



## Positive Psychology as a Theoretical Foundation for Constructive Journalism

Karen McIntyre & Cathrine Gyldensted

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# POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY AS A THEORETICAL FOUNDATION FOR CONSTRUCTIVE JOURNALISM

Karen McIntyre and Cathrine Gyldensted

*This article seeks to provide a theoretical foundation and justification for the innovative and interdisciplinary field of constructive journalism. Constructive journalism involves applying positive psychology techniques to the news process in an effort to strengthen the field and facilitate productive news stories, while holding true to journalism's core functions. It is this application of positive psychology methods that makes constructive journalism distinct. This paper expands existing work by identifying the broad psychological framework that is applied to journalism and the more specific constructs that apply to six individual constructive techniques. Constructive journalism has been gaining popularity in the industry but is in need of more academic research. This conceptual article intends to clarify the theory and practical application of constructive journalistic methods in an effort to provide a foundation for further research on the topic.*

**KEYWORDS** constructive journalism; positive psychology; social responsibility; solutions journalism; news

The events surrounding the Watergate era—the investigative journalism coverage that spanned two years and led to the resignation of U.S. President Richard Nixon in 1974—established a golden age of journalism. Since Watergate, however, news reports overfocus on what psychologists call the *disease model of the world*, a theory concerned with the cause and course of pathological conditions or processes (Gyldensted 2011; Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2014). Synthesizing this parallel to the news-gathering processes, it means an overfocus on conflicts, dissent, heated debate, wrongdoings, faults and weaknesses, thus resulting in an overriding negativity bias and consequently a skewed portrayal of the world (Gyldensted 2011).

We argue for an added dimension to journalism that has to do with the *well-being model of the world*—positive psychology, which gives a starting point for more precise and comprehensive reporting on reality. The International Positive Psychology Association (2017) has defined positive psychology as “the scientific study of what enables individuals and communities to thrive” (n.p.). The most prominently studied areas within positive psychology are resilience, character virtues and strengths, well-being, post-traumatic growth, positive emotions, love and prospection (Csikszentmihalyi 2014; Lopez 2011; Seligman et al. 2005; Sheldon, Kashdan, and Steger 2010). This positive psychology research is important knowledge for journalists as it can expand their knowledge of human nature. A fundamental value in journalism is portraying the world accurately. How will reporters go about this if they only report on the disease model of the world and are unaware of the well-being model of the world?

An emerging approach to news, called constructive journalism, seeks to counterbalance the skewed portrayal of the world produced by classical news journalism and strengthen traditional journalistic ethics by drawing on such positive psychology research (Gyldensted 2011). We have previously (McIntyre and Gyldensted 2017) defined constructive journalism as “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” (23).

While the application of positive psychology to journalism is new, the idea of constructive journalism, broadly speaking, was recognized in the early twentieth century. Walter Williams, the dean of the world’s first journalism school at the University of Missouri, underscored constructivity as a value in 1914:

I believe that the journalism which succeeds best—and best deserves success . . . is stoutly independent, unmoved by pride of opinion or greed of power, **constructive**, tolerant but never careless, self-controlled, patient, always respectful of its readers but always unafraid. (The Journalist’s Creed 1914, emphasis added)

Constructive journalism stands on the shoulders of an earlier concept in journalism, civic journalism, which is the idea of integrating journalism into the democratic process (McIntyre 2015; McIntyre and Gyldensted 2017). Pioneers of civic journalism (also referred to as public journalism) argued that the news media not only inform the public, but engage citizens and create public debate (Merritt 1995; Rosen 1999). Constructive journalism supports this mission, but draws from the field of positive psychology and aims to counterbalance the negativity bias and, as a possible consequence, increase societal well-being by replacing cynicism with hope and apathy with civic engagement, and by lessening polarized debate.

Journalistic values as seeking truth and reporting it, portraying the world accurately, and providing both a forum for public criticism as well as *compromise* call for constructive techniques (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2014; SPJ Code of Ethics 2014). However, the practical implementation of constructivity into news coverage has not become reality. We believe this was in part due to the missing development of concrete methods and techniques, a shortcoming that is being remedied by news organizations.

Since 2011, the use of constructive journalism has been steadily growing, especially in Northern European countries and Scandinavia (Cobben 2015, 2016). However, despite this growth in the industry, little conceptual work has been published on the subject. In this article, we argue how the positive psychology framework is congruent with journalism’s core values and should be applied to journalistic methods in order to strengthen the profession. This discussion is followed by a description of six practical applications of the concept and their connections to positive psychology literature. Finally, we provide an overview of the aspects of constructive journalism that have been studied and those that need to be explored.

## Psychology Theory Underpinning Constructive Journalism

### *The Disease Model in Psychology*

During the second half of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth, psychology and psychiatry was concerned with treating mental disorders, such as

schizophrenia, depression, dementia and mental abuse (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2014). However, psychiatrist Carl Jung recognized and was troubled by the psychopathology and negative focus (Froh 2004). With time, this focus on disease pushed psychology toward the dark and morbid recesses of the human mind and away from the deeper well-springs of human strengths and potential—mental states that are just as important and valid as pathological conditions. After World War II, the focus of psychology was solely treating abnormal behaviors and resulting mental illnesses. Scholars found that grants were easier awarded if research proposals studied pathology (Seligman and Pawelski 2003). Discontented with this approach, psychologists regenerated the academic focus and interest in the more positive aspects of human nature (Froh 2004). Maslow (1954) wrote:

The science of psychology has been far more successful on the negative than on the positive side; it has revealed to us much about man's shortcomings, his illnesses, his sins, but little about his potentialities, his virtues, his achievable aspirations, or his full psychological height. It is as if psychology had voluntarily restricted itself to only half its rightful jurisdiction, and that the darker, meaner half. (354)

As the president of the American Psychological Association, psychologist Martin Seligman proposed a new addition to traditional psychology research, namely studying and researching human strengths and virtues instead of only weaknesses and vices. The negative focus of psychology had resulted in drawbacks for the field, Seligman argued. Psychologists became victimologists and pathologizers, forgetting that people make choices and have resources and responsibility. Also, by focusing on pathology and curing illnesses, the development of interventions to make people happier was ignored (Seligman 1998). Since, the scientific domain of positive psychology has evolved.

### *The Disease Model in Journalism*

We argue that journalism traditionally sees its role in society much like traditional psychology did when it solely focused on pathology and mental illness; journalists focus on stories that involve political and institutional corruption or other societal conflicts. Both have a negative focus, despite the intention being positive (psychologists aim to help people get healthy and journalists aim to correct society by exposing its illnesses and flaws). Beginning with Watergate, "great reporting" has been "critical reporting." But, in recent decades "critical reporting" has morphed into "critical attitude reporting" instead of "critical scrutiny reporting." In other words, reporting styles characterized by thorough, fact-based, deep research, independence and nonpartisanship have evolved to include pseudocritical interviewing, stereotyping, and "he said-she said" reporting styles (Patterson 2016; Rosen 2009; Stephens 2014), in-part due to a decline in circulation and advertising revenue, newsroom staff and other resources (Barthel 2017). For example, journalists have implemented a type of pseudocritical reporting in mainstream political coverage by framing their stories in terms of negative conflicts rather than productive solutions (Patterson 2000). In this way, political coverage has become increasingly negative, cynical and conflict-based (Patterson 2000). Negativity has been established as a news value (Harcup and O'Neill 2001) and does not always refer to an anti-policy frame. However, generally, a negativity bias exists and extends beyond political news, affecting the public, the press itself and the democratic process (Gyldensted 2011; Haagerup 2015; Patterson 2016).

Core functions of modern journalism include identifying, monitoring and describing illnesses in society. Journalism, by highlighting those, acts as the Fourth Estate: Overseeing democracy and government function without abuse of power, neglect and corruption. If violations happen, perpetrators are held responsible (Schultz 1998). The press, with this focus, live up to the important societal function which indeed keeps democracies with less corruption, maladies, and abuse of power. Brunetti and Weder (2003) performed a 10-year study of press freedom and corruption in 127 countries and found states with the freest press to have the lowest corruption index. Hence, a press that serves as watchdog does have a productive and significant effect on society; therefore, the watchdog function should continue to be central to journalism. But, as in psychology, if news journalism only focuses on reporting a pathological version of the world, it is not providing comprehensive and truthful coverage. With a “disease model focus,” news journalism violates core functions of journalism such as seeking truth and reporting it and portraying the world accurately (Gyldensted 2011).

### How Positive Psychology Aligns with Journalism’s Normative Ideals

Constructive journalism aims to embrace the core values of seeking the full truth and portraying the world accurately, arguing that journalists should report equally about conflict and collaboration, regress and progress, setback and growth. As prior studies on constructive journalism have stressed (McIntyre and Gyldensted 2017; McIntyre, Dahmen, and Abdenour 2016), this approach reflects a commitment to the *social responsibility theory* of the press, or more specifically to its precursor, the Hutchins Commission, which in 1947 declared that journalists are obligated to consider society’s best interest in their newsmaking decisions (The Commission on Freedom of the Press 1947; Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm 1956).

News was never intended to focus only on negative events, despite the idea that conflict is inherent in and essential to the news (Bantz, McCorkle, and Baade 1997) and the acceptance of “bad news” is an established news value (Harcup and O’Neill 2001). The Journalist’s Creed (1914), which has been published in more than 100 languages, stressed the need for journalism to be *constructive* for it to qualify as successful journalism. Additionally, Lasswell (1948) identified the surveillance of the environment, including the disclosure of threats and opportunities, as a core function of communication. More recently, scholars have noted that journalism functions to cultivate a healthier public climate and provide citizens with the information they need to make the best decisions about their lives and society (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2014; Rosen 1999). Further, journalists have an ethical responsibility to be fair, accountable, and minimize harm (SPJ Code of Ethics 2014).

The ideas that journalism should expose the public to opportunities, facilitate a healthier public climate, and consider society’s best interests are not antiquated. Recent research has shown that journalists in non-Western countries are committed to social change and progress (Bro 2008; Hanitzsch et al. 2011; McIntyre and Sobel 2017b), and a recent survey found that U.S. journalists highly value the professional roles inherent in constructive journalism (McIntyre, Dahmen, and Abdenour 2016). This national sample of journalists valued their role to accurately portray the world—by covering stories of collaboration and progress just as often as those about conflict and destruction—stronger than any of the other 19 journalistic roles they were provided. They also said they highly appreciate other constructive roles such as acting socially responsible, contributing to society’s well-being, and alerting the public to potential opportunities. Further, a follow-

up study showed that a representative sample of American news audiences also esteemed constructive roles such as acting socially responsible and portraying the world accurately (McIntyre, Abdenour, and Dahman 2018). Skeptics of constructive journalism might perceive this practice as biased, in that it calls for journalists to take an active role, meaning they care about the effects their stories have on individuals and society (Bro 2008). However, this should not be perceived as bias, but rather as framing, or highlighting certain aspects of a story and ignoring others to create meaning (Entman 1993). Framing is inevitable (Tuchman 1978); all journalists frame their stories by choosing what topic to write about, the angle they'll pursue, which sources they interview, which quotes they choose to use, the order in which they organize the information, and the prominence given to the story in its final presentation. The idea that news events exist and journalists identify and objectively disseminate them to the public is naive. News values "are human constructions that have evolved through an informal consensus among journalists and others over time" (Berkowitz 1997, xi).

Constructive journalism calls for journalists to acknowledge that news is socially constructed, to educate themselves on the effects of their stories, and to frame their stories in ways that lead to productive change. It calls for journalists to redefine news values and to seek and cover stories of progress and collaboration in addition to stories about destruction and conflict. Constructive journalism does not stand alone in its efforts to improve society. Other journalistic forms and practices share similar aims. For example, the notion of accurately portraying the world, or genres such as peace journalism or civic journalism, also share the goal of engaging readers and pushing society forward. What sets constructive journalism apart is its concrete methodology grounded in positive psychology. And news organizations are beginning to implement these constructive methods.

### **Practical Applications and their Connections to Psychological Theory**

Constructive elements in journalism can be applied to several stages of the news process including story generation, information gathering, and production (McIntyre and Gyldensted 2017). We coined constructive journalism and described how it stems from civic journalism, and how it shares a common entity with solutions journalism, peace journalism, prospective journalism and restorative narratives (McIntyre and Gyldensted 2017). The practical application of constructive journalism has used six entryways or *elements*, most of which were introduced in McIntyre and Gyldensted (2017). These elements were classified by the Journalism School at Windesheim University of Applied Sciences in 2016 (Hermans and Gyldensted, [forthcoming](#)). This section describes the six elements, including each element's connection to positive psychology, and includes examples we have identified of how a range of international news outlets have applied them.

- (1) *Solutions: When covering problems, also add a solution-oriented framing of news.*

Early U.S. experimenters with solutions journalism include the New York-based *Solutions Journalism Network*, who saw its beginnings in 2001 and launched online in 2013 (Gyldensted 2015a). Since then the *Solutions Journalism Network* has expanded its outreach and partnerships with newsrooms and journalism schools across the U.S. *The New York Times* has a weekly blog series called *Fixes*, in which solutions to major social problems are explored. The journalists behind this series are also the founders of the *Solutions Journalism Network*.

Also, regional Danish news media like *Jysk Fynske Medier*, *P4Fyn*, *TV2 Ostjylland* and *DR SYD* have been actively reporting solution-focused news stories (van Gameren 2016b; van Schaik 2016). *Times Media Group*, one of South Africa's largest media companies, has launched a training in constructive journalism for its news editors and journalists to take on a new responsibility in engaging readers by facilitating a constructive debate and by seeking solutions to the problems for South Africa's young democracy (Gyldensted 2015b; Nevill 2015). *BBC World News* is creating a six-part series, "My Perfect Country," in which it addresses its audience's interest in solutions-based journalism by tracking down solutions for common problems that can be adopted elsewhere.

Methods applied for all aforementioned newsrooms operate on similar principles: When reporting on a problem, they move the coverage toward possible solutions to the problem. The *Solutions Journalism Network* teaches specific approaches to reporters and newsrooms in order to secure a rigorous story, all of which can be studied in their "solutions journalism toolkit" (Bansal and Martin 2015). Three key methods from this toolkit form the backbone of the solutions journalism method:

- (1) Look for the positive outlier. Many reporters solely look for conflict or highlight negative outliers. Looking for positive outliers, or stories that show progress, can result in valuable news pieces. For example, if the story topic is more gun control, look for a state or region that has succeeded in gun control. By showing that something is working in one place, the excuses for failure elsewhere are weakened.
- (2) Support the story with data. A good idea does not make for a solid solutions journalism story. These stories are investigative in nature and the progress being highlighted must be backed up with reliable data.
- (3) Conflict in solutions stories does not constitute a conflict between people or politicians but rather the tension in answering the questions, like how the protagonists go about solving a problem that has stumped so many others? How do they overcome the obstacles robustly and rigorously?

Moreover, the newsrooms mentioned have implemented constructive journalistic brainstorming as part of their editorial meetings in which the editor asks the team, while discussing the stories of the day: "How can we add a constructive take on this story?" (Thörnqvist 2018).

Research from social science identifies what motivations most effectively drive an individual toward a certain solution, and how we may find the energy to stay committed to achieving the solution (Halvorson 2010; Halvorson and Tori Higgins 2014). News audiences, who consume stories about individuals or groups working toward solutions to society's problems, will experience the emotion of elevation, which is an emotional response to witnessing acts of virtue or moral good (Haidt 2003). This emotion can motivate people to act in similarly prosocial ways. It can motivate people to turn their attention outward and help others (Haidt 2003). Moreover, researchers are also studying how, just as helplessness can be taught, so can optimism, grit and resilience—traits that relate to the process of finding solutions to social problems (Duckworth et al. 2007; Seligman 2011). Exposure to solution-focused news stories could reasonably contribute to greater social quality, or the conditions that contribute to human flourishing, including characteristics as social cohesion and empowerment (Abbott and Wallace 2012).

- (2) *Future Orientation: Adding a "What Now?" question to the traditional journalistic questions (who, what, when, where, why, how). Supplying a future orientation allows for a possible productive perspective about the future, and about society's ability to get there.*

In the Netherlands, the online news site *De Correspondent* seeks to facilitate a future oriented and visionary debate in its coverage (Gyldensted 2015a). The news outlet has named a progress correspondent who aims to cover "what's going well, in this country and beyond. And what we can do better" (Pfauth 2017, n.p.).

In the United Kingdom, the *Guardian Media Group/GMG* launched an editorial approach on how climate change would be covered in 2015. Alan Rusbridger, chairman of the GMG, stated that journalism looks too much in the rear-view mirror and needs a more future-oriented inquiry on how we can solve "the most important story of our lives" (Menon 2015, n.p.; Rusbridger 2015). *The Guardian*, under the slogan "Keep it in the ground," sought to demonstrate an example of journalistic coverage with future orientation at its core, aimed to move society constructively forward on a global issue. Future orientation can be achieved through the interviewing conducted by reporters if the temporal orientation of the questions is future oriented. For example, reporters can ask their sources how problems could be solved, how people could collaborate, or what kind of progress their sources envision (McIntyre and Gyldensted 2017).

The relevant research underpinning this element draws from prospection, which is "our ability to 'pre-experience' the future by simulating it in our minds" (Gilbert and Wilson 2007, 1352). These "simulations allow people to 'preview' events and to 'pre feel' the pleasures and pains those events will produce" (1352). Seligman et al. (2013) suggested that instead of being guided by the past, individuals can be guided by their expectations for the future. The researchers argued that rather than using what happened in the past to direct one's motivation and action, individuals can make decisions to act based on the needs and goals of their imagined future, and this goal-based behavior can be more effective than habit-based behavior.

- (3) *Depolarization: Work against polarizing dynamics created by news media in order to strengthen inclusion and diversity.*

News organizations have used this technique primarily for political reporting. During the Dutch general election in the spring of 2017, *De Correspondent* and *Algemeen Dagblad* teamed up to create depolarizing coverage under the title "Could We Talk?" (Luyendijk 2017a, 2017b). First, the two media organizations catered to opposite voter segments, so collaborating and sharing coverage was aimed to have a depolarizing effect in itself. Secondly, the voters from the right-wing party were interviewed at length in an effort to openly and curiously deflate stereotypes. The journalists, to lessen the hyperbole, made a point in asking for sources' experiences instead of their opinions. This technique was effective in de-escalating the conversation. *The New York Times* tried another depolarizing experiment following the 2016 presidential election under the title "I Voted Clinton. You Voted Trump. Let's Talk" (Barbaro 2016). *National Public Radio* has also published stories of mediated conversations between individuals with opposing political views (Brady 2017; Storycorps, n.d.).

To better understand depolarization techniques, journalists can consider Jonathan Haidt's research on moral foundations. He invites readers to think of his theory imagining a tongue with six taste buds. Recognizing that the world is not neatly divided among two

groups, liberals and conservatives, Haidt asserts that liberals tend to have a “taste” for three foundations of morality: care (versus harm), fairness (versus cheating) and liberty (versus oppression). Issues outside of these three either go unnoticed or are not given much importance. Conservative morality, however, tends to be guided by all six taste buds of moral foundations. In addition to care/harm, fairness/cheating and liberty/oppression, conservatives hold true to authority, loyalty, and sanctity and believe more passionately in respecting traditions, hierarchical organization and loyalty to groups. This helps explain why it is hard for conservatives and liberals to find common ground on many issues.

These moral foundations have evolved through history and can play a role in contributing to a less polarized society (Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009; Haidt 2012). Understanding the moral psychology explaining how liberals and conservatives view the world makes journalists more capable to understand what people deem important for society. This understanding could be weaved into the coverage of the political spectrum and taken further by asking depolarizing questions to each side guided by Haidt’s mapping of moral values. Further, journalists can help depolarize debates by recognizing their sources as individuals with a range of attitudes that do not necessarily conform to the liberal-conservative dichotomy, and by starting discussions by moving beyond a specific policy stance and rather asking individuals about their own set of personal moral values. By identifying individuals’ personal values, it may become easier to find areas of agreement and understand areas of disagreement.

- (4) *Constructive Interviewing: “Kill Your Victim.” Include a variety of questions to empower so-called victims and experts. These questions should elucidate possible resources, collaborations, common ground and solutions.*

The “Kill Your Victim” tagline was introduced in 2015 and has evolved to a more sophisticated expansion of journalistic interviewing (Gyldensted 2015a; van Gameren 2016a). In 2004, Ingrid Thörnqvist, foreign editor at SVT, became aware of how the station’s negative, chronically conflict-oriented coverage of Africa had given the Swedish population a view and knowledge of Africa that was outdated by thirty to forty years (Gyldensted 2015a). Thereafter, they started to work on applying constructive interviewing techniques (Lénart 2014). The national *Swedish Radio SR* has been implementing constructive interviewing techniques throughout its organization and was recently awarded for its coverage (Hedegaard 2017). An interviewing framework from family therapy (Tomm 1988) can be used by journalists to enhance the journalistic interviewing technique (Gyldensted 2015a; McIntyre and Gyldensted 2017). This framework provides four types of questions a therapist can use in psychotherapy sessions to bring about positive therapeutic outcomes from clients. By using the same model in journalism, similarly, constructive answers can be obtained from the interviewee.

- (1) Linear Questions (“The Detective”): Basic investigative questions that deal with “Who did what?, Where?, When?, and Why?” This type of questions helps discover the factual aspect of the problem or issue.
- (2) Circular Questions (“The Anthropologist”): This type of question discovers relevant contextual perspective behind the facts. Examples: “How did this affect you (or other things/people/etc.)?” and “What is your explanation for A or B?”
- (3) Reflexive Questions (“The Future Scientist”): In reflexive questions, the interviewer suggests a new perspective on a given topic, thereby nudging the interviewee to

reflect on a new possibility of constructive solutions to the problem or issue. These questions are future oriented. Examples: “What do you think A believes when he is in that situation?”, “How would you approach this problem?” and “What action should be taken in order to do A or B?”

- (4) Strategic Questions (“The Captain”): Direct the interviewee into commitment of the solution. These questions are future oriented. Examples: “What should be done?”, “Will you do it?” and “When will you do it?”

We argue that journalists should spend more time asking questions in the style of an anthropologist or future scientist, because these two interview questions can elicit responses that provide context and reflection. (McIntyre and Gyldensted 2017; Tomm 1988).

- (5) *The Rosling: Using data to establish whether progress or setback is happening on an issue covered journalistically.*

This element is named after Swedish professor and statistician Hans Rosling (Hermans and Gyldensted, [forthcoming](#)), whose core message was using data to explore development issues. Most often Rosling’s datasets would result in documenting fact-based societal progress rather than setbacks (Rosling, Rosling, and Rönnlund 2018). Moreover, the intent is to go from covering incidents to covering contexts. Harvard psychology professor Steven Pinker (2012, 2018) has written extensively on the theme of progress in his books, drawing on vast datasets spanning centuries to investigate how violence has declined, and using data-based graphs to argue how life expectancy, health, prosperity, safety, peace, knowledge and happiness are on the rise. Journalistically, the magazine *The Economist* (2015, 2016) states that part of its role is to also celebrate optimism and progress, often using datasets and infographics to provide oversight. This technique is further a trademark of the U.S.-based journalism magazine *The Week*, which publishes infographics showing both regress and progress and provides context on complex issues under the titles: “It Wasn’t All Bad” and “Good Week/Bad Week.”

The psychological theory relevant to this element relates to the impact on news consumers when exposed to stories about societal progress. When individuals are exposed to progress, they can reasonably be expected to experience positive emotions, which have positive effects. According to Fredrickson’s (2004) Broaden-and-Build Theory, positive emotions broaden our awareness and cultivate physical, intellectual and social resources, which can be used later. One emotion relevant to this discussion is hope. Lazarus (1999) defined hope as an emotion occurring when individuals believe something positive, which does not currently exist in their lives, can materialize, so they yearn for it. He found that hope is a vital coping resource, which is important given the literature showing that negative news has negative effects. As argued in McIntyre (2015), experiencing positive emotions, like hope, while reading a news story might direct readers’ attention toward the message in the story, causing them to be more motivated to engage with the story and its possible outcomes (Nabi 1999). Additionally, experiencing hope can result in a spiral of other positive outcomes such as optimism, feelings of control and goal motivation (Snyder 2000).

- (6) *Co-creation and empowerment: Engage and empower the public. Co-create journalistic content with citizens, strengthening civil debate.*

In order to achieve this, *De Correspondent* applies constructive journalistic elements in its coverage, co-creating content with its readers. The journalist publishes a “call” which inspires readers to offer their expertise and submit data which then makes the journalist write the story in close collaboration with readers (Harbers 2016). *De Correspondent*, which has added constructive journalism as one of its 12 core principles, openly discusses how the feedback and co-creating process with readers has influenced the coverage. This co-creation technique is similar to participatory journalism, citizen journalism or the broader practice of user-generated content. However, participatory journalism has developed slowly (Paulussen and Ugille 2008), and perhaps this is partly due to a failure of news organizations to empower potential contributors. Empowerment is a multidimensional construct comprised of meaning (value of a purpose, judged in relation to one’s own ideal or standards), competence (an individual’s belief in his or her capability to skillfully perform activities), autonomy (sense of having a choice in initiating and regulating actions) and impact (the degree to which an individual can influence strategic, administrative or operating outcomes in life/work) (Spreitzer 1995).

Research has shown that a key factor in successful citizen journalism initiatives is making individuals feel they are contributing to community building and having a valuable impact (Domingo et al. 2008; Schaffer 2007). They found that most of the online newspapers studied did not implement several of the techniques used to facilitate user-generated content (Domingo et al. 2008). But *De Correspondent* has done just that; *Hearken* and *Coral Project* are two examples of software plugins and online websystems which have been built solely to facilitate engagement and co-creation with audiences, seeking to strengthen community building, civil debate, co-creation and hence journalistic quality. Further, Örnebring (2008) found that when users did contribute, they were more likely to submit soft, human-interest material (such as a photo of a wedding) than to contribute more informative news content. Bringing readers into the hard news process through co-creation, like *De Correspondent* does, might reasonably cause readers to feel empowered, thus resulting in a successful co-creation process.

### Existing Research

Academic research on constructive journalism is in its infancy, but growing quickly. So far, scholars have focused their studies on the effects of constructive journalism (or similar methods such as solutions journalism and others), the visual components of constructive stories, the pedagogical outcomes and the international scope of the approach.

Scholars have tested the impact of constructive stories using several methods. Lab experiments have found that evoking emotions, such as hope, in news stories can have positive effects on readers (Gyldensted 2011; McIntyre 2015), and that solution-based reporting can cause readers to feel less negative and to report higher ethical intentions, particularly compared to shocking news stories (McIntyre 2017; McIntyre and Sobel 2017a). News stories with positive emotion and solution information have had a similar impact on children (Kleemans et al. 2017). Further research, including field experiments, focus groups and Twitter analysis, have found solution-oriented news stories to be associated with greater engagement levels and behavioral intentions among audiences (Curry, Stroud, and McGregor 2016; Curry and Hammonds 2014; McGregor and Stroud 2016).

Another thread of research has examined the visual elements of constructive journalism. Dahmen (2016) found through photographic analysis and interviews that

photojournalists can distinguish themselves from citizen journalists by capturing restorative narratives—stories of recovery, resilience and restoration that come long after an immediate tragedy—in their images. For example, a photojournalist might capture a restorative narrative by documenting an empowering recovery process of a mass shooting survivor. Others have examined the photos published alongside solutions journalism stories, and the impact on viewers when the message in the photo conflicts with the message in the text (Lough and McIntyre, [forthcoming](#); McIntyre, Lough, and Manzanares, [forthcoming](#)).

The pedagogy of constructive journalism, or its component solutions journalism, has been examined as well. Loizzo, Watson, and Watson (2017) found that constructive journalism MOOCs (massive open online courses) can mobilize citizen journalists concerning social justice topics. Thier (2016) similarly revealed the inspirational impact of teaching solutions journalism in a classroom setting, but also found that teaching this subject was challenging.

Finally, constructive journalism has gained prominence among journalists and the public in many countries, Western and non-Western alike. Two national surveys in the U.S. found that both print/online and broadcast journalists generally have favorable attitudes toward constructive journalism techniques (Abdenour, McIntyre, and Dahmen 2017; McIntyre, Dahmen, and Abdenour 2016). Pepermans and Maesele (2017) criticized the mainstream media for its failure to facilitate constructive debate and demonstrated how two Dutch alternative news organizations do just that by practicing constructive journalism. In-depth interviews revealed that journalists in Rwanda have practiced constructive journalism in an effort to help their country rebuild after the 1994 genocide (McIntyre and Sobel 2017b). Further research has examined how Chinese news media are practicing constructive journalism techniques in Africa (Yanqiu and Matingwina 2016).

## Conclusion and Future Directions

This paper provides a theoretical foundation and application for the innovative and interdisciplinary idea that journalists can—and should—borrow techniques from positive psychology and apply them to their work. In this effort, we first explained the theoretical foundation for constructive journalism—the “disease model” in psychology—and how it has been applied to journalism, which paved the path for an emerging field. Next, we discussed how positive psychology aligns with journalism’s core values, reinforcing constructive journalism. Then we described six practical applications of the approach and the psychological literature that applies to each one. Finally, we outlined the current research on constructive journalism.

We have added to the theoretical foundation of this emerging field by primarily discussing the psychological framework which gave rise to and supports constructive journalism, and which makes the field distinct from other forms of journalism with similar goals. We further discussed six specific techniques, but we do not see these entry points as the only ways to practice constructive journalism. Future research should examine other possible approaches backed by positive psychology literature and more specific theories that might explain some of the mechanisms involved in constructive techniques. For example, what constitutes a solution, conceptually, and what theory might predict the effects of solution-focused news stories? Further, existing research shows that constructive stories consistently impact individuals’ feelings, attitudes, and sometimes their behavioral intentions, but not their actual behaviors. Future research should explore the various

aspects of constructive journalism in an effort to find the optimal techniques for behavioral change. Although behavior change is not a required outcome of constructive journalism, it is connected to its goals—to produce productive and engaging news stories in an effort to help society flourish.

Finally, scholars should continue to monitor whether constructive journalistic coverage has a productive effect on society, political decisions, cohesion and depolarization in comparison with classical journalistic coverage. Do constructive methods strengthen journalism's trustworthiness or the opposite? Journalists are not mirrors, rather, they're moving the world. By adhering to constructive journalism practices, journalists can portray the world more accurately while also strengthening their connection with the public—two attractive outcomes for the journalism of the future.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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**Karen McIntyre** (author to whom correspondence should be addressed), Richard T. Robertson School of Media and Culture, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA, USA. E-mail: [kemcintyre@vcu.edu](mailto:kemcintyre@vcu.edu)

**Cathrine Gyldensted**, Open Eyes Institute, Amsterdam, Netherlands. E-mail: [c@openeyesinstitute.org](mailto:c@openeyesinstitute.org)