Research Paper

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When newspeople get constructive

An editorial study on implementing Constructive Reporting at Verlagsgruppe Rhein Main

Abstract: **Constructive (or solution-oriented) Journalism is in vogue right now. In addition to specially created formats, such as** *Perspective Daily***, more and more traditional media are also adopting this new reporting model. In 2019, the editors-in-chief of the newspapers of the publishing group Rhein Main (VRM) launched the »Project Future«, which was to subscribe to the goals and methods of »Constructive Journalism«. The Ostfalia University of Applied Sciences was commissioned to conduct an accompanying study, the results of which are presented here. A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was used in a triangulated procedure to assess the effects of Constructive Reporting. Guided interviews were conducted to provide insights on the effects of these new work practices on journalistic role perceptions. In a two-part content analysis, the study examined coverage by VRM newspapers and compared it with articles from** *Perspective Daily* **and the** *Sächsische Zeitung***. The results show that Constructive Journalism was successfully introduced into the daily editorial routine of the VRM newspapers. The study also ascertained effects on self-image and work practices. It also identified certain differences between the media that were examined. The article concludes by offering some implications for journalistic practice.**

Introduction

The purpose of Constructive Reporting is to offer readers added value. Editorial offices hope that the new reporting model will intensify their interaction readers and strengthen the bond between readers and the medium (cf. Beiler/Krü-

ger 2018: 178). To this end, VRM launched the »Project Future« in 2019, which addresses structural challenges in the Rhine-Main region under the overarching topic of mobility. From April to December 2019, editors volunteered to work on the project team in addition to their usual editorial duties. The objectives of the research project were:

1. Monitor and support the transformation process within VRM
2. Identify content-related and strategic potentials for improvement as well as
3. Conduct a content-analytical examination of project outcomes.

A two-part content analysis was conducted to examine coverage by VRM's newspapers and compare it with articles from *Perspective Daily* and the *Sächsische Zeitung*, two media which have been engaged in Constructive Journalism for some time already. How does the introduction of Constructive Reporting affect editorial practice and what are the outcomes?

First, we will provide a brief introduction of VRM, followed by the elementary components of Constructive Journalism and research findings on its perception and impact. We will then explain the methodology and present the results. Seven guided interviews provide information about the project and how it evolved at VRM. Content analyses point out differences between Constructive and traditional reporting and differences between the media.

VRM – focus on a regional publisher

VRM is a long-standing media company operating in the region between the Rhine, Main, and Neckar Rivers. With 27 daily newspaper editions in Hesse and Rhineland-Palatinate, its circulation area covers the western and southern Rhine-Main region as well as Wetzlar and Gießen in Central Hesse. Thanks to acquisitions over the past decade (including Darmstädter Echo 2015, Wetzlardruck 2018), VRM has become one of the regional publishing groups with the widest reach (cf. IVW 2020) with a total daily circulation of around 290,000 copies (of which approx. 30,000 are e-papers), in a newspaper market that has been plagued by dropping circulations, declining advertising revenues, and more and more bankruptcies. However, it is not among the top ten largest newspaper publishers in Germany (cf. Röper 2020).

VRM is home to the following daily newspapers: *Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Wiesbadener Kurier*, *Darmstädter Echo*, *Gießener Anzeiger*, *Wetzlarer Neue Zeitung*, *Wormser Zeitung* and *Main-Spitze* as well as advertising gazettes, hometown papers and digital products (cf. VRM, n.d.). Including them, VRM reaches 1.09 million readers daily (cf. ma 2019). A total of 1,750 employees work at 35 locations, 483 of them at headquarters in Mainz.

Table 1

Overview of sold VRM daily newspapers in the 2nd quarter 2020

Titles of the daily newspapers	Sales	of which digital editions
Allgemeine Zeitung and *Wiesbadener Kurier*	129,156	14,755
Darmstädter Echo	36,890	3,575
Gießener Anzeiger	21,200	1,825
Wetzlarer Neue Zeitung	19,424	1,063
Wormser Zeitung	12,824	581
Main-Spitze	9,618	939

Source: IVW

In 2019, VRM took up the cause of Constructive Journalism and launched the »Project Future« to address the structural challenges facing the Rhine-Main region. Initially conceived as a publishing initiative with the aim of implementing new business models within the publishing group, »Project Future« became a purely editorial project following internal discussions about feasibility and project goals. The project ran from April to December 2019. Thematically, it mainly addressed questions of mobility and traffic, which are of particular concern to the Rhine-Main metropolitan area. It kicked off with the topic of rural areas and their modes of transport. Other topics included high-speed bike paths as new thoroughfares in the distribution area, a self-experiment for individuals to assess their personal ecological footprint, and testing mobility apps, including the existing public transit company app. Last, it addressed future topics such as autonomous driving, delivery drones, and air taxis as well as new drivetrain technologies in public transit.

Central features of Constructive Journalism

The editorial team's goals for the project included increased reader loyalty, in line with the traditional objectives of editorial marketing (see also Beiler/Krüger 2018: 178; Krüger 2016: 98-101). Constructive Journalism aims to draw attention to aspects beyond traditional news factors (cf. Kramp/Weichert 2020: 34). Accordingly, the question is how journalistic routines change and what that means for journalists' daily work. How and to what extent can the relatively recent concept of Constructive Journalism be integrated into traditional reporting and established work processes without producing additional work? It also seems reasonable to assume that a changed approach to topics and collaboration with other experts could impact the journalists' notion of their own role. In recent years, a

consensus has emerged about the nature and goals of Constructive Journalism. The following table is a summary of its key aspects.

Table 2
Summary of the features of Constructive Journalism

Features of Constructive Journalism	Description
Solution- and future-oriented	• Solution-oriented presentation of issues, making suggestions for alternative action; (Haagerup 2015; *Perspective Daily* n.d.); *Perspective Daily* n.d.)
	• Emphasize diversity of proposed solutions: Think outside of the box about issues and critical issues, view them from a variety of perspectives, and point out different tools and options for action (Meier 2018: 4)
	• Critical, investigative research as a central component (Gleich 2016: 14)
	• Go beyond the traditional W-questions (What happened? Where did it happen? Who is affected? When did it happen? Which way did it happen? Why did it happen? What are the consequences? [Mast 2012: 274]), adding questions about research and topic selection: What happens next? What happens now? (Meier 2018: 6)
Report on context instead of events	• In addition to merely rendering the events, provide in-depth information that gives readers contextual knowledge (Hermans/ Gyldensted 2019: 5)
»Co-creation«	• Facilitate a more sophisticated debate on social issues; promote social participation, and create content in cooperation with the readers (ibid.)

Constructive Journalism in practice

Danish journalist Ulrik Haagerup introduced the term »Constructive Journalism« as a new »reporting model« (Weischenberg 1995: 111-119) which journalists follow partly consciously, partly unconsciously (ibid). Constructive Journalism complements and enriches traditional reporting formats. By defining new criteria of newsworthiness for reports or topics, it aims to counteract the negativity bias in reporting, which has done much harm to the reputation of journalism.

(Fletcher/Park 2017) Based on the definition used in this paper, Constructive Journalism goes further yet: It aims to convey a more »holistic« view of the world and, with the new type of reporting and the changed journalistic structures and rules it entails, to allow audiences to participate more in social processes and issues.

Constructive Journalism has gained prominence in journalistic practice over the past decade, both nationally and internationally (see Seng 2018: 126). Amidst the ongoing economic crisis and restructured public sphere, it is even hailed as the savior of journalism and a way out of the media crisis (cf. Hermans/Drok 2018). Even at first glance, this seems excessive. In any case, the Constructive Reporting model requires time, skill, and space for background reporting – preconditions and structures which themselves must first be created and/or, in any case, taught. This is why few media companies are consistently implementing the ideas of Constructive Journalism (Seng 2018: 127), but the concept has undoubtedly made its debut in the German media landscape (see Meier 2018: 5-6). Prominent current examples include public television station ZDF with *Plan B*, NDR Info with *Perspektiven* and *Sächsische Zeitung* with »Gut zu wissen«, International examples are the crowd-funded web magazine *Perspective Daily* (which currently has more than 13.000 subscribers).

Constructive Journalism in research

Given the small number of Constructive formats and projects, research on this topic is still in its infancy in German-speaking countries. The little research that does exist is focused on the social added value of the concept (Beiler/Krüger 2018; Krüger 2017; Meier 2018; Pranz/Sauer 2017), there are no content analyses. Most recently, Kramp and Weichert (2020) interviewed journalists about Constructive Journalism in Germany – such as their expectations, editorial approaches, and effects on work processes and forms of distribution. So far, both in the German-speaking world as well as internationally, the debate has been mainly about theory and concepts. (cf. Aitamurto/Varma 2018; Beiler/Krüger 2018; Bro 2018; Hermans/Drok 2018; McIntyre/Gyldensted 2018; Pranz/Sauer 2017). Also, there are only few experimental studies of audience impact (Baden/McIntyre/Homberg 2019; Curry/Hammonds 2014; McIntyre 2015; Meier 2018). In the Netherlands, Hermans and Gyldensted (2019) conducted the first-ever online survey of 3,263 people on their appreciation of constructive elements in the news. Curry and Hammonds (2014) found evidence of increased reader interest and influence on reader opinion, resulting in increased reader loyalty (ibid). In the German language area (2018), readers were presented with a news item and a report in an experimental 2x2 design, one featuring Constructive and the other non-Constructive language. The findings are »surprising« (ibid: 14): The differences between the perception of classical and constructive repor-

ting are minor. The expected result that the audience expects proposed solutions cannot be confirmed experimentally. On the contrary, traditional messages are rated better, at least if they are worded in a more »well-rounded« way than Constructive messages (ibid.). Therefore, it cannot be generally assumed that there is a preference for Constructive Journalism.

So far, we can only make few reliable statements about the production conditions, statements, and consequences of Constructive Journalism. There is a lack of empirical research on editorial practice, for example using guided interviews with editorial offices or individual journalists, as well as content-analytical inventories, which might elucidate the actual Constructive nature of the reporting. We also need more recipient research on the perception and impact of Constructive Journalism, for example by means of focus group discussions, group discussions, or even guided interviews. This is the only way to understand the implementation and challenges of Constructive Reporting as well as to identify which issues matter to readers.

Research questions and hypotheses

For the VRM project described above, the overarching research question is:
- How successfully and with what results has VRM established the »Project Future« in the organization and introduced Constructive Reporting into its work routines?

The first research question addresses the transformation process within the newsroom and its success.
- RQ1: How and with which results has »Project Future« been implemented within VRM?

We will use quantitative and qualitative content analysis to investigate the extent to which VRM reporting that has been explicitly declared as »Constructive« differs from competing products as well as from its own traditional articles.
- RQ2: Do journalists successfully implement Constructive Journalism in their reporting, and to what extent does this differ from traditional reporting?

Based on previous research, and in light of the circumstances of the project at VRM, we developed three additional hypotheses. We assume that VRM has successfully established Constructive Reporting and is publishing Constructive articles. Moreover, we assume that VRM articles are at least as Constructive as the products of the *Sächsische Zeitung* and *Perspective Daily*. The third hypothesis aims to determine to what extent contributions that are declared »Constructive« are actually more Constructive and solution-oriented than traditional ones.
- H1: The contributions within the »Project Future« feature Constructive Reporting.

- H2: In terms of their Constructiveness, the articles in »Projekt Future« do not differ from articles in the *Sächsische Zeitung* and *Perspective Daily*.
- H3: Contributions from »Project Future« feature Constructive and solution-oriented elements more frequently than traditional articles.

Method

We chose to interconnect quantitative and qualitative methods. They are divided into guided interviews with VRM editors who are responsible for or prominently involved in the project, as well as a quantitative and qualitative content analysis. The guided interviews with the responsible editorial staff provide information on factors such as internal »change management«, changed work processes, and changes in journalists' notions of their role or their self-image. This provided insights into project rollout and implementation. We used quantitative content analysis to determine the Constructiveness of the contributions and compared it with *Perspective Daily* and the *Sächsische Zeitung*. We leveraged qualitative analysis to compare traditional VRM newspaper articles on related or comparable mobility topics with explicitly »Constructive« articles.

Guided interviews

Between 28 and 30 August 2019, we conducted five guided interviews with the responsible editors-in-chief (project management), editors of various VRM newspapers who are involved in the project, and a trainee.[1] We interviewed the editors-in-chief of the *Wetzlarer Neue Zeitung*, the *Darmstädter Echo*, and the *Wiesbadener Kurier*. In addition, we included a reporter (economy, traffic) of the *Wiesbadener Kurier*, the head of the newspool, as well as a trainee in Mainz. In September of 2019, we conducted two additional telephone interviews with the editor-in-chief of the *Wiesbadener Kurier* and an editor.

Qualitative and quantitative content analysis

We conducted the content analyses in October 2019 while the project was ongoing. They cover the 17 VRM articles published by that date, from 2 April to 12 October 2019. In addition, we coded 16 articles from *Perspective Daily* and 17 articles from the *Sächsische Zeitung*, resulting in a sample of 50 articles. We chose *Perspective Daily* and the *Sächsische Zeitung* as benchmarks for our comparison because they have

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1 We interviewed only men, which is why we will refer to the interviewees with male pronouns and generally male terms.

already been engaged in and/or work exclusively according the principles of Constructive Reporting. We created a codebook of 32 variables to collect the data and answer the research questions. The intercoder reliability analysis showed good to very good values in the different categories (Krippendorff's alpha for formal categories was at 1.0 and for content categories at 0.86). Formal criteria include medium, date of publication, length of the article, headline of the article, form of presentation, and interactivity options such as a comment function or other means of contacting the author. Content categories include the tone of the titles and teasers as well as the overall coverage, the range of topics, news factors, and the quality of the articles, as measured by the Constructiveness of the coverage. Variables in this Constructiveness index include:a variety of perspectives, at least one approach towards a solution, critical reporting, addressing the seventh W-question, source transparency, suggestions for further sources/literature, background information, explanation of complicated issues, one-sided versus multi-perspective presentation of conflicts and problems, and exaggeration/dramatization.

Constructive journalism at VRM: Results of the guided interviews

Project Management/Change Management

The interviewees felt that the »Project Future« was off to a successful start and was working. All interviewees were proponents of the project and rated its importance as high or very high. »In-house, the project is very important – for the entire publishing group. I quite like working across the Rhine region« (IV-1).[2] The project was presented across all media throughout the company – the project leadership felt that the point had been clearly communicated via different internal channels, for example by email or via the intranet. The scientific monitoring was also communicated. However, general engagement and participation on the part of the editors was limited. As this was a top-down project, imposed on the organization by the editorial leadership, it did not win the approval of all editors. »Initially, the publisher decidedly saw the project as an opportunity to boost revenue and a vehicle for economic interests. That is not our job.« (IV-3) Thus, there was no majority participation across the involved media. »New projects are often perceived as fads that will blow over and are not worth keeping up with.« (IV-1) Another problem was a lack of clarity as there were several, sometimes concurring projects. Furthermore, we assume that most editors were reluctant to assume what they expected to be an extra workload and therefore chose not to join the project. As a result, the project leadership proactively approached

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2   Respondent (IV), numbered consecutively.

potential editors and recruited them for the project. Interested editors joined the work group for topic planning; which meant that these editors were, of course, better informed than the non-participants. The local editorial offices were not involved, as the selected topics were meant to work well for the entire distribution area of VRM under the overarching topic of mobility. Some interviewees criticized this decision, since it meant that the project could not be fully integrated into the entire editorial team. Although some praised the selection of topics, others said they would like to see project editors in charge of topic identification, introduction, and research. They argued that in the future, topics should no longer be predetermined, but rather developed by heterogeneous, larger groups of editors. Last, we assessed channel-specific implementation. »Overall, the project is too much geared toward print« (IV-2), and not digital enough. The publisher's digital potential is not yet fully exploited. There is also room for improvement in social media integration, which should be intensified to increase online traffic. In the long term, the new reporting model is expected to have a positive impact by increasing reader loyalty.

Analysis of roles and self-image

Working Constructively expands the respondents' understanding of their own roles. The Constructive approach and its focus on the users' perspective are not about replacing »the traditional understanding of the role of the critical reporter who states what is, addressing and explaining conflicts« (IV-2), but rather about adding a new component to the journalists' notion of their own role, that of being a »solution provider.« (IV-2) »The control function remains important and works well with the concept of Constructive Journalism.« (IV-2) One respondent struggled with the term 'solution-oriented': »I find it presumptuous to be solution-oriented: VRM can't solve problems. We are not reinventing the wheel.« (IV-7) Overall, all respondents agreed that Constructive Journalism should be integrated into everyday work and be an original component of journalistic work. All respondents welcomed the new thought process of working out solutions and finding sources that offer solutions on certain topics. They found it enriching as well as exciting – albeit not right from the start. »At first, I struggled a lot with the concept. I consider myself a very critical journalist. I don't see my role as necessarily being Constructive.« (IV-3) They often emphasized the proximity to the reader and life's realities. Overall, Constructive Journalism is understood as a change of perspective.

Work processes, workload, work enrichment

Editors and editors-in-chief offered no uniform assessment of the additional effort involved with Constructive Journalism (and the project). Organization

and project management entailed extra work for the editors. However, the aim of the project was not to generate any additional work. Although individual editors felt a Constructive article required a special effort, especially in terms of research and planning, respondents generally did not experience a considerable additional effort. »After all, these are big pieces, so you reflect more, tap into new experts. It doesn't really involve any extra effort.« (IV-3) In some cases, the additional effort depends on the topic and the extent to which it is prepared for digital and social media presentation, which entails additional work steps. Although the editors' other workload was lightened to compensate for their work on a Constructive contribution, some respondents perceived an extra effort due to the change and the novelty of the approach. »The project has triggered a thought process, which I don't think is wrong.« (IV-4)

The respondents disagree on the need for further training. Some do not think that Constructive Journalism requires new research patterns and training. Others felt that Constructive Journalism does require additional training and a fundamental review and discussion of the approach in order to clarify the distinction from other forms of journalism, such as positive journalism. Some of the participating editors-in-chief felt a need for practical workshops for onboarding and support, both during initial training as well as for all seasoned editors. Another new aspect, in addition to the changed approach to research and thinking, is working with different interfaces, for example with the digital editorial team. For example, some editors lack the »planning mindset« necessary to collaborate with the digital media team. The basic problem, or rather the great challenge, lies in breaking down old thought patterns and raising awareness for new approaches, cross-media and digital thinking, in order to remain relevant in the future and reach a larger audience. They would like to see new structures and planning tools that integrate questions of Constructive Journalism into everyday editorial work. »Constructive Journalism is not a nice add-on, but rather will and and must be a fundamental part of journalistic work.« (IV-6)

Reader responses

As explained, our chosen method did not allow direct measurement of reader responses. We captured this aspect indirectly through the interviewees own self-reporting. The respondents agreed that VRM editors were disappointed to see only sporadic reader reactions. „We wanted readers to be involved in the project. That failed. No one looked after the collective email inbox. I can't take it on.« (IV-7) Also, the reading value[3] of the Constructive pieces was not necessarily higher than that

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3   The »reading value« measurement of the Dresden team »Added Value Makers« partially overlapped with the »Project Future«, but did not cover it completely. Ostfalia did not have complete access to reading value data at this point.

of traditional pieces. The editors concluded that the project had not yet fully gotten through to the readership. The project should have been explained to the readers more forcefully and frequently. »It takes time for readers to realize that there is a different quality to the Constructive articles.« (IV-1) Overall, the editors had hoped for more reader reactions and clicks, but they did not register any more reader reactions than usual. »I found the reader response rather disappointing. I expected more.« (IV-5) However, the editors-in-chief are optimistic: »Reader involvement will grow.« (IV-4) Isolated reader reactions show that the addressed topics met with interest and were relevant to everyday life. For example, readers left comments, contributing their own proposals for action and solutions on a given topic.

Interim summary: »Constructive journalism is not tied to a particular project«

»Constructive journalism can identify problems, analyze them, bring people together. But we cannot solve the traffic problems of the Rhine-Main area, which have been a topic of our coverage for 15 years. That would be presumptuous.« (IV-3) In summary, respondents agree that the new reporting pattern is important but needs explanation. This is the only way to encourage people to try something new. Moreover, such a project should not be practiced in a top-down manner only.

The aim should be to create a new, original approach to topics and process them creatively across all editorial departments. Permanently establishing the new approach will require different structures and planning tools as well as new formats, depending on the set-up of each editorial office. The results of the present study thus also confirm the findings of Seng (2018): The new reporting format will require time, skill, and enough space for background reporting. Such structures must first be created or professionalized. The interviews made clear that it takes a controlled project to break out of familiar routines in everyday editorial work and pursue new approaches – such as introducing and establishing a new form of reporting. Nothing will just change on its own. Constructive Journalism is also an ongoing learning process.

- According to the respondents, the following has been achieved successfully:
- Management, timetable was kept
- Explanation of the »Project Future«
- Topic selection
- Participating editors showed high degree of involvement
- Testing of new work methods and research techniques
- Constructive Journalism as a change of perspective.
- Stronger focus on user perspective and expectations

- Reporting that is relevant to everyday life
- Overall, no additional work
- Sporadically triggered reader reactions

The following aspects were criticized:
- Non-involvement of the local editorial office
- Top-down topic setting
- Focus on print, lack of social media integration
- Technical problems (Newspool)
- Insufficient focus on reader awareness, few reader responses

The following table contains succinct quotes from the guided interviews according to their valence, reflecting what has remained the same in VRM, what has changed, and what respondents think of future perspectives for the project.

Table 3
Summary of impressions from »Project Future« as expressed in the guided interviews

Consistency and change	Positive	Neutral	Negative/critical
Continuity	»The control function remains important and works well with the concept of Constructive Journalism« »After all, these are big pieces, so you reflect more, tap into new experts. It doesn't really involve any extra effort.«	»I find it presumptuous to be solution-oriented: VRM can't solve problems. We are not reinventing the wheel.«	»At first, I struggled a lot with the concept. I consider myself a very critical journalist. I don't see my role as necessarily being Constructive« »The project is geared too much towards print.« »I found the reader response rather disappointing. I expected more.«
Change	»The Constructive approach and its associated user perspective adds a new component to the journalists' notion of their own role, that of a 'solution provider'.«	»The project has triggered a thought process, which I don't think is wrong.	„We wanted readers to be involved in the project. That failed. No one looked after the collective email inbox. I can't take it on.«
Perspective	»Constructive Journalism is not a nice add-on, but rather will and and must be a fundamental part of journalistic work.«	»Constructive journalism is not tied to a particular project.«	»There needs to be more of a planning mindset.« »I feel that the texts are not powerful enough yet.«

Constructive reporting at VRM: Results of the content analyses

Qualitative content analysis

A quantitative content analysis of the contributions produced within »Project Future« shows that they predominantly meet the criteria of Constructive Journalism (H1). To test the first hypothesis, we calculated an index to reveal the level of

Constructiveness of an article. The selected characteristics for the Constructiveness index adequately represent Constructiveness (Cronbach's α = 0.743 – acceptable). On average, the 17 articles examined in the VRM newspapers feature Constructive Reporting with a mean score of 2.52. Table 4 shows which elements of Constructive reporting were particularly well met.

Table 4
Constructiveness characteristics (H1)

Characteristics of Constructiveness	Mean value
Multiple perspectives	2.70
Solution approach	2.42
Critical reporting	2.78
Seventh W-question	2.44
Source transparency	2.84
Suggestions for further sources	1.72
Background information	2.68
Explains complicated issues	1.58
Focus is not exclusively on conflicts/problems	2.84
Not merely exaggeration/dramatization	2.98

Mean values from 1 = not met to 3 = met, n = 17

In particular, the articles present multiple perspectives and report critically; sources are almost always evident. None of the articles is exaggerated or dramatized, however, complicated issues are not always adequately explained. However, the low mean value also indicates that the topics are not always complicated issues. The article in the sample with the highest degree of Constructiveness has a mean of M = 2.9. Also, it was notable that the more diverse the proposed solutions, the less often the articles focused exclusively on negatives or problems (r_{Sp} = 0547*). Similarly, responses to the seventh W-question correlate positively with the variety of proposed solutions (r_{Sp} = .807**). Constructiveness traits (index) also correlate positively with variety of solutions (r_{Sp} = .744**), showing long-term trends (r_{Sp} = .600**), and explaining the root cause of a problem (r_{Sp} = .649**).[4] A comparison of Constructive articles between VRM, the *Sächsische Zeitung*, and *Perspective Daily* shows clear differences. VRM reports have a higher degree of Constructive Reporting than *Sächsische Zeitung*, but lower than *Perspective Daily* (H2).

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4 * The relationship is significant, at a level of p < 0.05; ** The relationship is highly significant, at a level of p < 0.01.

Table 5
Index of Constructiveness in media comparison (H2)

Index of Constructiveness	n	M	SD	Min	Max
VRM Newspapers	17	2.52	0.17	2.20	2.90
Sächsische Zeitung	17	2.16	0.25	1.90	2.70
Perspective Daily	16	2.83	0.13	2.60	3.00

Mean value ranging from 1 = not Constructive to 3 = Constructive

Significant differences were found between the newspapers.[5] A post-hoc test shows that the level of Constructiveness of VRM articles is significantly higher than that of *Sächsische Zeitung* (p < .001) and significantly lower than that of *Perspective Daily* (p < .001).[6] This means we cannot confirm Hypothesis 2, which predicted that there would be no differences between media.

A group comparison reveals the differences between articles by the VRM and the *Sächsische Zeitung*. VRM reporting exhibits the following characteristics significantly more frequently or strongly: Number of perspectives and approaches, critical reporting, answering the seventh W-question, and suggestions for further sources/literature.[7] Accordingly, the VRM and the *Sächsische Zeitung* are similar in their source transparency, thoroughness of background information, explanation of complicated facts, focus on exclusively negative aspects, and dramatization of content. The VRM and *Perspective Daily* differ significantly on three characteristics. *Perspective Daily* more frequently provides additional sources, offers more background information, and explains complicated issues more often than VRM.[8]

Qualitative content analysis

In order to answer the research question from a content analytical perspective as well as complement the quantitative content analysis, we ran a qualitative content analysis to distinguish between traditional and Constructive Reporting at VRM. In particular, we sought to narrow down what constitutes Construc-

5   We performed a Welch analysis of variance (heterogeneity of variance; F(2, 47) = 5.83, p < .01), which confirmed a significant difference in Constructive coverage between the newspapers (F(2, 30.25) = 51.00, p < .001).
6   We conducted a Games-Howell post hoc test.
7   Number of perspectives (U = 58,500, p < .001) and solutions (U = 59,000, p = .001), critical reporting (U = 68,000, p = .001), response to the seventh W-question (U = 78,000, p = .022), and suggestions for further sources/literature (U = 102,000, p = .037).
8   *Perspective Daily* provides more in-depth sources (U = 8,000, p < .001) and background information significantly more often (U = 96,000, p = .043), and it explains complicated issues significantly more often than VRM (U = 24,500, p < .001).

tive journalism and what factors can be used to determine it (H3). Our analysis summarized the following elements of Constructive Journalism regarding the topic of mobility: 1. present multiple perspectives, 2 present possible solutions, 3. report critically, 4. assume a future-oriented attitude, 5. cite scientific sources. In addition, we compared the argumentative line of the articles.

For our analysis, we contrasted six Constructive articles from the VRM project with six traditional articles, all on the topic of mobility. The selection was made by the editors-in-chief. As far as a content analysis allows, the qualitative analysis confirmed the presented fundamental components of Constructive Journalism, expanding them by two central aspects. We were thus able to establish that the articles not only critically considered individual issues and offered solutions, but that the solutions themselves were also critically reflected. In addition, Constructive articles follow a dynamic argumentative structure, that is, articles often feature quotes from different people with different positions that make the argument come to life. This includes more frequent pro/con comparisons as well as more evidence through practical examples. Arguments are also supported by background knowledge. Another result was that VRM's constructive articles report more critically than traditional articles on similar topics. Although all articles are fundamentally critical, the Constructive articles go a step further, taking a critical look at possible solutions or projects that are presented as solutions to the problem. Constructive articles are therefore also critical of possible improvements. Traditional articles also feature significantly less diverse perspectives and proposed solutions, and they dwell on problem descriptions and one-sided argumentation. Their orientation towards the future is mostly limited to listing aspects or areas in need of change, without proposing solutions (H3).

Our comparative analysis confirms that a new way of thinking – or at least an active engagement with Constructive Journalism – has taken hold in the VRM editorial team and that Constructive articles do indeed differ from traditional ones in that they are more solution- and future-oriented and shift the focus away from problems and negatives. The participating editors succeeded in reporting (more) Constructively.

Conclusion

Constructive Journalism will not replace traditional journalism, but it can complement and enrich it, as the present study has shown. The reporting pattern allows for a new, original approach and treatment of complex and controversial issues. The new reporting format will require time, skill, and enough space for background reporting – resources which are more readily available in media that do not publish daily. Contrary to critical voices that maintain that Cons-

tructive Journalism cannot be introduced into daily news coverage for lack of resources, our content analyses showed that it is very much possible to establish Constructive articles as part of traditional reporting. VRM has been even more successful in this than the Sächsische Zeitung. The measurable critical stance of Constructive Journalism does not necessarily fall short of traditional journalism. Here, our content-analytical examination of the topic did not substantiate any general suspicion that Constructive reporting is merely PR. This was also corroborated by the guided interviews, which identified no potentially controversial changes in the journalists' perception of their own role.

The guided interviews made clear that these new work processes also require new structures and planning tools. Experienced journalists, in particular, find it difficult to reinvent their approach to topics. Therefore, comprehensive training seems necessary to understand the essentials of Constructive Journalism. The fact that elaborating and proposing solutions and critical reporting are not mutually exclusive, as our content analysis shows, has yet to sink in with many editors. Integrating readers into reporting in the sense of »co-creation« is the greatest challenge. Attempts to integrate this into daily journalistic work have failed.

We were also able to show that the Constructive approach and its work method and associated user-oriented perspective also have an effect on the interviewed journalists' self-image. Here again, their self-image was supplemented and expanded, but neither discarded nor challenged. For example, the control function remains important. The role image evolves from that of a »pure reporter to a solution provider« (IV-2). Respondents often emphasized the proximity to the reader and to life's realities. The bond with the audience is an important part of Constructive Journalism, and exchange with media consumers was actively promoted in the »Project Future«. The sporadic feedback from readers shows that the fundamental characteristics of Constructive Journalism – its orientation towards solutions and hope – are being perceived and processed as something positive. According to the editors, Constructive articles also encouraged readers to propose and discuss their own solutions. This indicates the positive effect of focusing on every-day life or citizens. The editors were disappointed by the scantness of direct audience reactions. Reader responses did not increase beyond the usual amount, which the editors interpreted as a sign that the readership was not fully aware of the project. However, given the results of Meier's (2018) experiments on audience impact, we tend to believe that the hopes for a positive perception and a positive effect of Constructive reporting may have been significantly inflated. Apparently, as the present results suggest, these aspects do not differ significantly from traditional journalism. However, we must concede that we were only able to capture audience reactions indirectly via the interviewed editors. A new desideratum would thus be focus group discussions with readers on the different perceptions of traditional reporting and Constructive Reporting

and the possible influence on reader loyalty, especially regarding the critical integration of positive examples.(ibid: 19) It does not seem to be a panacea for tapping into new readerships and markets.

For journalistic practice, we can conclude that Constructive Journalism can be integrated into the daily routines of traditional editorial offices with some reservations. Reader integration poses some challenges and would require significant changes to current routines. The project or any further integration of Constructive Journalism would need to fully leverage, and be better incorporated into, the publisher's digitalization strategy, especially in terms of social media.

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