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To cite this article: Monika Djerf-Pierre & Mats Ekström (05 Feb 2025): Constructive Journalism as Practice—Storytelling in Solutions-Focused News Reporting in Mainstream News Media, Journalism Practice, DOI: [10.1080/17512786.2025.2461213](https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2025.2461213)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2025.2461213>



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Published online: 05 Feb 2025.



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# Constructive Journalism as Practice—Storytelling in Solutions-Focused News Reporting in Mainstream News Media

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## ABSTRACT

Constructive or solutions-focused news is often promoted as a way to mitigate news avoidance and declining levels of trust in mainstream news media. The constitutive element of the constructive approach is the prioritization of *solutions-focused* news stories. Rather than reporting negative, conflict-driven news about societal issues, journalism should focus more on presenting concrete solutions to problems. This study examines how solutions-focused journalism is applied and enacted in mainstream news media in Sweden. By drawing from research on news discourse and news as narrative, we examine journalism as a storytelling practice, analyzing both the “story”—what is told about solutions to problems - and the “telling”—how is it told, i.e., the forms of expression used by journalists. The aim is to analyze how solutions-focused news stories are constructed in journalistic news discourse through a repertoire of storytelling devices. This study presents a qualitative analysis of a corpus of 218 solutions-focused news stories sampled from press, radio, TV, and online news in Sweden. The results describe the prevalence and characteristics of solutions-focused news, identifying the three main formulas for solutions-focused storytelling in mainstream news media. We also outline the potential challenges the solutions-focused approach presents to professional news journalism.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 23 April 2024  
Accepted 27 January 2025

## KEYWORDS

Constructive journalism;  
solutions journalism;  
journalism practice; news  
production; negativity bias;  
societal issues; qualitative  
analysis; Sweden

## Introduction

### “Now on to a More Hope Inspiring Story”

Negativity bias is an inherent and enduring feature of news media’s reporting about societal issues and events. Bad news is often regarded as “good” news, and newsrooms around the world tend to focus more on problems, conflicts, and catastrophes than on solutions and positive developments in society (Parks 2019). Constructive journalism is often put forward as means to alleviate the negativity bias and to reclaim professional journalism’s legitimacy and societal relevance, not the least among news avoiders.

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Constructive news is thought to engender a more optimistic view of society, promoting positive engagement, trust, and empowerment of audiences (Hermans and Gyldensted 2019; McIntyre and Lough 2021).

Constructive journalism is a broad concept. Scholars and practitioners disagree on definitions, but most agree that the prioritization of *solutions-focused* news stories is the constitutive element of the constructive approach. Rather than emphasizing negative, conflict-driven news about societal problems, journalism should focus more on presenting concrete and credible solutions (Hermans and Gyldensted 2019; McIntyre and Lough 2021).

Despite the increasing popularity in academic research and in the newsrooms, we know little about how solutions-focused news reporting is conducted in everyday journalistic practice, not the least how it is applied in the newsrooms of mainstream news media. There is also limited research on the different ways solutions can be represented in constructive news stories (Atanasova 2019, 2021; Riggs 2024). Since we have limited knowledge about how this form of journalism is applied in ordinary news production, there are also few discussions on the professional challenges this type of news reporting presents to news journalists.

This article contributes to journalism research by examining how journalists construct news stories about solutions to societal issues, focusing on news media in Sweden, including television, radio, press, and online news. Solutions journalism is examined as a storytelling practice, drawing from research on news discourse, and news as narrative. The overall aim is to analyze how solutions-focused news stories are constructed in news discourse through a repertoire of storytelling devices.

The study presents an extensive qualitative analysis of a sample solutions-focused news stories collected over a six-month period in April–October 2023. We examine the frequency and characteristics of solutions-focused news stories and identifies the three main formulas for solutions-focused storytelling. In the concluding section, we also discuss the potential implications and challenges solutions-focused news reporting present to news journalists in their everyday work.

## Research on Constructive and/or Solutions-focused Journalism

Terminology—constructive or solutions journalism—and definitions vary both in academia and in the newsrooms, but the idea that journalism should focus more on solutions to societal problems unites most standpoints. Constructive journalism is often defined more broadly than solutions journalism and incorporates goals beyond prioritizing “coverage of credible responses to social problems” (Thier and Namkoong 2023, 1557). These include providing a positive, hopeful, and future oriented outlook, offering context, and in-depth explanations when covering issues. There are also calls for journalism to actively strive for societal change, stimulating audience engagement, building partnerships with the public, and broadening the range of voices heard in the conversation about societal issues (Atanasova 2019, 2021; Hermans and Gyldensted 2019; Lough and McIntyre 2023; McIntyre and Lough 2021; Van Antwerpen and Fielding 2023).

We concur with Hermans and Gyldensted (2019) who argue that constructive journalism is best looked at as an umbrella term. In its broadest conceptualization it is difficult,

even impossible, to implement in ordinary news production as newsrooms are often too constrained by time, resources, and format to be able to reach many of the ambitious goals suggested for constructiveness. Many news journalists also reject any form of professional activism, emphasizing editorial neutrality and the monitorial role of journalism, and some even see constructive news as driven solely by commercial motives (Amiel and Powers 2019). For these reasons, this study concentrates on the common denominator and core characteristic of constructive journalism—the focus on presenting solutions to societal issues and problems. Selecting and analyzing solutions-focused news stories enables us to examine how such stories are constructed while at the same time providing material for a further discussion about whether the news reports also meet other criteria for constructive journalism.

Previous research on constructive journalism to date has focused mostly on audiences' responses to a solutions-focused stories, mainly using experimental methods (Meier 2018; Overgaard 2023; Swijtink et al. 2023; Van Antwerpen et al. 2023). There are also conceptual articles, discussing the normative foundations, antecedents, and characteristics of constructive journalism (Bro 2019; Hermans and Drok 2018; Mast, Coesemans, and Temmerman 2019; Thier and Namkoong 2023), as well as interviews with journalists regarding solutions-focused news (Fölscher-Kingwill and Wasserman 2024; McIntyre and Lough 2021; Rotmeijer 2019). Content analyses—qualitative or quantitative—are rare, and mostly focus on outlets that specialize in this form of reporting or target specific aspects or topics (e.g., Covid-19) of constructive news (Ashe and Lough 2025; Atanasova 2019, 2021; Li 2023; Riggs 2024).

Academic criticism of constructive journalism is also generally rare (Amiel and Powers 2019), and many of the scholars in the field come across as strong proponents, or even advocates, for making journalism more solutions-focused. The meta-discourse (Aitamurto and Varma 2018) that supports constructive journalism emphasizes the many positive outcomes that solutions-focused news could generate for both audiences and society.

Constructive journalism does, however, provide challenges to journalistic norms and role conceptions, such as the tension between activism and neutrality (Wagemans, Witschge, and Harbers 2019). Some journalists also fear that a focus on positive news will result in uncritical, “happy news” and are wary of journalism turning to advocacy and activism, even for a “good” cause. This is clearly the stance taken by the editors from Swedish public service radio and TV we collaborated with for this project, who promote constructive journalism in their organizations mainly to provide audiences with a more accurate picture of reality, and to mitigate news avoidance associated with the negativity bias in news. Qualitative interviews with audiences about solutions-focused news stories from an area of London did also express skepticism to the positive tone of the solutions-oriented news in question, expecting news to be monitorial rather than promotional (Mellor and Nguyen 2023). Non-involvement, detachment and a perception of journalism as the Fourth Estate—do, in fact, constitute “the professional mainstream of news people” in most parts of the western world (Hanitzsch 2011, 486). This is certainly also true for Swedish news media and the monitorial role conception is particularly strong among Swedish journalists (Hanitzsch et al. 2019, 183). This paper aims to fill a research gap by examining how constructive journalism is enacted in journalism practice in mainstream news media in a North European context, while also highlighting some of

the tensions in relation to the journalistic norms of neutrality and critical scrutiny that are actualized in this form of reporting.

## Constructive Journalism as a Storytelling Practice: An Analytical Approach

We approach constructive journalism from a storytelling perspective. Such a perspective resonates reasonably well with journalists' self-understanding of how they perform their craft—producing and telling news stories. It thus aligns with a practice-oriented approach to studying journalism by focusing on what journalists actually do when they produce news (Witschge and Harbers 2018). We know from decades of research on journalism practice, that news work is routinized, and that the news genre is often formulaic, with established norms and conventions for how news selection and editing are conducted (Bednarek and Caple [2012] 2019; Montgomery 2007; Tuchman 1978; Westlund and Ekström 2019).

In research, storytelling is a broad concept that lacks conceptual unity as it is used in many different academic disciplines (Djerf-Pierre and Lindgren 2021; Squire et al. 2014). In most instances it puts attention to the narrative aspects of news, including both the story - what is told, the main theme or storyline - and the discourse - how the story is told, the expressive elements (Chatman 1978). A second argument for focusing on storytelling is thus the opportunity to address both these aspects of news stories.

In this study, we analyze the *storytelling elements* and *formula(s)* that are regularly applied when journalists produce stories about solutions to societal issues (Djerf-Pierre and Lindgren 2021). Formula here refers to a categorization of news stories that structure the journalists processing of the news event and which manifests in types of stories where elements are differently articulated.

We identify the following five storytelling elements as critical to the different constructions of a solution-focused news story. These have guided the questions we asked in the analysis of the news. The first two elements refer to general components in the construction of stories: namely what the story is about, the structure and composition of the story, as well as the actors/characters and the roles they play in the story. The subsequent three elements are analyzed to address critical issues in the discussion of constructive journalism (see above); how solution-focused news stories in practice manage the aspiration for more positive, hopeful views of the world, and how norms of critical scrutiny and evidence are employed in such narratives. When analyzing the discursive enactment of these elements, we draw from news discourse analysis (Bednarek and Caple [2012] 2019; Ekström 2024; Montgomery 2007; Van Dijk 1988).

- (1) *The topic and theme of the news story*: What is the main topic and theme of the news story (such as climate change, economy, crime, social welfare)? What is the main problem and solution and how are these expressed in the news narrative? We analyze the structure and composition of the news text and how topics are expressed and foregrounded in headlines, lead etc. (Van Dijk 1988).
- (2) *The actors/characters and their role in the narrative structure of the news story*: Actors are the news subjects that are interviewed, quoted, and referred to in the news,

and we place specific emphasis on what key actors do, the role they play in relation to the problems and solutions, as well as the categories (identity or collective) they represent in the news story (Bednarek and Caple [2012] 2019, 92–24).

- (3) *Tone*: Constructive news is supposedly promoting a more positive outlook on societal issues, but to what extent, and in which ways, are solutions described in positive terms? The *negative/positive dimension* of solution-focused news is thus central to our analysis. As Bednarek and Caple ([2012] 2019) show, the characteristic negativity in much news reporting is discursively constructed in the news through linguistic and audio-visual devices, such as *negative evaluative language, references to negative emotions, negative vocabulary; visual representations of negative events and their effects, showing people's negative emotions, high camera angle, camera movement/ blurring* (Bednarek and Caple [2012] 2019, 118). To the extent that solutions-focused news is constructed as “positive” news, such storytelling should constitute *the inverse mirror of negative news*, by, for instance using positive evaluative language (success, progress), and references to positive emotions (hope, happiness), including visual representations of positive events, and showing peoples’ positive emotions, and so on.

From a news discourse perspective newsworthiness is not something intrinsic to certain events, but constructed as news is produced: ... (*N*ews values are not “inherent” aspects of events or internalized beliefs, they are values that are established by language and image in use (Bednarek and Caple [2012] 2019, 45). This means that solutions-focused news stories are not regarded as inherently positive or hope-inspiring, but rather that journalists construct them as such. Obviously, actual real-world events have different affordances in terms of how suitable they are for applying a positive storytelling formula, but the processes of selection and editing done by journalists also influence the positive or negative tone of the story. To what extent and in which way solutions-focused news is indeed constructed as “positive” news is a key empirical question for this study to answer.

- (4) *Critical/uncritical stance*: Proponents of constructive journalism emphasize the need for ensuring that a critical stance towards the issue at hand are enacted also in reporting on solutions. Are critical views and scrutiny of problems and solutions included and, if so, how are they represented in the story? To answer the question about a *critical stance* in the reporting on solutions we analyze the overall framing of the news, the eventual inclusion of critical actors, and how critical/uncritical views are indicated in the representation of facts and cited voices. Moreover, in news discourse a critical stance is typically enacted in adversarial and accountability questions posed in critical interviews (Ekström 2024).
- (5) *Evidence*: What kind of evidence supports the solution in the story and to what extent and in which ways are different forms of evidence used to indicate that the solution “works”? Here we analyze how the news present *evidence* of a solution being a solution with some certainty; how solutions are verified, critically discussed, or essentially taken for granted. News discourse largely relies on authoritative sources, and the voices of experts, witnesses, and informants. Evidence is further established in presentations of details, numbers, visuals, and, not least, the construction of cases as exemplars (Ekström and Westlund 2019; Montgomery 2007). Notably, the narrative of a news report, and the semiotic relationships between text/talk/visuals, may

indicate that solutions are working without this being explicitly stated and argued (Bednarek and Caple [2012] 2019, 148).

## Method and Data

The study employs a qualitative analysis of a sample solutions-focused news stories in 11 mainstream media outlets with the widest reach in Sweden, collected over a six-month period in April–October 2023. The following outlets were included:

*Press: Svenska Dagbladet* (SvD, broadsheet), *Dagens Nyheter* (DN, broadsheet), *Aftonbladet* (AB, tabloid), *Expressen* (tabloid). SvD and DN are quality newspapers, based in the capital of Sweden but often national in outlook. The Swedish tabloids differ from those in many other countries in the way they combine serious news reporting and commentary with tabloid style content (sex, crime, popular culture, celebrities).

*Television: Rapport* (public service), *Aktuellt* (public service), *Nyheterna* (commercial). *Rapport* is a national news show that focuses on breaking and spot news, covering the major news events of the day, whereas *Aktuellt* is more of a national current events show, emphasizing longer features and studio discussions with invited guests. *Nyheterna* is similar to *Rapport* in style and format.

*Radio: Public Service radio* produces regional and national news around the clock, but *Dagens Eko* (at 4.45 pm) and *Morgonekot* (at 8 am) are two of the most prominent national broadcasts.

*Online: SVT Nyheter online* and *Sveriges Radio (SR) Nyheter online* are the online sites of public service TV and radio in Sweden, but they differ significantly in how news stories are published on the site. *SVT online* offers full transcripts of stories accompanied by shorter videos. *SR online* provides text-based summaries of the radio stories published by *Dagens Eko* and other news programs, with links to the full audio versions. Both *SVT and SR online* are showcasing stories originating from the different local and regional newsrooms across Sweden.

The sample was collected using a combination of sampling methods. First, we gathered all news stories produced during the month of April 2023, to get a general sense of the frequency and characteristics of solutions-focused news in the outlets. This was followed by a sampling of stories using the synthetic week method over the subsequent five-month period, 1 May–31 October 2023; i.e., we sampled all news stories on the Monday of the first week, Tuesday next week and so on. This resulted in a corpus consisting of 218 news stories from 11 mainstream news media outlets—57 stories from newspapers, 28 from radio, 61 from television, and 72 online.

We used the following criteria for inclusion of news stories:

- (1) The news story must present a societal problem and a solution.
- (2) The solution must be foregrounded in the story; it should be mentioned in the headline or lead and/or take up the main part of the body text.
- (3) The solution must be tangible rather than hypothetical, i.e., the solution must have been initiated, tested, and/or approved by reliable sources.

Although simple and straightforward, the application of these criteria to actual news stories still brought to the fore several borderline cases that needed careful consideration. To be included in the sample, the solution had to be the main topic of the story, and not

just an addendum to a story focusing on the problem. Although a problem and a solution are required, the problem is sometimes implicit or “obvious” to the audience when it concerns a problem that is very salient in the public debate. In such cases, a description of the problem may not be needed, only the solution. Solutions to a problem that affects a single individual were included when described in such a way that makes it relevant as a societal issue. Personalization is a widely used device in journalistic storytelling (Bednarek and Caple [2012] 2019, 55). It is also present in solutions news; to focus on how specific individuals are affected by and dealing with societal problems is a common strategy to illustrate the general issue. Still, the “advice columns” of the daily press where people seek guidance regarding personal problems, such as relationships and sex or cooking and gardening, were *not* included in the sample. Further examples of considerations relating to the three criteria will be discussed in applicable parts of results section, as they are a key part of the analysis.

The analytical strategy for the study was developed in five steps: (1) Collecting the news stories and doing preliminary analyzes while watching, listening and reading the news during sampling, (2) Storing the collected news items in a database for easy retrieval, (3) Two researchers (the authors) coding the news items in the database in an excel-sheet using broad qualitative (text-based) notes about each story, primarily related to the storytelling elements in the analytical framework, (4) Viewing, listening and discussing examples over three sessions to ensure reliability, focusing in particular on the examples that raised questions regarding criteria for inclusion and principles for coding, (5) Analyzing typical and outlier stories, devising the main results and conclusions about storytelling elements and formulas in solutions-focused news. Moreover, the two researchers discussed the findings of the study with two editors from SVT and SR whom have been leading efforts to implement constructive journalism in their respective news organizations. This collaboration was established to further the practice-oriented approach and to ensure that our definition of solutions journalism corresponded with the practitioners’ view. Following the principles of abduction, the analyses are thus guided by established conceptualizations of news discourse (see section above) and developed through detailed intersubjective interpretations of empirical data.

## Analysis

The results of the analysis are presented in three parts, starting with a brief overview of the presence and frequency of solution-focused news. This is followed by the analyses related to the various storytelling elements and, finally, the storytelling formulas.

### *The (Scant) Presence of Solutions-focused News*

The search for solutions-focused news resulted in a corpus of 218 news stories (Table 1). This means that the examined news outlets published less than one solutions-focused story per day; highest in public service television, lowest in the press, specifically the tabloid *Expressen*. Public service television produced more solutions-focused stories than private television and the press, but all outlets remained within the low range of 0.1–0.9 stories per day. A first conclusion is therefore that solutions-focused news is not very prevalent in mainstream news media in Sweden.

**Table 1.** The frequency of solutions-focused news in eleven mainstream news outlets.

	Number of solutions-focused stories per day	Number of solutions-focused stories
<b>TELEVISION</b>		
Rapport (public service TV)	0.7	38
Aktuellt (public service TV)	0.4	13
Nyheterna (private TV)	0.2	10
<b>RADIO</b>		
Dagens Eko 4.45 pm (public service radio)	0.2	10
Morgonkot 8 am (public service radio)	0.3	18
<b>PRESS</b>		
Aftonbladet (AB, tabloid)	0.4	23
Expressen (Exp, tabloid)	0.1	5
Svenska Dagbladet (SvD, broadsheet)	0.3	14
Dagens Nyheter (DN, broadsheet)	0.3	15
<b>ONLINE</b>		
SVT nyheter online (public service TV online)	0.9	46
SR nyheter online (public service radio online)	0.5	26
<b>MEAN</b>	0.4	20

Note: News items collected between 2023-04-01 and 2023-10-31 using a systematic sampling procedure. Total number of stories = 218. Number of days surveyed = 55. The calculation of the number per day has taken into account that some outlets were unavailable and/or did not broadcast on the day of survey.

To put the comparison in context, we must also consider the vast differences in the total number of articles/stories published per day. The online news sites have between 75 and 100 stories on their websites on a single day, compared to 4–12 in the TV and radio news programs. Seen in this light, if increasing solutions-focused news is a goal for newsrooms, the public service news program *Rapport* was the most successful in making solutions-focused news part of their regular news output.

### **Storytelling Elements**

#### (1) Topic and theme: environment, public health, and social issues dominate

In terms of news topics, the news agenda for solutions-focused news often reflects the general news agenda during the period of study. Climate change, energy, biodiversity, health care, schools, public health, immigration, crime, social welfare, and the economy are all present as topic categories (Table 2).

The relative emphasis of news topics still differs between solutions- and general news. Despite lacking comparable quantitative measures of the total news agenda for the period, it is evident that some news topics are clearly favored as suitable for this type of storytelling. Environmental issues of all kinds, medicine, and social issues dominate the solutions-focused news agenda, whereas other news topics that we know are very salient in general news, such as politics and the economy, are hardly visible among the solutions-focused stories.

Moreover, we noticed a clear emphasis on local news across the board. About 50 percent of the solutions-focused news stories are local, one-third national (Sweden), and less than 20 percent foreign or international news. We also noted that a vast part of the solutions-focused stories in the public service outlets is produced by their local

**Table 2.** The main news topic of solutions-focused news.

Main news topic	Frequency	Percent
Environment, total	81	37
<i>Environment, nature conservation and biodiversity</i>	25	12
<i>Environment, climate change</i>	22	10
<i>Environment, sustainable farming and food production</i>	8	4
<i>Environment, African swine fever</i>	8	4
<i>Environment, energy production and conservation</i>	5	2
<i>Environment, other</i>	13	6
Medicine, total	38	18
<i>Medicine, new pharmaceuticals and medical treatments</i>	20	9
<i>Medicine, public health</i>	18	8
Social issues, total	28	13
<i>Support for vulnerable groups</i>	12	6
<i>Social measures to prevent crime</i>	7	3
<i>Integration of immigrants</i>	7	3
<i>Social issues, other</i>	2	1
Crisis response preparedness	17	8
Crime and judicial system	16	7
Economy and labor market, total	8	4
<i>Consumer economy and personal finances</i>	3	1
<i>Economy, other</i>	5	2
Health care	8	4
War and conflicts	6	3
Schools and education	5	2
Terrorism prevention	3	1
Energy production (not environment)	3	1
Other	5	2
Total	218	100

Note: See note to Table 1. Subcategories in italics.

and regional newsrooms and repurposed to run in the national news show and/or promoted online.

The most prominent theme in solutions-focused news is a case report about a concrete and successful outcome of a specific—and often local—measure (project, program, intervention) to prevent, reduce, or solve an environmental, public health or social welfare problem/issue. Indeed, about 50 percent of the solutions-focused stories contain a case report of some kind, either by fully focusing on the case or using a case as an example.

A typical example of such a case-focused story is from *Rapport* (2023-04-12) about tests using garbage trucks with AI cameras to monitor the quality of the roads in a city in Southern Sweden. The story shows how trucks are filming the roads as they go about collecting garbage, and the videos are used to identify damaged sections. An engineer who is responsible for developing the program is interviewed, describing the virtues of the technique and how it saves the city money.

## (2) The main actors—solution promoters and recipients

The news actors that appear in all stories represent two distinct but complementary roles in relation to the solutions: the promoters, and the solution recipients. The promoters are those who are responsible for initiating or delivering the solution and who are acting and talking on behalf of its benefits. The solutions recipients are those whose problems are to be solved or mitigated and thus benefiting from the solution in some way. Almost all stories in the sample have at least one solutions promoter as key actor in the story.

Many, but not all, also include a solutions recipient. The specific categories of actors chosen for these roles are—not unexpectedly—highly dependent on the news topic. In social welfare stories, solutions promoters are often social workers or their managers and the solutions recipients are representatives of the vulnerable groups in question—elderly people, immigrants, people with disabilities. Medicine news often includes scientists or medical professionals as solution promoters and patients as the recipients and so on. Solutions providers in the environmental stories are varied, but scientists, farmers, and local authorities are quite frequently represented. Since the recipients of environmental solutions are often animals, nature, or humanity at large, these stories often have experts, and occasionally even environmental organizations, speaking on behalf of the benefits of the solution.

It is equally interesting to note which actors are *not* present in solutions-focused news. One group that is prevalent in ordinary news but almost invisible in solutions news are politicians. The only solutions-focused story in the sample that includes a government minister is the *Rapport* story about the government's climate change program (2023-10-19), "Climate billions under scrutiny". This is, however, in many ways an *atypical* solutions story, as it presents itself as a critical investigative report about the efficiency and effects of the government's program to mitigate climate change. It contains the only accountability interview with a politician found in the sample, a format otherwise frequently applied in political news when journalists hold politicians to account for their actions.

We surmise that the absence of political actors is partly due to the fact that solutions must be concrete and tangible to be included in the sample, thus excluding general proposals and promises regarding solutions from politicians, but also that avoidance of conflict and controversy generally characterizes solutions-focused news (see further below). Hence, while the issues reported on certainly have significant political dimensions, the solution-focused stories tend to construct a non-political discourse on societal problems.

### (3) Tone—positivity prevalent but not dominant

Positivity is a trait often associated with constructive news, but it is in fact *not* part of our definition. One recurring feature of the solutions news in the sample is still the positive tone in many of the reports. Solutions news are often edited to be inspiring, encouraging, and providing a positive outlook on society. This includes reporting on positive trends in society and employing "optimism", "hope" and "possibilities" angles when addressing problems. Headlines often showcase the solution, and the lead and presentation are also edited to signal positivity, as is evident in this example from *Aktuellt* (2023-08-08) where the news presenter introduce the story in this way:

Now on to a more hope inspiring story, that is, that the deforestation of the Amazon rainforests is the lowest since 2017.

Another example from *Rapport* (2023-04-13) has the headline "A new malaria vaccine awakens hope". The story starts with the reporter describing the problem, that malaria is one of the main public health problems in Africa, and that researchers have tried for decades to develop an effective vaccine. Now, the reporter continues, researchers from

University of Oxford have succeed to produce what they describe as a “groundbreaking” vaccine, and Ghana is the first country to try it on a large scale. The story includes video from a health care clinic in Ghana and interviews with a local head of the clinic. The story concludes with an interview with a Swedish malaria researcher from Lund’s University, who is also speaking supportively about the new vaccine.

Still, not all solutions stories are framed by a positive evaluative language in the headlines. We also find ample examples of news with negative and problem-focused headlines but where the solution clearly constitutes the main part of the story. An example of this is from *SVT online* (2023-04-04), which has the problem-focused headline, “Mental health stigma among minority groups”, but where the text and video that follow clearly focus on tenable solutions, such as having access to a Somali speaking psychologist.

Another example of the tension between negativity and positivity in solutions news is a story about climate change and heatwaves in *Aktuellt* (2023-04-02). The first part of the story is clearly negative and alarmistic as the news presenter introduces the story with the phrase “the heat in Europe is becoming more and more dangerous”. The reporter continues with a narrative about how people in Southern Europe are suffering from the heating climate. This is, however, followed by a studio interview with the climate reporter who takes a more solutions-focused stance describing the many adaptation measures that are put in place to handle the heat, such as early warning systems, rebuilding the city to increase shade etc. The latter focus on tangible solutions is what made us include the story in the sample, despite the initial negative tone.

Positivity is thus a prevalent feature, but evidently *not constitutive* of solutions-focused news in Swedish mainstream news media. Notably, solutions regarding some news topics are very difficult to tell in a positive, inspiring, and hopeful discourse. The war in Ukraine is perhaps the most evident example in our sample. The war yielded several solutions-focused news stories during the period, but these are conveyed in a neutral and descriptive language. An example is a story in *Dagens Eko* (2023-04-08) about Ukrainian soldiers who choose to freeze their sperm in case they get killed or injured in battle. The story highlights a possible change in legislation that will allow using sperm in IVF even though the provider is no longer alive but does so without any emotionally charged expressions.

#### (4) Stance—the absence of critical views

One feature that is not just prevalent but *dominant* in the solutions-focused news stories is the absence of criticism. Explicitly critical views on solutions are very rare in the sample and only about 20 percent of the stories raise some criticism or problematize the solution in some way; and this is with a very wide and permissive categorization of “critique”. When critical questions are raised by reporters and interviewers, they often have a pre-emptive function to allow the promotor of the solution to counter anticipated or known objections.

Critical scrutiny of solutions is indeed rare in the examined news stories. One example is the “Climate billions under scrutiny” story in *Rapport* (2023-10-19), mentioned earlier. In fact, there are more stories that do the opposite, enacting a more or less promotional stance to the solution in question. A few case reports, of which most seem to be initiated by a press release, originate from a company or organization that seeks to present itself as

environmentally friendly, ethically responsible, or socially sustainable, and therefore launches a project or program that will contribute to this image.

One example of such PR driven news is from *Nyheterna* (2023-04-27), a story about a business that grows cut flowers with less environmental impact. The grower, who is part of the “slow flower movement” and a member of a business association for flower growers, is interviewed on site. She speaks enthusiastically about the benefits of growing flowers ecologically without pesticides, artificial fertilizers or using a greenhouse. The story is promotional in a way that is nearing something that could be published on the organization’s own webpage.

(5) Evidence—variation in tangible support for that the solution “works”

Although the presentation of concrete evidence is part of our definition of solutions news and thus a criterium for inclusion in the sample, there are huge variations in terms of how precisely, concretely, and extensively the qualities and workings of the solution are described in the news. It was indeed quite difficult to decide on a lower limit for tangible evidence. Sometimes the solution appears to be concrete when judging from the headline and lead, but the description of the solution and what it entails is vague in the actual story. In other situations, how the solution is supposed to be working is concretely described, but less conclusive evidence for it actually working is presented. Key examples here are news reports about promising results when scientists test new cures for a public health problem (e.g., obesity) or a disease, but also many case reports about projects that have just been launched where stories have more emphasis on “hope” and “expectations” of successful outcomes than proof of tangible results.

Evidently, the shorter formats of broadcast news hamper the possibility to provide nuanced and in-depth descriptions of the features of a solution. The broadsheet press, with access to longform reportage, has more space and resources to provide details to the reports. One example from *Dagens Nyheter* (2023-04-10) is a two-page story about how the Port of Gothenburg is investing in sustainable solutions, such as electrification of transports, to meet its climate goals. The story, featured in colorful graphics and explanatory visualizations, is obviously promotional in the sense that it puts the port in a positive light, but it also problematizes the solution and gives space to critical views.

The current affairs format of stories in *Aktuellt* also harbors the potential for providing details and discussions in the reports. An example is a longer feature in SVT’s *Aktuellt* (2023-04-13) that devoted 11 min to discussing the role of population growth as a driver of climate change, and whether family planning and birth control are necessary measures. This is done in a nuanced way, including interviewees that argue for and against population control. Nuance and context are features that many proponents of constructive journalism want to include in the definition of constructiveness. In our sample, however, we find a few examples of such in-depth, contextualized reporting; it can thus be seen as an opportunity lost for the outlets that have the format, space, and resources to actually deliver such news.

In most, if not all, solutions-focused stories, concrete evidence to support the solutions are provided by *authoritative sources*, i.e., people entitled to act as experts and who present adequate knowledge to evaluate the solution at hand. These are often individuals associated with academic institutions, but other actors are also presented in the stories as

authoritative sources allowed to vouch for the solution's viability, such as a farmer with vast experience in agriculture in a story about how climate change affects Swedish farmers. Even environmental organizations can be assigned that role, such as, in a story about the decrease in deforestation of the Amazon in *Aktuellt* (2023-08-08). The story uses an interview with a Greenpeace representative to give evidence that the president of Brazil's policy to limit deforestation has been successful. It is thus not always the interviewee's formal title or position that facilitates the role of an expert in a story, but how journalists *construct actors as authoritative sources* of knowledge and suppliers of evidence for that the solution in the story actually works.

Finally, in terms of evidence, it is sometimes unclear if the solution presented in the story is a solution to the fundamental issue at hand, or just a way to alleviate a minor part of the problem. One interesting example is a story from *Rapport* (2024-04-07), commemorating the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, which ended most of the violent conflict in Northern Ireland, 25 years ago. The news presenter's introduction states that religious divisiveness still influences the region, but that "some schools have decided to cooperate over the religious boundaries". The story that follows is about one Catholic and one Protestant school that have decided to cooperate by giving joint classes in certain subjects. The cooperation is described as a major success and a series of interviews with pupils and teachers vouch for the viability of the program. At the same time, all interviewees are clearly in favor of keeping the schools separated based on ethno-religious identity and see no point in fully integrating education. The solution, thus, seem to encourage a further peaceful co-existence between the two ethnic groups rather than solving the heart of the matter—the ethno-religious fractionalization that is still very much alive.

### ***Storytelling Formulas—Three Models for Constructing Solutions-focused News***

In the final part of the analysis, we discuss how the abovementioned traits are applied and combined to shape the ways journalists commonly construct news about solutions. This means that we take the storytelling elements as a point of departure and analyze how recurring combinations of these represent formulas for how solutions-focused news is presented in actual news discourse. The three main formulas identified are *the Positive Case Formula*, *the Advisory Journalism Formula*, and *the Positive Societal Development Formula (the "Rosling")*.

#### ***The Positive Case Formula***

The Positive Case Formula focuses on specific instances where an entity (individual or organization) has presented a way to solve, mitigate or alleviate some part of a societal problem. In extant news stories, this formula generally includes the following storytelling elements:

- (1) A headline that highlights the solution.
- (2) An intro/lead that introduces the problem, followed by a bridge inserting "*but there is hope*" (or "help", or "possibilities", or "a solution" or "things that are/can be done", or "things you can do" or "ways of dealing with") and a brief outline of what the solution entails.

- (3) On the scene reporting from a place relevant to the case, where the reporter provides further descriptions of the solution.
- (4) On the scene interview with solution-provider(s) who appears confident and happy and further describes the solution and provides evidence, asserting that the solution is “working”.
- (5) On the scene interview with solution-recipient(s), looking happy and talking about how the person and/or society benefits or is helped by the solution.
- (6) (Optional: interview with an expert who also supports the solution).

There are many variants of this form of case-focused storytelling, both in terms of what type of case is selected, how the case is represented as an evident solution to a problem. The *Best practice* story are case reports from a specific community, municipality, or country where a solution to a problem has been tested effectively - and thus serves as an example that can inspire others to solve the same problem.

Another variant, which heavily draws on personalization, is *Taking matters in your own hand*. These are stories about “ordinary” people who are finding ways to deal with an issue on their own, cases that can inspire others to do the same. A typical, but still odd, example is from *SVT online* (2023-04-30) about a local man who collects and spreads his own urine around his property to scare away wild boars. The wild boar population has skyrocketed in Sweden and is causing havoc in the fields for farmers and gardeners, but the smell of human urine keeps them away.

The *Entrepreneur invents a solution* variant focuses on an enterprising individual who has invented something useful that can (or might) contribute to solving an issue. One example is a story in *Dagens Eko* (2023-04-29) about a mobile bomb shelter invented by an American entrepreneur. Despite not addressing the core problem (the availability of firearms), he speaks in favor of the solution, saying it can be installed in schools in the USA to protect children when a school shooting is happening.

As represented by the previous example, the *Positive Case Formula* is also enacted in stories where an alternative, problem-focused storytelling formula could potentially have been applied. Another example of this is from *SVT online* (2023-10-19), with the headline “The police are building Sweden’s first ‘child detention center’”. The problem presented in the story is that, since the Convention on the Rights of the Child became Swedish law in 2020, children should no-longer be placed in police custody together with adult suspects. The solution is to build special wards for children, and Malmö’s is the first in the country. The story includes an interview with a head police commissioner in Malmö, who speaks in favor of the solution and the story also mentions that the police in Malmö has collaborated with the Ombudsman for Children and the social services to ensure the suitability of the premises. Still, the journalist poses no critical questions, such as if children should be placed in detention centers at all, or if alternative measures had been considered.

### ***The Advisory Journalism Formula***

The *Advisory Journalism Formula* involves inviting experts, often scientists, to give advice to the general public about how to deal with a current problem or issue. In our sample, it is frequently used in stories about public health or medicine, such as how to alleviate arthritis (*Aftonbladet*, 2023-08-08) or protecting yourself from skin cancer (*Aktuellt*,

2023-06-14). In this formula, the story is not focusing on a specific case, but on experts providing their knowledge in the service of the public. Being more focused on “news-you-can-use” and practical guidelines, explicit references to hope and optimism are less prevalent in this type of stories. The main actor and solution provider in these stories is the expert, who, in the case of broadcast news, is either invited to the studio or interviewed in the person’s office. Still, not all advisory journalism involves scientific expertise. An example of this is from *SVT online* (2023-04-04) with the headline “Changing ingredients can save hundreds of dollars in Easter - see the chefs’ tricks.” The story was placed in the context of the cost-of-living crisis due to rising inflation in 2023, and a well-known chef and food blogger was interviewed about how you can change ingredients in Easter food to save money.

### ***The Positive Societal Development Formula (The “Rosling”)***

*The Positive Societal Development Formula (The “Rosling”)* is the least prevalent of the three and it entails reporting on examples and statistics proving optimistic trends in society, hence the reference to professor Hans Rosling (who is widely known for criticizing the news media of neglecting all the positive development that actually takes place in the world; <https://www.gapminder.org/>). Such stories were included in the sample if they also focused on what had brought about the positive changes. These good news stories do not focus on individual cases but on societal developments at large. The story-line can focus on a critical event that occurred and fundamentally changed the way a problem is dealt with by society for the better (before-after), or about reversing trends in which efforts and solutions have turned around a previously negative development. An example is a story from *Dagens Nyheter* (2023-06-29) about the positive development of cancer treatments in the world, with the headline “Cancer milestones - so many more survive”.

## **Discussion**

This study contributes to the, thus far, limited research on the content and styles of solution-focused news journalism (Ashe and Lough 2025; Atanasova 2019, 2021; Li 2023). The study takes a practice-oriented approach, examining how solutions-focus news is applied and enacted in mainstream news media in Sweden, showing how a focus on solutions to societal issues (rather than problems) can be integrated into ordinary news reporting.

The first conclusion from the study is that solutions-focused news stories are generally quite uncommon and hardly prioritized in the newsrooms. This is despite the active efforts of—in particular—public service media to implement this form of news.

Solutions news is still more prevalent in public service media. The fact that the marked-driven outlets that focus on breaking news and click journalism publish very few solutions stories indicate that these outlets do not regard this form of journalism as a way of driving attention or increasing revenues. Solutions journalism thus seem to align better with the social responsibility norms emphasized by public service media. These news organizations have also initiated several projects to increase solutions reporting in their newsrooms. However, the main argument for

promoting solutions-focused news in the public service outlets is often to mitigate news avoidance.

Still, the low prevalence of solutions news in general shows how difficult it is to alter the fundamental practices of news production, particularly the habitual application of problem-focused storytelling formulas in all news media.

The second conclusion concerns the storytelling elements of solutions-focused news. The optimistic and positive tone, which is noted also in other studies of constructive news (Atanasova 2019, 2021), is a prevalent but not a constitutive feature of solutions-focused storytelling in Swedish news media. An accepting and often uncritical stance to the solution in question is, on the other hand, indeed a dominant feature of the solutions news in the study. The claims of solutions promoters are often taken for granted without critical questions. Strong criticism of the solution in focus is rare and many news stories tend to fully embrace the solution, without problematization. The solution-focused stories avoid controversy and thus tend to depoliticize even politically sensitive issues. This lack of critical scrutiny and accountability reporting is a weakness also noted in other studies of solution-focused news stories (Li 2023).

The provided evidence for that the solution works varies greatly between stories, and although tangible support is one of the three criteria we employed to define solutions-focused news, the evidence is often quite weak. Stories construct cases as good exemplars and feature sources entitled to speak in support of the solutions presented. However, some stories are relying on optimistic predictions, hopes, and wishes for good outcomes rather than solid proof of positive effects.

A third conclusion relates to the storytelling formulas, showing that solutions-focused news is quite formulistic when it comes to how storytelling elements are selected and combined. The *Positive Case*, *Advisory Journalism*, and the *Positive Societal Development* (the “Rosling”) are the three main formulas identified. All three obviously focus on solutions to societal problems, but display important differences regarding how actors/sources, tonalities, and forms of evidence are employed in the stories.

In Sweden, as in many other countries, systematic efforts are being made to develop solution-focused news reporting in the newsrooms, often in an attempt to address the inherent negativity bias of news. However, there are several challenges news journalists face in the process of making the news more “constructive”.

One tension that is actualized in this form of reporting is with the professional norms of neutrality/independence and critical scrutiny (Li 2023). A major challenge is that solutions stories often tend to be promotional and therefore difficult to align with the monitorial role of journalism. Journalists are generally wary of the risk of doing PR, but the need to find positive cases and to tell the news in an optimistic and hopeful tone make solutions-focused news particularly susceptible. The avoidance of controversy in solutions-focused storytelling, combined with the tendency to embrace the solution at hand also risk naturalizing certain “easy” and uncontroversial solutions over other more complex and transformative.

Solutions-focused storytelling offers many opportunities for making journalism less negatively biased, but also significant pitfalls to avoid: the risk for an overly uncritical, simplistic, and depoliticized reporting on significant societal problems. Notably, some of the observed features of solution-focused news stories are at odds with the normative definitions of constructive journalism which emphasize comprehensive and critical

examinations of how solutions to significant societal problems actually work (McIntyre and Lough 2021).

Solutions-focused storytelling requires some consensus about both the problem and the solution. The journalistic assessment of whether a potential story is suitable to report using a constructive storytelling formula or if it should be treated as “ordinary” news, employing critical or negative formulas, is therefore essential and consequential. This judgement depends on whether the current public debate about the problem (and solution) is located in the sphere of “consensus” or “legitimate controversy” (Hallin, 1986). More precisely, the identified formulas for solution-focused news tend to assume that a solution is either uncontroversial (e.g., pothole in the road) or subject to widespread consensus. Hence, important solutions risk not being reported on because they are too difficult, complex or controversial for the present solutions-focused storytelling formulas. Evidently, some news topics are deemed more suitable for this form of storytelling, such as environment, public health, and social issues. This is also sustained by the focus on environmental issues and climate change in previous research on constructive journalism (e.g., Ashe and Lough 2025; Atanasova 2019, 2021).

Integrating critical elements in solutions journalism is certainly a challenge. An inherent problem for this type of reporting is that it presupposes that all solutions are positive and hope inspiring. However, radical and comprehensive solutions to major societal problems are more often than not both demanding and conflictual. There is, consequently, much to be done in terms of developing journalistic story structures and narratives to allow for nuance, critique, and conflict when telling stories about solutions.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This research was supported by the Swedish Research Council [grant number VR-2022-02272]; Vetenskapsrådet.

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