

## Essay

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# Teaching Constructive Journalism

How solution-focused journalism can serve both as a model and a tool for journalism education

**Abstract:** Does the concept of Constructive Journalism contribute new aspects to journalism studies? This essay shows that the approach of Constructive Journalism can be a productive and stimulating element in education and training. It helps society negotiate contentious issues and unburdens journalists as an alternative reporting model. During events that are portrayed as crises, Constructive Journalism can point out different possible solutions.

Constructive Journalism is hailed as a powerful concept of great promise. It is designed to be objective and balanced, address important social issues without bias, build bridges, and be future-oriented, nuanced, contextualizing and fact-based, initiating debates on solutions to well-known problems (cf. Kramp/Weichert 2020: 22).

But isn't good journalism supposed to do all these things, anyway? And doesn't that mean we don't really need this new model at all? Proponents argue that the concept of constructive, solution-oriented journalism is designed to promote social discourse by conveying background information and context along with a given day's news. It explores and points out options for action and pathways toward solutions.

In order to test the concept in practical use, the author has developed a manual for practical journalists' training, consisting of structured teaching units based on video and text materials (cf. Hooffacker 2020). The materials were previously tested in several courses for journalism students and professionals as well as with journalists and journalism teachers at a conference. This essay is based on this preliminary work.

## Alternative role pattern

Times of crisis, be it migratory movements, ecological crises, or a pandemic, breed speculation. This is the moment of Fake News, setting the record straight, and responsible reporting. How can journalists deliver on such high demands?

Some years back, a young television journalist wrote an intelligent bachelor's thesis on changing means of research and their effect on television journalism. As her examiner, I asked her where she saw her professional future. She replied, visibly relieved: »Fortunately, in tv production management.« Why was she so relieved? Journalists bear a heavy burden of responsibility, she said. And she as a recent graduate felt she was not in a position to tell others what to do. She was too inexperienced, she said. And therefore, she was not ready for this kind of responsibility.

I am not going to reproduce our ensuing discussion here. But the incident gave me pause: What makes young journalists think they have to know everything better? Who gave them the idea that they were somehow the nation's schoolmasters?

The public's expectations of the media and journalists are high. Their critics are numerous. But aspiring journalists should push back against this unreasonable demand: They don't have to know better than everyone else. They just have to do better research. Horst Pöttker once wrote: »Journalists are not educators; on the contrary, their profession could even be said to a counterpoint to pedagogy.« (Pöttker 2010: p. 115)

Perhaps my recent graduate would not have been under this misconception if one of the basic works on Constructive Journalism had been available or if the concept had been covered in journalists' training at the time she wrote her thesis. Because in Constructive Journalism, and especially in solution-oriented journalism, journalists are not expected to come up with and propose solutions. Rather, their task is to research existing solutions and possible next steps.

As Uwe Krüger describes in *Journalistikon*: »Constructive Journalism is not fixated on single events, but rather on long-term processes. It not only describes social problems, but also initiates debates about possible solutions – yet it is not the journalists' task to come up with their own solutions. Instead, Constructive Journalism should independently and critically investigate the people and organizations that are working on answers to a given problem.« (Krüger 2019) Constructive Journalism thus provides an »alternative reporting model«, as Klaus Meier writes (Meier 2018), and thus also a possible role for journalism.

## Research possible solutions

Where can I find interesting individuals to talk to? How and where can I do my research? And do »constructive« pieces always have to end on an upbeat note? At

the Munich Journalism Academy, the author tested whether the concept of Constructive Journalism can also be used in the training of young journalists.

Let me make one thing clear before I continue with my findings: It is a misconception that Constructive Journalism, especially its variety of solution-oriented journalism, glosses over negative news and only highlights positive news. There are news portals, such as *Perspective daily* as well as the BBC, that routinely explicitly cover good news under headings such as »people fixing the world«. Conceptually, however, Constructive Journalism is quite different: Particularly in crisis situations, it puts the acute situation in its larger, long-term context and points out possible scopes of action and solutions (Hooffacker 2020: 2) The one-day class we held at the Journalism Academy was based on the short video »Rumor mill abuzz over knife control in schools«. It covers a fictional story on racial profiling at a school and the students' social-media response to it (cf. HTWK 2020).

This film was one of six videos produced from 2017 to 2020 in the collaborative project MeKriF – Flight as Crisis. The primary aim of the overall project was, firstly, to find out where and how young people get their information about the topic of refugees and flight. Secondly, we used the concept of Constructive Journalism for the media-educational aspect of the project, showing how social discourse can be advanced with adults as well as with adolescents (cf. Brüggem et al. 2021).

The video starts with a newspaper article headlined »Principal introduces student weapons checks.« A text conversation between students pops up, then an internet blog with the headline »Terror threat – students compelled to hand in their knives«. In a local television interview, the principal explains the school's strategy to prevent students from bringing weapons to school. Students and their bags will be checked upon entering school premises, with a particular focus on students who are considered 'dangerous'. Subsequently, the film shows various social media posts in response to this statement. Some agree. Others question or vehemently criticize the measures. The video closes with another newspaper headline, quoting the principal: »We have no other option than continue this measure!« (Hooffacker 2020: 16).

Journalism students are tasked with analyzing the media and presentational formats (newspaper article, hyper-local blog, television statement), then write a piece for a local newspaper (traditional journalism) and one for a tabloid medium (internet blog with sensationalist headlines) as well as create a concept for a local television segment. (As an extension to the project, participants could also be asked to analyze and/or write social media posts.) As they do these tasks, students are asked to apply the concept of solution-oriented journalism and incorporate it into their own editorial work.

Among the results that participants presented at the seminar, a »local journalist« framed the topic with the overall theme of »violence in schools«. As sources, she suggested a spokesperson of the teachers' association, an educational scientist,

a school psychologist, and a criminal psychologist. These expert sources made recommendations such as violence prevention, anti-aggression training, or more generally, create spaces in everyday school life to address such incidents. The »tv journalist«, on the other hand, took an entirely different route: His contribution starts with a group of vocal teenagers expressing their outrage at the measure. He interviewed the child services office, school administrators, and the parents' association, ending his piece on an upbeat note: Students taking solidary action by having everyone present their bags for the weapons check to avoid discrimination.

What did the participants think of the journalism workshop, which was held in late summer 2020? In their reviews, they made comments such as: »Interesting approach to writing. It breaks down topics and allows for more nuance«, »It showed that I am on the right track with my personal method of presenting a variety of perspectives :) And apparently, it is not common practice to research and write constructively«, »... give the reader some guidance, conduct comprehensive research, remain unbiased, even when proposing solutions« or »... look at the issue from different angles and emphasize positive aspects«. None of the participants were familiar with the concept of Constructive Journalism before this workshop. All of them said they could see themselves incorporating it into their own toolbox.

## Concept still largely unknown

To conclude this series of trials, we invited veteran journalists and higher-education journalism teachers to a MeKriF transfer conference. Participants included representatives of the HTWK, the JFF (Institute for Media Education in Research and Practice), the Heinrich Heine University in Düsseldorf, the Journalists' Academy in Munich, and the Center for Media Ethics and Digital Society (zem::dg).

In a customized workshop, the experts learned about Constructive Journalism and its approaches and applied them in a short practical exercise. Due to the pandemic, the transfer meeting was held as a video conference.

Here, too, the feedback was positive. When asked »What do you take away from this workshop?«, participants responded: »Useful suggestions for my teaching practice« – »A lot of important info was presented in a compact, yet very informative format. I would love to learn more about this topic and do some further reading on it!« – »Many helpful links and references« – »Creative suggestions, thank you!« During the closing expert round, panelists repeatedly referenced the reporting model of Constructive Journalism.

## Conclusion

Based on her experience with the teaching materials, the author is certain: There is room to increase awareness of the possibilities and approaches of Constructive Journalism, even among experts in journalism studies.

When applied in the training and further education of journalists, the concept of Constructive Journalism is a great tool to help journalists reflect on their self-concept and understand their own roles. The teaching units presented here presuppose that participants are familiar with journalistic presentational formats and media specifics. Therefore, they lend themselves both for repetition and consolidation as well as for an introduction to project work.

Overall, Constructive Journalism helps society negotiate contentious issues. As an alternative reporting model, it unburdens journalists and helps them identify alternative notions of their own roles. It promotes researching solution-oriented positions and can serve as a guideline for journalistic work during crises, not only, but especially regarding teenage and young adult audiences.

During crisis events, constructive journalism can help outline possible next steps or even point out potential solutions by giving a voice to relevant actors. This will at least mitigate the problem of audiences being left to deal with images of crisis events by themselves.

Ideally, Constructive Journalism helps the public examine crisis events and the contexts that led to them. It »promotes civil society engagement, as crises are not perceived as hopeless, but as changeable« (Hooffacker 2020: 6).

## About the author

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The videos were co-produced by Prof. Gabriele Hooffacker, Prof. Ulrich Nikolaus, Nico Hattendorf, Tino Reiher, Sebastian Gomon, and students of the Faculty of Computer Science and Media at the Leipzig University of Applied Sciences (HTWK). They can be accessed here: <https://mekrif.jff.de/veroeffentlichungen/details/video-impulse/>