

“It’s more of a mindset”: Journalism professionals’ perceptions and experiences of constructive journalism

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Abstract

Constructive journalism is an approach of increasing interest in journalism scholarship and practice. The approach draws on positive and cognitive psychology to underpin choices when reporting, such as including possible solutions, developments, context, and stories of hope in news reports. While it has gained momentum, ongoing work is needed to align practice and research when defining and implementing constructive journalism. We report on a thematic analysis of interviews with journalism professionals ($N = 16$) to clarify how professionals understand and use constructive journalism and the opportunities, concerns, and barriers they experience in doing so. While, across our sample, themes encapsulated a range of techniques aligning with those discussed in the constructive journalism literature, participants described constructive journalism as a mindset or principled approach, but often found it difficult to describe specific practical techniques. Participants experienced barriers, including traditional standards, fear of activism, and structural barriers such as limited time and resources. Drawing on participant insights, we discuss some suggestions for newsrooms and educators when implementing constructive journalism.

Keywords

Constructive journalism, constructive news, journalism culture, journalism norms, journalism practice, solutions journalism

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Constructive journalism is proposed to reduce news-driven anxiety and improve audience trust and informativeness (van Antwerpen et al., 2022a). While theoretical work on constructive journalism has increased (Lough and McIntyre, 2021), there is still a frequent gap between theory and practice (Bro, 2023). We interviewed journalism professionals interested in constructive journalism about their perceptions and experiences of the approach in practice, including opportunities, concerns, barriers, and methods of overcoming these. We aimed to understand and contribute to the approach's practical development and implementation.

Constructive journalism in context

Based in psychology and behavioural science, constructive journalism aims to counteract news' negativity bias and broaden reporting's lens to more accurately reflect the world, including reporting solutions and developments alongside problems and disasters (Bro, 2023; McIntyre and Gyldensted, 2017, 2018). Constructive journalism initially evolved from practicing journalists Gyldensted and Haagerup, and shares relation to other counter movements such as civic, peace, and solutions journalism; all of which critique the disproportionate focus on conflict and negativity, the representation of institutions, the logic of power in society, and news being distant to the citizens and civil society it claims to serve (Bro, 2023). Within these approaches, constructive elements were developed with the intention to help journalism to produce accurate, ethical, and responsible news. They include solutions-orientation, future orientation, inclusiveness and diversity, empowerment, context, and public-orientation (Hermans and Gyldensted, 2019). More broadly, the [Constructive Institute \(n.d.\)](#) defines the approach as embracing solutions, nuance, and dialogue. Constructive journalism acknowledges journalists' active role in constructing mediated reality; approaches audiences primarily as socially competent citizens, taking an action-oriented perspective empowering people to make self-substantiated decisions; and gives context while including diverse perspectives and sources (Hermans and Drok, 2018: p. 688). Constructive journalism has received criticism for being 'fluffy' or 'positive' news, however, proponents have disputed this, arguing constructive journalism is equally capable of serving journalism's watchdog function whilst presenting information on developments and solutions (Bro, 2023).

Constructive journalism is proposed to address common criticisms of traditional news; including: the dominant negativity bias; practices such as false balance, where opposing views are presented without reference to the evidence or (expert) consensus (Imundo and Rapp, 2021); and presenting extreme opposites that can fuel polarization (Ahva, 2022). While constructive journalism forms a promising answer to current newsroom challenges, including avoidance due to negativity (Andersen et al., 2024), its definition is still developing, and its practical implementation is going steadily but lacks empirical attention (Bro, 2023). The 'elasticity' of constructive journalism has received mixed responses, enabling flexibility and innovation, yet threatening dissolution if theory and practice are not solidified (Bro, 2019, 2023). Currently, newsrooms across many countries purport to be using constructive journalism (Ross, 2020; Heinrichs et al., 2022; Kovačević, 2023; [The New York Times, n.d.](#)), however, limited work evaluates this news production

(though see [Kovačević, 2023](#)). Additionally, there is often a gap between ideals of journalism, education and scholarship, and how it works in practice ([Bulendu and Yanqiu, 2024](#); [Jiang and Rafeeq, 2019](#); [Mellado et al., 2020](#)), including for constructive journalism ([Bro 2023](#)). For constructive journalism, this gap may be heightened by its newness, varied definitions, and still-developing resources. Constructive journalism has seen increased industry interest, with multiple institutions promoting the approach (e.g., the Constructive Institute, the Bonn Institute) however, while some training materials are available, they are still in an early stage and relatively brief ([Lund Jørgensen and Risbro, 2021](#)).

Consistent with [Bro's \(2023\)](#) call to develop constructive journalism definitions and practices through collaboration between researchers and practitioners, we therefore aim to contribute to further articulation and practical development by considering how professionals perceive and use constructive journalism, including opportunities, barriers, and concerns impeding implementation. Similar research has been conducted for solutions journalism, originating in the US and often considered a subset of constructive journalism ([Lough et al., 2024](#); [Lough and McIntyre, 2018](#)), though lacking for the broader constructive journalism approach.

Current research on constructive journalism

Constructive journalism has promise to address key news concerns, including news avoidance ([Skovsgaard and Andersen, 2020](#)), potentially misleading negative and episodic reporting, and declining trust ([Garusi and Leonhardt, 2024](#); [Van Antwerpen et al., 2023](#)). Often constructive journalism studies investigate audience effects comparing constructive with problem-oriented approaches. Audience research has shown an unequivocal effect on emotions, with constructive news producing less negative and more positive emotions than problem-oriented news, including within social media posts and over time ([Hermans and Prins, 2022](#); [Kleemans et al., 2018](#); [McIntyre, 2020](#); [McIntyre and Lough, 2023](#); [Overgaard, 2023](#); [van Antwerpen et al., 2022](#); [Venrooij et al., 2022](#)).

However, the practice of constructive approaches has been less studied, with existing research often focusing on a specific topic, region, or newsroom, or on solutions journalism ([Lough and McIntyre, 2021](#)). These studies have found journalists view the principles underlying constructive and/or solutions journalism positively, though experiencing barriers including existing journalism culture ([Fölscher-Kingwill and Wasserman, 2024](#); [Garusi and Leonhardt, 2024](#); [Jiang and Rafeeq, 2019](#); [Kovacevic and Perisin, 2018](#); ; [Rotmeijer, 2018](#)). Across both solutions and constructive journalism, qualitative research shows journalists have difficulty with constructive/solution principles given their socialisation into traditional journalistic practices. We expand former research to have a more global perspective, examining international conceptions of constructive journalism, and actual practices, to understand whether these align with the literature, and what would best serve journalists and newsrooms when implementing the approach.

This study

While promising, constructive journalism needs better conceptualisation and practical guidelines that close the gap between theory and practice (Bro, 2023; Lough and McIntyre, 2021). Accordingly, we sought to understand conceptualisations and practical experiences of constructive journalism among interested professionals, to inform training, conceptualisation, and implementation. Consistent with our aims, we approached interviews with an open view on constructive journalism's definition and techniques, being receptive to participant experiences. Our research questions were:

- RQ1:** How do journalism professionals interested in constructive journalism understand, use, and experience the approach?
- RQ2:** What concerns and/or barriers do interested journalism professionals experience in using constructive journalism, and how do they overcome them?

Methods

Procedure and participants

Participants were recruited through the constructive journalism network, an online platform for professionals interested in constructive journalism, and snowball sampling. All participants with listed emails were contacted. As membership requires registration, this strategy ensured participants had sufficient familiarity and interest in constructive journalism to join the network (like Lough and McIntyre's 2018 use of Solutions Journalism Network).

One focus group¹ and 13 one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted between January and late April 2020, either in-person or via phone or video conference (*Mdn* 68 minutes). Participants were from Europe ($n = 12$; France, Spain, Netherlands, Croatia, Sweden, United Kingdom, Finland, Norway), Africa ($n = 1$; Tanzania); North America ($n = 2$; Canada, United States), and Oceania ($n = 1$; Australia), and worked across various formats including print, online, local, and broadcast journalism, with some also providing training or engaged in research.

Initial questions asked about understandings of constructive journalism, followed by their constructive techniques/practices, views on relationships between journalists and audiences, and experiences working with a constructive approach in practice, including barriers or concerns. Follow-up questions were asked to further understand participants' understandings and experiences, including diverse perspectives.

Analytic approach

Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim including verbal and nonverbal utterances. At participants' request, reported quotations were cleaned of non-semantic sounds and utterances (e.g., "um" or coughing). To maintain anonymity while providing context, interviewees are identified by jurisdiction and role. The audio recording failed in

one interview, and notes were written collaboratively with the participant. Transcripts were stored and analysed in NVivo 12[®].

Reflexive thematic analysis was conducted by the first author, with a blended inductive and theoretical approach from a critical realist position [Braun and Clarke, 2019](#). Analysis was undertaken following the six phases described in Braun and Clarke (2019), including familiarisation, followed by generating initial codes. Consistent with the analytical approach, coding was centred on specific questions, working through each transcript to produce as many themes and patterns as possible and relevant. Third, codes were inspected and sorted into themes and subthemes, including through visual maps. Fourth, themes were reviewed for internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity, and the thematic map checked against the dataset. Fifth, themes were defined and named according to content. The final phase involved writing up the data and analysis. Themes were discussed between both authors.

Ethics and quality criteria

Approval was granted by the University of Adelaide Human Research Ethics Subcommittee (01/20). Participants were invited to review their transcripts and a summary of findings. Throughout the analytic process, codes and themes were discussed with a research team, extracts cross-checked against themes and thematic mind-maps, and an audit trail maintained.

Results

The analysis generated four themes for each research questions, as described below.

Constructive journalism approach and practice

Four subthemes were generated in response to RQ1, on participants' understanding and use of constructive journalism: (A) the constructive mindset; (B) Context, perspective and solutions; (C) Listening to audiences and promoting dialogue, and (D) Working with sources: Selection, portrayal, and respect; each described below.

(A) The constructive mindset: Responsible, conscious, and purposeful reporting. Participants described constructive journalism as an attitude, or mindset, that influenced their reporting practice even from the initial stages. This mindset included being conscious of their work's impact on society, and thinking about different solutions and angles for a story beyond the scope of traditional practice. While participants differed in which aspect of the mindset they emphasised, it broadly encompassed hope and solutions, responsible reporting, and being conscious and purposeful in their work.

As below, recognising this mindset did not automatically enable awareness of concrete changes made in routines and practices. Participants recognised that their way of doing journalism differed but struggled to articulate specifically *how*.

I cannot say it's really something I do and pinpoint what it is, it's how I look at the world, constructive journalism. [...] But it starts with the subject choice, and the people you interview, the type of questions you ask. (Freelance, Netherlands)

Within this mindset, participants described constructive journalism as involving a shift in thinking from the initial stages of selection through to composing the final product, including shifting from a predominantly problem focus to including possible solutions, opportunities, and potential for positive stories, as expanded in the next theme.

Linked to mindset, participants expressed a personal resonance with constructive journalism, particularly in looking for stories of hope. As below, they expressed disliking the negative focus often used in news, and wanted to tell different stories.

[there is a difference with] other journalists, in the way that we detect the stories that we want to tell[we have] more affinity towards stories about what's working (Broadcast and research, Croatia).

Further to finding hopeful stories, strong emphasis was placed on being purposeful and considered. Participants discussed constructive journalism as encouraging consciousness about the journalists' role and relationship with readers. For some, this mindset included perceiving and writing to audiences as intelligent consumers, encouraging more constructive engagement. This consciousness was seen to require more self-reflection around journalists' beliefs and practice, which in turn required stepping outside existing reporting routines. Some thought working constructively made for a personal approach to journalism, being more aware of their choices and the influence of their perspectives.

I think, constructive journalism can help [journalists] be more, well why am I here? What is my job? (Editor 2, Norway)

Extending the responsibility and possibilities side of the constructive mindset, several participants viewed constructive journalism as linked to journalism's public function, referring to idealism, hope, and forming a better world. As below, constructive journalism was considered an alternative to commercially driven news, focusing on service rather than profit.

Anything that we put out into society, should be fundamentally trying to make it better in some way. And so, the idea that there's a journalism that can serve people, and serve readers, not tear them apart or journalism that scapegoats, or does immoral things for commercial gain. (Reporter, Australia)

Participants saw constructive journalism as portraying the better side of humanity and society, changing the world through providing common inspiration and encouraging a cultural shift toward hope and cohesion. Similarly was constructive journalism contributing to civic engagement, through presenting possibilities for society in future, and action on issues otherwise presented as recurring and intractable.

I think that that is the potential of constructive journalism. To help both surface and amplify those kinds of galvanising images around which we move towards creating a better society. (Research and training, United States)

Participants also saw constructive journalism as responding to a more complex and interconnected society, and an epoch of societal reorganisation, with news replacing previous social structures of civic participation. They considered constructive journalism a more active approach, rather than the traditionally responsive role of journalism.

Overall, participants saw constructive journalism as a mindset, involving reflection of their role and influence on audiences and society, taking responsibility and being conscious of news' impact, including how it creates and reinforces audience perceptions. This mindset encompassed a conscious, purposeful, and responsible approach to reporting, which practically influenced a news report's sources, questions, and components; including looking for solutions, resources, and diverse sources. While participants saw this mindset as influencing their practice, they often struggled to identify specific techniques.

(B) Context, perspective, and solutions. The second subtheme linked to the constructive mindset but focussed on participants' practical integration of constructive journalism into reporting. Participants expressed the importance of context and perspective in constructive journalism, related to the mindset's aim in helping audiences better understand events and phenomena. In practice, they described zooming out, providing perspective, and explaining systems and broader contexts when reporting on events and statistics. They emphasised the importance of conveying why, including detail enabling audiences to interpret and use information provided in the news meaningfully. Often, this required going beyond fast journalism and the heavy emphasis on breaking news, and considering how events or phenomena had changed over time, as described below.

Context, perspective, balance is really important. Taking a longer-term view on an issue is constructive. Because reporting the outcome tends to lack context. When you are breaking news, it's very difficult to place that in the 'what does that mean?' space which I think everyone needs to understand, to actually find this information useful. (Research and training, United Kingdom)

Participants considered reporting on positive events and solutions part of providing context and perspective, giving audiences a better understanding of world events, both positive and negative, and of problems through including actions being taken to mitigate them. Reporting with solutions, possibilities, and a longer-term perspective were considered a natural outcome of constructive journalism's mindset, looking for possibilities rather than problems, and looking into the context of issues and stories, which naturally led to considering possible alternatives.

While reporting solutions was considered to provide context, context around the solution itself was also required. Participants described the importance of reporting on limitations and making realistic and critical appraisals of possible solutions and their efficacy. Constructive journalism was also thought to empower audiences by providing realistic understandings of the contributors to change, and including how those portrayed

in solutions draw on resources and communities. Reporting was not only focused on solutions, but on possibilities, and on the context and multiple perspectives around those possibilities. In these appraisals, participants emphasised prioritising expert advice and guidance rather than the journalist's opinion. Participants saw journalists' speculation, opinion, or personal investment as non-constructive. Solutions also required follow-up stories that enabled audiences to evaluate their progress and effectiveness over time. Evaluations were considered to serve journalism's watchdog function, holding people to account on the changes promised.

Reporting follow-up stories which reveal how change has been made over time or the measure taken by the people responsible, rather than just doing a once-off story. (Editor and Coordinator, Tanzania)

Though solutions were helpful for providing context, participants thought it more important their reporting provided realistic and balanced information, which more accurately reflected audiences' lives, and better informed and engaged the public than predominantly negative, episodic, and conflict-oriented reporting, as below.

My life is not full of [poverty and terror attacks and death], but if I see the news it looks like it. Why? Something went wrong, in that process of news production. [...] if you decide not to focus only what's going wrong, but also on people that are trying to improve things in society, people will be better informed in the end, because there is more balance. (Freelance, Netherlands)

Constructive reporting also provided context by reconsidering traditional framing of events such as natural disasters and wars. Participants discussed approaching specific sources making active efforts to contribute to recovering, providing more context and perspective to audience understandings of disasters and other nations often portrayed as passive victims. Participants also thought reconsidering traditional angles also contributed to less stereotyping and better, more nuanced stories.

I always tell [journalists] don't just go to the one crying, go to the one who is building. Because then you will get a better story also. (Editor, Sweden)

Overall, constructive journalism was considered 'information plus', moving beyond stating facts to conveying why they matter and how they fit with broader events and developments. Practicing constructive journalism involved rigorous reporting that included solutions, context, and perspective; enabling audiences to better understand and use information, and for news to reflect the world more accurately. Constructive journalism was seen as providing rigorous explanations, valuing substance over entertainment, style, or sensationalism, and as giving depth and insight rather than portraying heroes, victims, and villains.

(C) Listening to audiences and promoting dialogue. Participants saw constructive journalism as related to the role of journalism within modern and diverse societies to promote

dialogue and civic participation, often influencing their relationships with audiences. Participants described constructive journalism as fostering greater understanding, conversation, and respect by incorporating audience voices and perspectives into news, as below. Constructive journalism's 'broadening lens' was also considered to partially overcome the barrier between journalists and audiences created by traditional journalistic practices.

Journalism that causes people to opt-in rather than opt-out. [...] journalism that helps us understand each other in spite of our differences. (Research and training, United States).

Linked to the mindset in (A), participants emphasised the importance of listening in constructive journalism, often seen as less practiced in traditional reporting. Along with listening was a willingness and receptivity to new ideas, topics, or questions. Participants also expressed self-reflection on the limits of their knowledge, and audiences' contributions when journalists were listening, noting that journalist should connect to citizens and be receptive to alternative voices and perspectives, including understanding what people know and at what level to pitch stories, particularly as "journalists lose touch a bit with what the average person knows." (Reporter, Australia).

Listening could be expressed through conversation with audiences, or via platforms enabling audience participation and engagement. Participants largely discussed co-creation in the form of listening to audience questions and input, rather than citizens helping to create news products.

We often don't listen to bottom down to that great idea so when you create tools, and you bring that to journalism, how to listen [...] tools can get input then real dialogue can start. (Broadcast, Netherlands)

Including audience perspectives was related to a virtuous cycle, with conversation sparking greater engagement and deeper stories, sparking further conversation. Constructive journalism was also seen to foster conversation by shifting from spectacle to substance when portraying differing opinions or political views, particularly on controversial topics. Participants considered constructive journalists to be guides and mediators between different parties, promoting dialogue rather than debate, and shifting from winning and argumentation to inquiry, encouraging those responses among audiences.

Participants considered contributing to empowering citizens an important principle of constructive journalism, by facilitating action, understanding, and providing citizens with access to larger systems and powers. Empowerment included enabling citizens to interact with broader structures, powers, and systems, and providing them with the "knowledge required to be free and self-governing" (Research and training, United States). This often meant taking an educational role; explaining broader societal systems, encouraging critical thinking, and providing tools to navigate society. Techniques like co-creation to gauge what audiences wanted and needed were helpful for shaping this role.

(D) Working with sources: Selection, portrayal, and respect. Participants saw the selection and treatment of sources as important to constructive journalism, including mindful consideration of sources and voices outside of those usually portrayed or contacted. Linked with the mindset (A), source selection and treatment was described as more considered and going outside traditional routines, thus increasing the diversity of perspectives, creating a more in-depth and interesting product. This diversification of perspectives was considered crucial in modern societies, where a narrow range of often elite voices would not be relevant to audiences.

Particularly as this country has gotten more diverse, journalism wasn't relevant to them. And so, it was like the journalism was for middle- and upper-class white people, and if you didn't fit that, it wasn't necessarily of use. (Research and training, United States)

Along with diverse experiences, constructive source selection also involved including sources with moderate rather than extreme views, particularly on controversial topics; with an aim to encouraging dialogue rather than debate among sources and audiences. As below, participants described these sources as often being more interesting for a conversation, though seen as less interesting in traditional journalistic practice.

There's a lot of middle ground, people who may have a certain, intuition, or an opinion, but who aren't that extreme, and they get tend to get left out by journalists because we journalists think they are not interesting while they may be much more interesting for a conversation. (Broadcast, Netherlands)

Participants also described bringing a different mindset to interviewing; including asking critical, but empowering, questions. One participant also described asking critical but empowering questions of those traditionally considered victims, such as what actions they were taking to change their situation. While seeming less empathetic, they considered this approach to provide sources with dignity. Generally, constructive interviewing involved moving beyond a victim frame, empowering sources and audiences by moving beyond commonly used conflict frames, and providing a sense of connection, belonging, collective identity, and potential hope or agency, as below.

It starts with the subject choice, and the people you interview, the type of questions you ask. I once interviewed a migrant from Syria who was in the resistance [...] that was an important story, because his voice was not a story of victimhood which is the frame that we got to know now when we think about the people in Syria. His voice was a story of hope. (Freelance, Netherlands)

How constructive journalism changed interviews was considered source-specific. Participants discussed interviewing politicians and powerful or influential sources in a constructively critical manner; providing insight into their good and bad actions, allowing audiences to judge for themselves, rather than presenting the negatives only. This approach was thought beneficial to journalists, as sources were more receptive when talking with a 'non-aggressive' journalist, and broader society, by encouraging a more

constructive perception of the role of politicians and positions of power and change and providing a platform for rectification. This change was also seen to promote a conversation of change in place of traditional problem or blame-focused questions that could engender cynicism.

People deserve it not to be asked only cynical questions, and be asked only why it's not going to work anyway and they deserve a journalist who has a little bit of hope also and tries to look at a possibility of a good future for this world. (Freelance, Netherlands)

Concerns and barriers (RQ2)

For RQ2, barriers to implementation, four overarching subthemes were generated: (E) Contentious understanding; (F) Active, not activism; (G) Structural and practical barriers; (H) Traditional news culture; discussed below.

(E) Contentious understanding. Despite the overall description of constructive journalism as expressed through a different mindset, participants experienced problems with understandings of the concept. This included how 'others' (mis)understood what constructive journalism is, and how to implement their own understanding given often (un) defined methodology and techniques.

Participants expressed concerns about misinterpretation of the name "constructive journalism" and others linking it to 'positive' or 'fluffy' news, which conflict with journalism's traditional aims, including being critical, being a watchdog, and addressing societal issues. However, participants expressed that perceptions of constructive journalism are changing, creating more openness as there are more examples of media/journalists working constructively.

People mix it up with positive news, and the sort of non-critical journalism. But I think this is now being more, I don't hear it as much anymore. (Editor, Sweden)

Some participants had an opposing concern, that rather than perceiving constructive journalism as radically different, colleagues would see it as over-promoting the classical definition of journalism, by emphasising stories they saw as 'constructive' which were not largely distinct from good traditional news practice.

There are some kinds of journalist who are really screaming they are doing constructive journalism, and it's so good because we're looking so much deeper into it. Well, some of them, are actually doing 85% of the work a normal, regular journalist would. (Broadcast, Netherlands)

This perception of constructive journalism as "just good journalism" was considered a barrier to implementation and training as journalists could overlook its novel aspects. While participants considered constructive journalism to go beyond 'just good journalism', more clarity on new techniques and approaches could help to explain where it differs.

Secondly, while favouring a constructive approach, participants expressed difficulty finding clear constructs and methods to work with. Participants referred to the Solutions Journalism Network as providing a clear methodological framework, with more substantial and helpful guidelines.

[The Solutions Journalism Network] started viewing specific steps of what you need to think about when you're doing a story. And I think that's the point for me where I came across something that was really useful for journalists, that they could apply in their stories without having really beautiful but general ideas about what their stories should be about. (Broadcast and research, Croatia)

Overall, the necessity of a better described practical methodology was considered important to make it easier to implement constructive journalism in practice, research, and education.

The problem with constructive journalism, is it's so difficult to describe exactly what it is. And that makes it a problem both for those who want to use it, and also for the theory about it. (Editor 2, Norway)

(F) *Active, not activism.* While participants viewed the mindset and increased consciousness of their work described in subtheme (A) as important to constructive journalism, many noted that this conscious engagement should not go beyond the journalistic role. Most participants thought that working with a constructive approach meant they could contribute to *activating* their public towards civic engagement, but saw this as distinct from an activist role. Participants discussed the danger of becoming an activist predominantly in relation to solutions. Though acknowledging that reporting was distinct from promoting solutions, they experienced a danger that these lines could be blurred, or that journalists could themselves become involved in the solutions. To ensure neutrality, participants noted solutions should be introduced by independent sources or co-creation and should be presented with clear discussion of the evidence and limitations.

For me the purpose of journalism in that mission is to first of all, raise awareness among the general public that this is an issue. Secondly to find out the cause of the issue and to try to find out what possible solutions are. And then fourthly to exhort or encourage others to implement those solutions, but not ourselves implement those solutions because that's where I think it stops for journalism. (Freelance 2, Netherlands)

Participants saw reporting about possible solutions as requiring a series of decisions, similar to selecting and framing problems, and thus while shaped by the journalist, not necessarily entailing activism. However, they were aware that there was greater risk of perceived bias because reporting solutions was not the conventional journalism standard. Outside of solutions, making unconventional choices in constructive journalism also required increased awareness of their biases, though participants also considered this important for journalism generally. Participants also discussed the importance of

recognising the limitations of possible solutions and available knowledge, and to be careful of not over-stating claims or their certainty. Partially, this involved making clear distinctions between opinion and fact, being independent, and taking time to recognise and limit personal bias's influence. Relatedly, participants saw independence and neutrality as important for keeping constructive journalism from becoming propaganda.

(G) Structural and practical barriers. Participants often perceived constructive journalism as requiring more resources and time than standard routines. This was a challenge with newsrooms often short of resources and time, therefore lacking capacity or interest to invest in longer or slower journalistic pieces.

There are less investments in really investigative journalism and constructive journalism is, should be investigative by nature, because you need to put things into perspective and into context, so you need more time. (Freelance, Netherlands)

Freelancers often expressed more ways of overcoming this resource barrier, such as crowdfunding, or setting up subscriptions by building an audience through demonstrated journalistic quality, though subscriptions brought conflict between what was economically viable for the journalist (paywalls) and best for society (open-access).

Format also presented a challenge, as participants thought constructive journalism was more suited to longer formats. Reporting on context or solutions was especially seen as requiring more time or words to avoid a surface-level piece, or reducing the size or complexity of the problem to emphasise the solution. However, as below, participants also saw opportunities outside of long-form journalism, particularly where constructive journalism became a routine mindset, which led to different questions and selections providing understanding beyond traditional journalistic frames. They mentioned some practical suggestions that could help report constructively and succinctly, including: Use of summary boxes and optional in-depth sections for online reports; a mix of multimedia, including graphs, videos, and text; and asking constructive questions changing the interview's content rather than length.

You can step back and say, so if you could design this system from the ground up, what would you do? Or, in what direction do you think the solution is? Or, where is the problem really? What is the heart of the problem? They are more constructive questions [...] you can, do that in a very short, even in a three-minute interview. (Broadcast, Netherlands)

Some participants from younger democracies noted national context and politics as a structural barrier when implementing constructive journalism. Audiences could be disinterested or suspicious of corruption, while for countries with more corruption, authorities with greater control over reporting could threaten or endanger journalists who reported outside standardised routines.

It is very hard to be a journalist where I am from, because if you publish something the leaders do not like, they will force you to remove it the next day, retract or publish an apology on the next release. (Editor and Coordinator, Tanzania)

Constructive journalism was considered an important approach for reporting on national developments within such national contexts. However, adaption was needed in training and implementation to ensure constructive journalism fit the national context, including understanding how audience needs could influence the techniques and selection of stories, sources, or solutions.

I think it's very difficult to both present constructive journalism to journalists in specific countries, and for them to do it. So, the political circumstances and the different social circumstances dictate very much what journalism and what kind of journalism the audience there the citizens need. (Broadcast and Research, Croatia)

Participants considered structural supports and reminders, such as connections to constructive journalism networks and records of constructive stories, important to maintaining motivation despite structural challenges. Support from editors and external networks tailoring training to the national context were also important, linking to the next theme.

(H) Traditional news culture. Participants discussed traditional journalistic culture as a barrier to constructive journalism, particularly where routines and standards led to a dominant focus on negativity and sensationalism. Constructive journalism was difficult to convey as a viable alternative for attracting audiences, particularly as newsrooms experienced increased competition around information and entertainment. Participants frequently experienced pressure from editors to produce more sensational and novel stories considered more likely to stand out, and be clicked or viewed. While many participants viewed constructive journalism as encouraging engagement, their editors rarely shared this view. Similarly, constructive journalism was questioned by colleagues or editors in relation to journalism's aims, including being a democratic watchdog. The existing traditional workflow routinized among editors and fellow journalists became a considerable barrier where newsrooms were unwilling or resistant to changes.

Given its differences from traditional practice, participants also experienced a higher demand for newsworthiness when reporting constructively. Some participants saw this demand as unavoidable for implementing a new approach that is still establishing and proving itself. However, others thought requiring exceptional constructive reports unnecessary because it stemmed from traditional prioritising of problems over solutions as newsworthy information.

Participants noted that they sometimes experienced traditional journalism norms as an internalised barrier. Even when participants embraced the constructive approach, they experienced difficulties overcoming routinised reporting standards, including focusing on negative angles and events.

The main problem is, it is so easy to do things like you have done it before. And what you learned from your colleague, or someone else in the newsroom you do it the same way. And also, what you have rewards for in journalism you reward the critical and that's good [...] but it's only that journalism rewarded so the young journalists coming into the newsroom will look for what's good to do here, what will give you applause and what will give you [thumbs down]. (Editor 2, Norway)

Participants thought younger journalists were more receptive to constructive journalism because it aligned more with their perception of journalism's role, and they were less influenced by traditional newsroom culture. However, as above, traditional newsrooms' acculturation and reward structure was considered a barrier to implementing constructive journalism, with attention and awards often given to negative and conflict-oriented reporting, which also influenced younger journalists.

Discussion

We explored perceptions of constructive journalism to understand its use among practicing journalists, concerns and barriers to implementation, and methods of overcoming those constraints. Journalism professionals saw constructive journalism primarily as a mindset, including consciousness of and responsibility for their journalistic role and impact. This mindset influenced practical reporting choices, often extending journalism's lens beyond traditional news frames, providing context and diverse perspectives, reporting on solutions and developments, and changing interview questions and source selection. Overall, journalism professionals' concept of constructive journalism aligned with the literature, including an ethos of responsible reporting and broadening journalism's lens through including diverse sources, and reporting solutions and developments. However, also consistent with literature, journalists could describe important principles of constructive journalism but struggled to provide a clear definition. Their experience of constructive journalism as a mindset may explain partially explain this difficulty. While they could describe several separate techniques for constructive journalism, participants used and experienced these techniques as interrelated, and a mix of strategies guided by the mindset, making techniques, and the overall approach, difficult to define (Bro, 2023; Hermans and Drok, 2018; Hermans and Gyldensted, 2019; McIntyre and Gyldensted, 2017). While the constructive journalism literature emphasises the approach's basis in psychology and behavioural science, most participants did not make concrete connections with those theoretical bases, even when directly asked. This finding is interesting because understanding how news production choices impact audience responses, information processing, and opinions could influence how journalists can practice responsible reporting.

Our findings suggest it is difficult to translate a constructive journalism mindset into a concrete definition, including for journalism professionals. Consistent with Bro (2019, 2023), there was a tension between the approach's openness, providing opportunities and room for further developments, and application of techniques according to the issue, situation, and goal, and the need for a stronger definition and set of techniques to define

and implement constructive journalism. To progress, constructive journalism could integrate the principled/mindset and practical side of the approach. Firstly, considering how journalists approach reporting decisions, including thinking about responsibility, positive/negative stories, and ethics, then considering how they use specific elements, such as context or solutions. By starting constructive journalism training with an explanation of its mindset, journalists could understand the approach's overall aims and flexibility, then understand the practical implementation through learning the mix of elements that can be used when producing constructive news. The Constructive Institute's pillars of constructive journalism, including solutions, nuance, and democratic conversation, could help to ground this mindset discussion (Constructive Institute, nd). This mindset could be followed with clear guidelines on practical techniques in constructive journalism, such as the six identified techniques (Hermans and Gyldensted, 2019). Existing practical guides offer useful insights and a starting place, including the Constructive Institute Handbook (Lund Jørgensen and Risbo, 2021) and the Solutions Journalism Network (Solutions Journalism Network, n.d.), though needing further expansion; particularly as solutions journalism is a subset of constructive journalism, and does not include all six techniques. Teaching explicitly on the constructive mindset could also help address comments of constructive journalism as 'just good journalism'. By understanding the approach's grounding in responsible, conscious, and ethical reporting, professionals may be more receptive to constructive journalism aspects that are similar to well-practiced traditional journalism (e.g., context, diverse sources), and how they differ (e.g., solutions, empowerment, specific implementation of context such as trends over time, questions asked of sources).

Importantly, the field has developed since these interviews were conducted, including new institutions and organisations (e.g., the Bonn Institute, and Constructive Institute Asia Pacific), however, recent work focused on South Africa (Fölscher-Kingwill and Wasserman, 2024) has found journalists still describe the definition of constructive journalism as vague or misunderstood, as does Bro's (2023) recent book. Similarly, to our knowledge, the amount of publicly accessible training for constructive journalism has not increased substantially since the interviews were undertaken. Not all journalists in our sample knew of existing constructive guidelines, even though our participants had registered with the constructive network, and therefore had some degree of active interest. Our findings thus indicate a need for greater publicity and dissemination of constructive guidelines and resources, contributing to a more uniform conceptualisation and potentially helping stimulate implementation. Similarly, Bro (2023) indicated that even when journalists received training there still remained some ambiguity on the approach's definition and practice, and a theory-practice gap; potentially due to general resistance to innovation in newsrooms. This resistance is particularly strong for changes to journalistic culture, followed by audience relationships (Ekdale et al., 2015), both prominent in constructive journalism.

Including examples of techniques in practice within toolkits and resources would help journalists to develop concrete tools within the mindset, which could help overcome some barriers to implementing constructive journalism, including explaining constructive practice to editors and colleagues. Developing openly accessible practical guidelines

would help disentangle techniques and clarify how they overlap in meaningful but distinct ways. Deliberate teaching of these techniques could help journalists understand the importance and broader applications of constructive journalism practices. Teaching practical techniques alongside a mindset could clarify how reporting choices in constructive journalism, such as including solutions, relates to journalistic concepts like neutrality, and where it differs from promoting solutions. By viewing constructive journalism as a mindset and concrete techniques, journalists and students might be better equipped to consider story topic and context, their reporting aim, and therefore the most responsible and rigorous way to implement constructive techniques.

Concerning challenges, consistent with past research, our study included discussion on the relationship between constructive journalism, activism, and traditional objectivity, including the importance of not advocating for solutions (Aitamurto and Varma, 2018; Garusi and Leonhardt, 2024; Lough and McIntyre, 2018), how to stay independent, and constructive practice within new democracies (Fölscher-Kingwill and Wasserman, 2024; Kovacevic and Perisin, 2018; Rotmeijer, 2018). While academic work has addressed some of these concerns since our interviews were conducted, including how constructive journalism techniques relate to objectivity (Van Antwerpen and Fielding, 2023), and conceptualisation and implementation (Ahva, 2022; Bro, 2023; Heinrichs et al., 2022), whether this has translated to practice is less clear. These questions also highlight the importance of reflecting on country-specific circumstances (Bro, 2019), particularly how they influence implementation. Similarly, we found some structural difficulties, reflective of general barriers to innovation in journalism, such as time and resources. For constructive journalism, cultural barriers and existing routines are particularly challenging, as selection and production processes across national contexts often prioritise negativity and conflict, and existing routines and standards influence young journalists. However, some education curricula and newsrooms are addressing these challenges and integrating constructive approaches with deliberate consideration of changing traditional practices (Lund Jørgensen and Risbo, 2021). An accessible inventory of these organisations and their news products should be created to further development on implementation and education.

Editorial facilitation of constructive journalism and development of its mindset is important for reducing structural and cultural barriers, particularly considering awards and incentives in the newsroom, and how these could encourage constructive reporting. While requiring consideration of the story and context, having concrete goals and measures could reduce internal and external barriers of tradition. However, to incentivise editors, researchers should provide evidence of constructive journalism's benefits for newsrooms alongside audiences.

Limitations

Due to practical constraints (recruiting from a limited number of contacts available on the Constructive Journalism Network), we cannot be sure saturation was reached and the smaller sample, though still being relatively usual for qualitative studies, may mean we missed some experiences and perspectives. While enabling a broad investigation of

constructive journalism across jurisdictions and formats, the strong European representation may not reflect all (constructive) journalistic practice, though the approach is most prominent in Europe (Lough and McIntyre, 2021). The study investigates journalism professionals' perceptions, but does not provide evidence for constructive journalism's efficacy.

Conclusions

Constructive journalism offers a response to audience and expert criticisms of news, particularly bias and negativity. However, for effective implementation, clearer guidelines and techniques should be developed and tested. Our findings reveal a strong cultural, or mindset, aspect to constructive journalism, which could be integrated with practical guidelines to help implementation. Providing more practice-oriented principles and examples, including issue selection and audience consultation, inclusive perspectives, and constructive interview questions, could build confidence among journalists and organizations wanting to work constructively, and help them overcome challenges and barriers to implementation. Our results suggest journalism professionals share conceptualizations with academics on constructive journalism, but effective implementation requires ongoing work.

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Ethics statement

Ethical approval

The study was approved by the University of Adelaide Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC 01/20), and all participants provided informed consent.

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Data Availability Statement

Data are available on request.

Note

1. In-person, as three participants from the same Dutch newsroom were interested. Each participant answered the questions individually within the group context.

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