies. We call it ‘joyful journalism’ – stories to make your heart sing.”

This does not strictly fall into the category of what the Danish institute’s Haagerup considers constructive journalism. These, he said, are feel-good stories. This sort of story is entertainment – which absolutely belongs in a diverse media landscape – but it is not a story that solves a known problem.

There was no particular person or team at the *Guardian* who could speak to constructive journalism in detail, although employees did ask around and offered

¹¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0f9f0k0>

[Reclaim your brain](#) – a series about the time we spend on our phones and how to get time back – as an example of their constructive efforts.¹² The *Guardian's* environment journalism also often features solutions-based reporting on the climate crisis.

The Fagbladet approach: objectivity is key

My editor at *Fagbladet*, Eva Ler Nilsen, explained that journalists needed to be particularly careful to prove that their constructive journalism efforts were not public relations efforts.

“Ideally, constructive journalism would be the ultimate form of objective journalism, but I see that some people may distrust us there since we are published by a member of the LO union and some accuse us of proximity to the sources or publisher,” she said.

She said *Fagsbladet* editorial staff are good at striking balance, not taking sides in an issue or promoting a particular view, nor tipping over into activism in the editorial space. The credibility of the product depends on us not connecting too closely to our publisher, but having a critical eye also on them and their priorities.

Fagbladet uses constructive journalism in columns, both in print and digitally. Many people are “conflict saturated” after a day at work; they can’t stand any more descriptions of misery. For this reason, it is important to create an editorial product that clearly offers more, including a chance to learn, find answers, and be inspired.

¹² <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/series/reclaim-your-brain>

What are the problems constructive journalism seeks to solve?

“Without changing our way of thinking, we cannot solve the problems we have created with our way of thinking.” – Albert Einstein, as quoted in Politiken by Ulrik Haagerup

The [2024 Reuters Digital News Report](#) gauged how news audiences think about news avoidance. An exclusive deep-dive into the Norwegian data provided by director of research Richard Fletcher revealed 1 in 3 surveyed (31%) said they avoid news often or sometimes. Last year, that figure was at 23% (+8 pp).

In *Avoiding the News* by Benjamin Toff, Ruth Palmer and Rasmus K. Nielsen, the authors argue there are five things news media can do to respond to news avoidance.¹⁵ To paraphrase:

- 1. Respond to how news feels.** Many people, not just consistent news avoiders, say news is depressing, irrelevant, unintelligible, and that there isn't anything they can do about the problems they see in the news anyway.
- 2. Take communities and identities seriously.** A good way to help people see more value in news is to try to emphasise the social benefits of news use and to foster new and more inclusive news communities where few or none exist.
- 3. Package content for consistent news avoiders.** Many news avoiders being interviewed said they felt news was too time-consuming, a poor fit with daily routines, and incompatible with their caretaking responsibilities at home. A solution to this can be simple summaries to accompany in-depth pieces. In addition, personalisation and delivery also matters.
- 4. Communicate the value of journalism.** For an industry premised on communication, the news media is curiously inept at getting the point of their own

¹⁵ Toff, B., Palmer, R., and Nielsen, R.K., 2024. *Avoiding the news: Reluctant Audiences for journalism*. Columbia University Press.

work across. News offers real value to people, and real social benefits for communities and society at large, but it is important to explain and advertise this.

5. (Re)affirm editorial values and defend professional standards. News media can sometimes seem in denial about how they are seen and have rarely banded together in an effective way to address public attitudes about the contributions of their products to the greater good. Journalists tend to think their values are self-evident, but they are not to news avoiders and to many others.

This year's Digital News Report also measured public interest in news that is inspiring. In Norway, it found a stronger interest in this category of news among news avoiders: 45% of the news avoiders said it was important, compared to 41% of non-avoiders.

To combat news fatigue and avoidance we might need to communicate differently. Constructive journalism is one tool in the toolbox that aims to empower readers, foster trust in journalism and encourage public dialogue. It also adds additional layers of nuance to quality critical journalism.

Redefining the outdated role of the news industry

Journalism researcher Alvsen has found the news industry tends to misconstrue constructive journalism as something different to the daily work of journalists. She said they view it as a niche beat, and one that is resource intensive. It is also often falsely assumed that constructive journalism is not compatible with being critical and revealing.

Long before opening the Constructive Institute in 2017, Haagerup, who was serving as the news director for Danmarks Radio (DR), the Danish public broadcaster, wrote a newspaper column for [Politiken](#) in 2008.¹⁴

In it, he reflected on the main problems of the news industry, stating: “Perhaps the time is ripe for us in the press to dare to be as critical of ourselves and our own habitual thinking as we demand of all other industries we cover.”

On the other side of the Atlantic, in 2010, Tina Rosenberg and David Bornstein debuted their *Fixes* column in the *New York Times*, seeking to highlight solutions to problems rather than just problems. The column would lead directly to the creation of the Solutions Journalism Network in 2013.

¹⁴ Haagerup, U., 2008. Konstruktive nyheder. Politiken. Available at: <https://politiken.dk/debat/kroniken/art5471819/Konstruktive-nyheder> [Accessed 1 August 2024].

For Haagerup, Rosenberg, Bornstein, and others, it is not a question of practicing one or the other type of journalism. As Haagerup explained: constructive news is not an alternative to critical reporting; it is a supplementary news tool.

Encouraging more comprehensive reporting

There can be a perception that constructive journalism is “soft” or unserious. In reality, it requires heightened rigour and critical analysis to report not only the problem but also what is being done to address it, to assess whether solutions have proved viable, and to ask what questions remain.

I interviewed Peter Yeung, winner of the top prize at the inaugural Solutions Journalism Awards for his story about how [fog catchers are helping communities](#) fight drought in Lima, Peru.¹⁵ For him, it is important to distinguish between Solutions Journalism, which has a narrow scope, and constructive journalism, which has a broader scope.

“Solutions Journalism reporting tends to follow the four pillars defined by the Solutions Journalism Network: the response to a problem; insight learned from that response; evidence showing the response works; and an analysis of the response’s limitations. Wider-ranging constructive journalism might include Solutions Journalism as one of its components, but also should include multiple perspectives. A constructive journalism story is framed on the positive rather than negative aspects of communities involved and attempts to eschew simplicity in favour of nuance.”

More succinctly, I find that Solutions Journalism seeks to find and rigorously report on solutions to problems; constructive journalism seeks to follow up on news about problems with a mindset that is open to seeking both the negative and positive nuances as the story unfolds.

Addressing the negative psychological impact of news

Constant exposure to negative news can lead to what psychologists call “mean world syndrome”, where our audiences start believing the world is more dangerous and intolerant than it actually is.¹⁶

Constructive journalism can help mitigate this by providing a more balanced view. When I completed a two-day course at the Constructive Institute in 2019, I was struck by the comparison of two front pages: one showing all that had gone wrong in

¹⁵ <https://www.ajc.com/opinion/solutions-these-farmers-are-harvesting-scarce-water-from-fog/BTQRF3XETVEZRM27ACVT7OO2UM/>

¹⁶ Gerbner, G. (1998). Cultivation analysis: An overview. *Mass Communication and Society*, 1(3-4), 175-194.

the year, and the other showing all that had worked. It was remarkable how different the impact of a story about Ebola deaths versus a story about the steps that Nigeria took to eradicate it felt. One leaves readers depressed and disengaged, the other leaves readers hopeful.

It's not only audiences who are impacted by the negative psychological impact of a steady stream of hopeless news stories; journalists are impacted too. Common to most of those I have spoken to is a sense of disillusionment from working on conflicts, confrontations and misery all the time.

Journalism researcher Alvsen was among them. She said her path to constructive journalism came after feeling as though she had to dig up the conflict in every context, and if there was nothing negative to report, it was not interesting to newsroom she worked for.

Encouraging audience engagement and civic action

One goal for constructive journalism must be to increase the understanding of each other. It is important to ask ourselves, how can we find the best angle for the story? Not only look at what divides people or groups, but also what they have in common. And importantly, how can we counterbalance our own, sometimes unintentional, bias towards one group or the other?

As Yeung puts it: "What I see in [constructive journalism] is the opportunity to catalyse the betterment of society, criticising what doesn't work and elevating what has proven to work."

A balanced world view is empowering, and an empowered audience is more likely to take civic action and feel part of a community.

Impact on public dialogue and democracy

NRK's Fjelly interprets constructive journalism as a means to strengthen and develop democracy by showing a more nuanced news landscape, pointing out potential solutions, counteracting polarization, and creating dialogue with and between people.

"People around the world have access to a variety and volume of information like never before. Navigating this abundance of sources online poses real challenges, especially amid widespread fears of misinformation and outright disinformation," she said.

This leads me to my hypothesis on how constructive journalism may address polarisation. When there are stories that we can all easily agree on, readers may experience a heightened sense of community and belonging.

As journalists, we play a crucial role in shaping public discourse and influencing how the public perceives reality. When journalists focus on constructive dialogue rather than rage-baiting adversarial debates, we can foster understanding. An important facet of constructive journalism is showing a more comprehensive picture.

SVT's former debate curator Landahl said traditional news delivered a narrow and limited picture of what is happening. "Research has shown it is a problem for democracy when the news is a constant repetition of negative social problems. It favours authoritarian tendencies that seek quick solutions. This worries me as a news journalist. Ultimately, it is a problem for democracy if more and more people choose not to inform themselves."

Stemming the erosion of public trust in media

Norway is a trustful society, with a high level of trust in news and strong consumption habits, according to the latest Digital News Report figures. However, this does not mean we are immune to the global decline in trust.

In an era of "fake news" and increase polarisation, constructive journalism can help rebuild the relationship between news outlets and their audiences by offering news in a more empowering format than most social media outlets.

Here, it is crucial to underline the importance of balancing constructive stories with critical reporting. Not all news can or should be constructive, but part of journalistic integrity is addressing serious issues without bias towards either a negative or positive framing.

While there is no peer-reviewed evidence that constructive journalism brings audiences back to news or improves trust, the journalistic sources I spoke to said young journalism students in Norway react positively towards constructive journalism. Audience feedback and metrics on constructive stories were also very positive. And there is [evidence](#) that audiences are asking for more diversity in how we choose to frame news – as inspiring, and not purely as factual update.¹⁷

Increased research on the effects of constructive journalism will enable us to deploy this tool more effectively in pursuit of the goals outlined above.

¹⁷ <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2024/more-just-facts-how-news-audiences-think-about-user-needs>

Constructive journalism in the trade press

“I can’t bear to experience conflicts at work and then come home and read about the same thing when I open Fagbladet,” – A union member’s survey feedback

Constructive journalism requires a change in mindset from only seeking what is wrong in our society to also finding what is working. At *Fagbladet*, we profile and give voice to all layers of society: from nurses to firemen to churchyard workers employed by the municipalities. This is a strength our newsroom can exploit.

There are countless municipal employees who have found different solutions to problems, and from whom others can learn if their experiences are shared. These stories are just as relevant to our readers as those that highlight municipal budget shortfalls and political mismanagement.

As my editor Ler Nilsen puts it: “Our trade magazine must be the place readers look to for good answers; a publication that brings nuance, useful facts, and inspiring examples.”

Fagbladet’s most recent example of constructive journalism was a critique of working hours that included coverage of Heim municipality’s solution. Here they increased the proportion of full-time health personnel from 35% to 70% overnight through untraditional measures.

Another example of constructive coverage includes our reporting on the at-home food supply by Norwegian municipalities for the elderly and housebound. By 2031, there will be more elderly people in Norway than young people. As they age, more people will become reliant on these vital services.

To cover the state of the service, we asked all 357 municipalities how they met the dietary needs of the sick and elderly. We then profiled not only those who did not have a satisfactory answer, but also those who had implemented innovative solutions around Norway. This reportage afforded professional pride to those offering a good service, and impetus and solutions to those who did not.

It is important that we do not take sides or tip over into activism when engaging in this sort of coverage. We have to ensure our journalism is about balance and assessing evidence, highlighting flaws and shortcomings. This is far from activism.

As the editor of SVT puts it: “We should not make people do this or that. We have a responsibility to tell the story, [but] no responsibility for them acting. Politicians will have to take responsibility for this.”

Asking different questions

Dr Karen McIntyre is associate professor of multimedia journalism and director of graduate studies at the Richard T. Robertson School of Media and Culture at Virginia Commonwealth University. She sees constructive journalism as a way of “creating [more productive news stories](#), all while maintaining core journalistic functions like serving as a watchdog and remaining accountable”.¹⁸ The key question to ask in the editorial meeting then is: “Is it possible to approach this story another way?”

As Gauteplass and Bækkelund Hauge at NRK said: there is no room for constructive journalism about murder and mayhem. These are major events that must be reported straight. But once the ink has dried on the first report, is there a constructive report into how things were handled? Here, the question becomes: “Is there scope for a constructive follow-up story on this major news event?”

In my newsroom, coverage of an individual employee doing great work can be a huge confidence boost and can help them access additional resources. It’s equally empowering to colleagues on the other side of the country to hear about solutions. The question we should be asking: “Is there someone or some initiative that deserves more profile?”

When the news agenda is creating anxiety, hopelessness, or apathy, it falls to journalists to ask: “Are we providing the right balance of information for a clear-eyed view of reality?” In other words: is it as bad as we’re making it out to be?

More questions

- How many times should a problem have been reported before we ask ourselves whether a constructive approach exists?
- When should the problem be the hook, and when should the solution be the hook?
- Should there be a central department for constructive journalism, or should all journalists be equipped to take a constructive approach?
- Could this constructive story be interactive?

There are so few media that talk about what works – and why it does. At *Fagbladet*, we have access to all sorts of people at work, with all of the problems and triumphs

¹⁸ <https://soundcloud.com/demystifying-media/karen-mcintyre-podcast>

that every workplace holds. When readers come to our website, they must find something they don't find anywhere else.

A winning approach

NRK journalists Bækkelund Hauge and Gauteplass have won several prizes for their constructive journalism, and have been invited to speak at this year's [Fortellingens Kraft](#) conference.¹⁹ Their notable work includes winning a Prix award in Norway for a story about [Trond Hammer](#), a police sharpshooter who responded to the Utøya terror attacks and was later paralysed in a cycling accident. He is now being considered for a mission to the International Space Station.²⁰

Internationally, the *Chicago Tribune*, in collaboration with the Better Government Association, won a Pulitzer Prize for Local Reporting in 2022 for their investigative series [The Failures Before the Fires](#).²¹ This series exposed the systemic failures in Chicago's building enforcement that led to fatal fires. One of the notable pieces within this series was [9 Potential Solutions to Keep Chicagoans Safer From Fires](#), which provided solution-oriented recommendations to improve fire safety in the city.²²

And you'll remember the award-winning Yeung from earlier and his Chilean fog report. He also reported on a hugely-effective child mortality reduction scheme in Mali for [NPR](#), which led to a \$15 million fund being announced to extend the scheme – probably the best kind of reward for journalist effort.²³

Last but not least, I must not forget my own newsroom's success: winning [Fagpressen's Innertieren award](#) for a series of articles on topics people find difficult to talk about (and which health workers therefore find difficult to diagnose and treat), such as sex and dementia.²⁴

¹⁹

https://fortellingenskraft24.sched.com/speaker/caroline_baekkelund_hauge_og_tordis_gaut.26o9qe9i

²⁰ NRK, 2023. Trond Hammer i Beredskapstroppen, ble lam etter en sykkelulykke. Kan bli astronaut i verdensrommet. NRK, [online] Available at: https://www.nrk.no/buskerud/xl/trond-hammer-i-beredskapstroppen_-ble-lam-etter-en-sykkelulykke.-kan-bli-astronaut-i-verdensrommet.-1.16329946 [Accessed 1 August 2024].

²¹ ONA, 2022. The Failures Before the Fires. Online Journalism Awards. Available at:

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²² Illinois Answers, 2021. 9 Potential Solutions to Keep Chicagoans Safer From Fires. Illinois Answers Project. Available at: <https://illinoisanswers.org/2021/08/02/9-potential-solutions-to-keep-chicagoans-safer-from-fires/> [Accessed 1 August 2024].

²³ Yeung, P., 2019. How One Community Brought Child Mortality Down From 154 to 7 Per 1,000 Live Births. NPR, 12 July. Available at: <https://www.npr.org/2019/07/12/741541818/how-one-community-brought-child-mortality-down-from-154-to-7-per-1-000-live-births> [Accessed 1 August 2024].

²⁴ <https://fagpressen.no/aktuelt/de-beste-i-fagpressen-prisbel%C3%B8nt-torsdag-kveld>

What happens now?

“Stop being blind: we’re not mirroring the world, we are moving the world,” – Catherine Gyldensted, director of Constructive Journalism, Windesheim University

Returning to my newsroom in Norway I have a much clearer understanding of what constructive journalism is and why we should be even more intentional about using this tool in our newsroom.

Constructive stories must address a fundamental societal problem, the solution must be in progress, and we journalists must be able to examine it. It is a supplementary mindset, and not a replacement for traditional journalism.

How do we make it happen?

What I learned from my interviewees is that constructive journalism is for anyone in the newsroom to consider, but that it thrives when a few members of the editorial team are tasked with the responsibility of looking for these stories.

These journalists take responsibility for looking for constructive angles by asking: What happens now? What do we do from here? How has this problem developed? Has anyone had this problem before and solved it?

Individual human encounters are important. If there is a problem, we must look for human stories that explain it and approaches to solving it.

Cathrine Gyldensted, the director of Constructive Journalism at Windesheim University, has formulated five focus areas for constructive journalism:

1. Solutions: Cover possible solutions, if possible
2. What now?: What are possible constructive scenarios?
3. Depolarization: Beware of the polarising role of news journalism.
4. New questions: Ask about resources, learning, possible agreement when interviewing.
5. “The Rosling”: Use research data to draw the broad lines of a case. Is it a question of progress or decline? Bring in the facts as infographics to cover the context rather than individual events.

By providing more constructive and solution-oriented coverage in reporting on our unique work-related news, we can inspire others to follow suit. (For those who wish to learn more and read further, I include a reading list at Appendix 1.)

We can also help foster a more constructive dialogue between trade unions, employers and politicians. By focusing on common goals and collaboration, the audience we serve will be a step closer to better solutions.

Team-wide commitment is an important factor in the successful integration of this approach. I am lucky to have the support of an editor who also believes in this approach. As a newsroom, we have every chance of succeeding in this.

Conclusion

Coming here, I hoped to find a clear definition and a more palatable and precise term for the varied approaches to creating news that presents the world in balance, through both negative and positive lenses.

But inventing a new term is tricky. I do not want to use words “happy” or “hopeful” or “positive” – all three brings to mind a New Age guru encouraging his followers to turn a blind eye to all the misery in the world. Neither do I feel that “Solutions Journalism” is correct, as there may not always be a clear-cut solution when we approach a problem constructively.

This journalism is about balance, assessing evidence, and highlighting flaws and shortcomings. I haven’t found a term more encompassing than “constructive journalism”, even though I’ll admit that I still don’t like it very much.

I feel much more confident about the definition of what counts as constructive journalism.

- It must have a social problem at its core.
- The solution must be under way and we must be able to scrutinise it.

I see now that articles I wrote thinking they were constructive were not really constructive. They might have showcased solutions, but they didn’t always make clear the problem being addressed.

More importantly, I feel inspired about the potential of constructive journalism after interviewed so many wise and committed people working with this tool.

Who knows? Perhaps if we all keep working at this approach – keep asking these questions, and keep including them in our editorial meetings – we won’t have to call it anything; it will just be a natural part of the fabric of how we report the news of the world.

Ulrik Haagerup defines constructive journalism as a necessary evolution in journalism that aims to give the audience a more balanced and hopeful picture of the world. By including solutions and highlighting positive developments, constructive journalism can help to engage audiences, build trust, and promote a more informed and active public debate. He concludes:

“I run fast and shout loudly, and those who like it follow.”

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Appendix 1: Reading list

A call for “constructive journalism”: our interview with Ulrik Haagerup - Fondation Hironnelle - Media for Peace and Human Dignity. n.d. [online] Available at: <https://www.hironnelle.org/en/our-news/476-a-call-for-constructive-journalism-our-interview-with-ulrik-haagerup> [Accessed 1 August 2024].

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