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Unpacking the Practices of Constructive Journalism to Reach Young People with News

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ABSTRACT

While numerous studies examine how young people encounter, share, are influenced by, or avoid news, particularly via social media, there is a notable gap in understanding how legacy news media adapt their practices to engage this elusive demographic. This ethnographic study applies a practice theory lens to shed light on how constructive journalism is practiced in the pursuit of young audiences. The study unpacks three journalistic practices connected to constructive journalism observed at the Norwegian public service broadcaster NRK: the explanatory practice, the practice of dialogue with the audience, and the visual practice, all tailored to reach young people with news. Additionally, the study addresses the definitional challenges of constructive journalism, revealing ambiguity within the organization. The article contributes insights related to the implementation of constructive journalism and the broader challenges faced by global news media in engaging young audiences. It also demonstrates how constructive journalism can be a promising path to reach them.

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Introduction

A key challenge facing legacy news media, including public service media (PSM), is effectively engaging young audiences with their news content (Galan et al. 2019; Newman et al. 2023). PSM are bound by universality principles to reach all groups of the population. Not being successful in reaching young audiences, might mean not fulfilling their obligations or even losing them for good (Rodríguez-Castro, Campos-Freire, and Túnéz-López 2021). News consumption at an early age is an important predictor of news consumption later in life (Mindich 2005). Young people experience a gap in what they want and expect from news and the news products that legacy media offer (Hermans and Prins 2022). How young audiences access, stumble on, or avoid legacy news has been given a lot of scholarly attention (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, and Matassi 2018; Peters et al. 2022), while less scholarly attention has been devoted to unpacking how news media and journalists adapt specifically to engage with young audiences (Some exceptions: Negreira-Rey, Vázquez-Herrero, and López-García 2022; Røsok-Dahl and

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Olsen 2024; Vázquez-Herrero, Negreira-Rey, and López-García 2022). This gap is shown in recent studies (Donders 2019; Rø sok-Dahl and Ihlebæk 2024). Scholars have urged for more studies using ethnographic methods to research how journalists practice journalism (Ryfe 2018), not just how they talk about it. Also, it is important to investigate strategies used to inform young people in an appropriate way (Swijtink and Hermans 2023).

One suggested path to reach young people is the adoption of constructive journalism, a topic which has gained significant scholarly interest over the last decade (Bro 2024; McIntyre 2015). Constructive journalism criticizes the dominant negative focus of today's journalism (Gyldensted 2015) and several effect studies regarding constructive journalism and young people have shown it to be an appropriate approach (McIntyre and Lough 2023).

The Norwegian PSM NRK initiated the implementation of constructive journalism organization-wide from 2022 to, among other reasons, tackle the challenges related to reaching young people with news (NRK 2023). NRK and Norway make an interesting case, as NRK has adopted a clear, albeit radical position regarding platform engagement – actively steering audiences directly to proprietary sources and away from social media (Rø sok-Dahl and Olsen 2024). This ethnographic study unpacks journalistic practices through a practice theory lens (Ahva 2017) and it investigates the implementation of constructive journalism at NRK specifically to reach the youth with news. Here, constructive journalism is understood holistically, encompassing solutions, hope, and encouragement, broader than the definition of U.S.-style solutions journalism (Meier 2018). This aligns with the three pillars (solutions, nuances, and democratic conversation) established by the Constructive Institute in Denmark (Lund Jørgensen and Risbro 2021), and a definitional effort by scholars and practitioners from Denmark and Norway (Borg et al. 2024).

Using constructive journalism as a strategy to reach the youth has, to the best of my knowledge, not been researched using ethnographic methods (for related ethnographic studies, see Rotmeijer 2019; Wenzel 2021). This study also answers calls for more research on constructive journalism testing theory (Lough and McIntyre 2023). Through an explorative approach, I unpack the journalistic practices associated with constructive journalism in the pursuit of younger audiences, and its definitional challenges and motivations, through these research questions:

RQ1: How do NRK staff define and motivate the use of constructive journalism to engage young audiences with news?

RQ2: What are the characteristics of journalistic practices associated with constructive journalism aimed at engaging young audiences with news, in terms of activity, reflexivity, and materiality?

This case study makes four specific contributions. First, it unpacks how the staff at NRK motivate the adaptation of constructive journalism specifically to reach 13–23-year-olds. Second, it shows definitional challenges regarding how constructive journalism is understood and practiced. Third, it demonstrates how constructive journalism resulted in a higher youth-share for constructive news stories, relevant to both industry professionals and media scholars globally. Finally, it provides insights regarding evolving journalistic practices, which in turn relate to continuity and change in journalism (Ahva 2017). The study relies on literature regarding constructive journalism, PSM, and normativity, which will be presented in the following.

Literature Review

Reaching the youth with news has proved challenging for legacy media (Newman et al. 2023). Attracting younger audiences presents significant challenges for PSM, potentially hindering its ability to fulfill its public service obligations (Schultz, Levy, and Nielsen 2019; Sehl 2020). Not fulfilling its obligations threatens popular support for PSM, as well as the legitimacy of public funding, as PSM is expected to uphold the ideals of diversity, accountability, and independence (Cabrera Blázquez et al. 2022). Consequently, engaging young people has emerged as a paramount strategic objective for PSM. Failure to reach this demographic raises concerns about future engagement (Rodríguez-Castro, Campos-Freire, and Túnuez-López 2021). Upholding the expansive reach of PSM remains pivotal for its future legitimacy, particularly among younger demographics (Newman et al. 2023). Research highlights the paradoxes in the relationship between PSM and social media platforms (Olsen et al. 2024). While social media can serve as a gateway to reach elusive youth, it also poses challenges such as loss of control of the spread of content and the negative impact of platform gatekeeping (Røsok-Dahl and Olsen 2024). News media's dependence on public attention and trust is well documented, as is the importance of people using and trusting news media (Strömbäck et al. 2020). While the core values and practices of journalism, such as objectivity and journalistic ethics, have remained largely stable and have been extensively studied over the decades, the conditions under which journalism is practiced have not only changed considerably, they are in permanent flux (Deuze 2019).

Using constructive journalism is proposed by many scholars as a possible strategy to reach the youth with news amid these complex challenges (Kleemans et al. 2019; McIntyre 2015). Some pivotal questions for legacy media and PSM today are how to stay relevant for the public and how to redefine the public service function (Hermans and Drok 2018). Constructive journalism emerged as a next-level movement, building on the foundations of civic or public journalism (Ahva 2013). These earlier reform movements sought to reevaluate journalism's assumptions about politics, power, people, public opinion, and democracy (Rosen 1999). Constructive journalism aims to enhance engagement and trust in news media. It provides a strategy for overcoming the negative effects of news exposure and, eventually, for narrowing the gap between journalism and the audience (Schäfer et al. 2024). Through applying positive psychology to news production, while upholding the core functions of journalism (McIntyre 2015), constructive journalism proposes a more accurate representation of the world (van Antwerpen et al. 2023), resonating with the need for a stronger consideration of audiences in the news media logic (Blassnig and Esser 2022). Within the journalistic meta discourse encompassing constructive journalism, the motivations include improving society and practicing better journalism (Aitamurto and Varma 2018). The many different aspects of constructive journalism and solutions journalism are somewhat conflated, although many definitional attempts have been made (Gyldensted 2015; Hermans and Prins 2022; Lough and McIntyre 2023). Similar approaches have been labelled "solutions journalism" (McIntyre 2019), "citizen journalism" (Mythen 2010), "public journalism" (Rosen 1999), "participatory journalism" (Hermida and Thurman 2008), "restorative narratives" (McIntyre and Gyldensted 2018) or "peace journalism" (Hanitzsch 2004).

Scholars have shown how constructive journalism has historical roots tracing back to the public-serving mission of figures like Walter Williams and Joseph Pulitzer (Mast, Coesemans, and Temmerman 2019; McIntyre 2015). Historical analyses have highlighted journalism's traditional focus on conflict, while shifts in journalistic ideals have positioned constructive journalism as a viable alternative, offering a balanced approach to news presentation (McIntyre 2015). While several studies over the last decade have focused on the proponents, precedents, definitional challenges or placing constructive journalism in context (Bro 2019, 2024; Hermans and Drok 2018; McIntyre 2015), other studies have investigated children's responses to negative news and constructive news (Kleemans et al. 2017; Kleemans et al. 2019) or effect on audiences, like Millennials (Hermans and Prins 2022; Meier 2018). In two systematic reviews (Lough and McIntyre 2023; McIntyre and Lough 2023), a vast literature on constructive journalism was reviewed and analyzed. The evidence from 19 effect studies was unequivocal: solutions-oriented and constructive news stories have a positive impact on audience sentiment (McIntyre and Lough 2023). Their conclusions resonate with Wahl-Jorgensen's (2020) study on emotional engagement in journalism, demonstrating how news consumers are more responsive to journalism that fosters emotional involvement, as opposed to detached and impersonal reporting. Both raise crucial questions for journalists: How should they integrate this knowledge into their practice? How should they balance the constructive journalism approach with the objectivity norm and the traditional watchdog role of the journalist? The normative aspects could be analyzed through the journalistic compass (Bro 2004), originally introduced to unpack the purpose and perspective of public journalism. The compass consisted of four journalism types along the axes of active versus passive and deliberative versus representative practices. Although public journalism gradually disappeared, the compass can be used as a tool for scholars and journalists to detect where one is situated in this normative landscape. The normative perspective plays a part in how constructive journalism affects journalism itself, as several studies have shown over the last decade (Bro 2024).

The normative nature of the constructive approach is shown on the Constructive Institute's webpage: "Audiences are fed up with the sensationalism and negativity bias of the news – but the media can still correct course, and in turn better serve our democracies" (2025). Most proponents of constructive journalism tend to start from journalism's distinctive status in democratic societies as a Fourth Estate, committed to serving the public by acting as a watchdog that holds the powerful accountable (Mast, Coesemans, and Temmerman 2019). Constructive journalism challenges the more detached watchdog role, which earlier research has found that many Nordic journalists relate to (Ahva et al. 2017). Critical voices opting against constructive journalism point to the challenges of journalism applying such a normative and positive approach (From and Nørgaard Kristensen 2018). Against this backdrop, this study applies a practice theory lens to unpack the constructive journalism practices that Norway's public service media NRK used in order to reach the youth with news.

Theoretical Lens

Practice theory suggests that social life is fundamentally anchored in practices – organized activities involving interconnected individuals. These practices are seen as "a

temporally unfolding and spatially dispersed nexus of doing and saying” (Schatzki 1996, 89) and “embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding” (Schatzki 2001, 11). Practices are understood as consistent nexuses of actions, objects, and discourse, socially recognized forms of action beyond individual identification (Ahva 2017; Couldry 2004). Practices, as recurring actions, are conventionally grouped into blocks of activity (Ryfe 2018). Viewed as cultural schemas, they are “loosely organized and often incomplete, allowing varied interpretations of the same situation by different people, and enabling individuals to apply different schemas over time, thus permitting difference and change” (Ryfe 2021, 66).

Practice theory, as outlined by Bourdieu (1977), Giddens (1984), and other scholars, centers on examining and understanding social phenomena by emphasizing the importance of practices. Since then, theories of practice have evolved to intersect with concepts such as activity, performance, fields, actors, networks, social systems, and change, with a notable practice turn around the millennium (Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, and von Savigny 2001, 11). This second wave has spurred numerous practice-based studies across various disciplines, including journalism. Investigating journalistic practices offers insights into both tradition and change within the field (Mitchelstein and Boczkowski 2009), as well as the societal role of journalism, understood through the interplay between structure and individual agency (Wu, Tandoc, and Salmon 2019).

Social settings (like the editorial group NRK UNG) are characterized by human coexistence within material arrangements (Schatzki 2002). From a practice perspective, journalism is best understood as an occupational field held together by shared cultural practices (Ryfe 2019). Practice theory in journalism studies often infers journalistic performance indirectly through interviews or content analyses rather than through direct observation (Ryfe 2018).¹

There are significant divergences in the discourse on the concept of practice and its role in societal dynamics. Latour’s Actor-Network Theory (ANT) (2005), focused on the binary complementarity between actors and actants, influencing multiple studies regarding the materiality of digital journalism (Lewis and Westlund 2015). Latour argued against a fixed macro-level structure for practices, emphasizing the symmetry between human and material aspects. Ahva’s approach (2017) views practice theory as a valuable intellectual asset that underscores the role of collective social activities in shaping the world, differing from the conception in actor-network theory. Ahva (2017) proposed the following framework for journalism studies (Figure 1).

Activity encompasses the behaviors, actions, and movements of individuals, but practice extends beyond mere activity; it must be connected to reflexivity and materiality. In journalism studies, activities (doings) include tasks such as prioritizing, assessing, selecting, ranking ideas (Ahva 2017). *Materiality* involves objects, tools, technologies, and places, such as a news desk or a meeting room. Scholars inspired by ANT (Latour 2005) refer to these as non-human actants or technological actants (Lewis and Westlund 2015). Reflexivity pertains to self-referential discursivity, such as criticism or appraisal (Ahva 2017). In the analysis, I will examine these elements within the journalistic practices associated with the implementation of constructive journalism at NRK to engage young audiences. Evolving news practices prompt reflections on what is new and what remains static in journalism. In the discussion, I will revisit the ideas of change and continuity in relation to constructive journalism (Carlson and Lewis 2019).

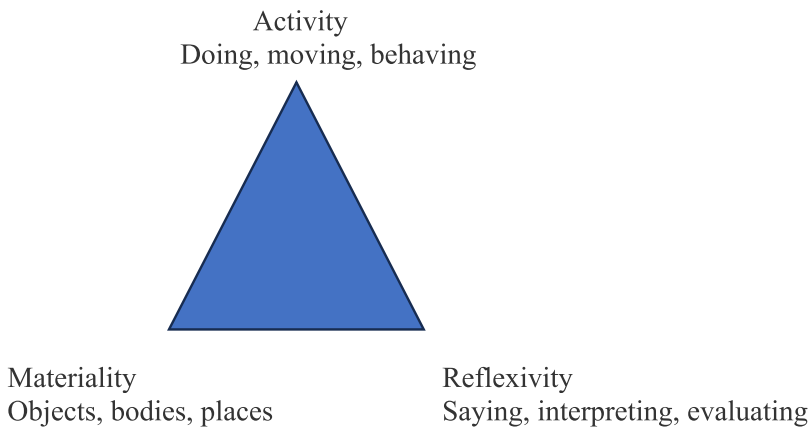


Figure 1. The elements of “practice” (Ahva 2017).

Methods and Materials

This study applies a practice theory lens to examine activity, reflexivity, and materiality within the context of implementing constructive journalism at NRK in Norway. The focus is on how the implementation of constructive journalism affects journalistic practices aimed at engaging young audiences. Norway’s media system is characterized as a democratic corporatist model (Hallin and Mancini 2004), marked by high reach by the press market, a relatively high political parallelism, strong professionalization, and state intervention through PSM and press subsidies (Brüggemann et al. 2014, 1042). As a state-owned and publicly funded broadcaster, NRK has a mandate to reach all population groups, including young people, and it reaches 91% of the population daily (NRK 2022).

The study comprised two distinct phases of data collection over nearly two years, with continuous engagement with NRK staff throughout the entire period. Initially, three months of full-time ethnographic fieldwork was conducted during the fall and winter of 2022 at NRK UNG (“NRK Young”), an editorial group targeting young audiences (primarily 13 to early 20s) through platforms such as Snapchat and NRK’s proprietary channels (TV, podcasts, radio, NRK.no). This phase provided thick descriptions (Geertz 1973), stemming from participation in meetings, access to internal discussions and internal logs, internal and external documents and reports, and three months of observation of work processes.²

A year later, I attended a full-day seminar on constructive journalism organized by NRK (December 12, 2023), which provided numerous examples of constructive practices across NRK’s editorial units. This seminar enriched my initial insights and underscored the connection between constructive journalism and engaging the youth with news, prompting follow-up interviews. The semi-structured interviews ($N = 16$) were conducted 1.5 years after the initial fieldwork (February–August 2024), during the full integration of constructive journalism into NRK’s operations. Conducted both in-person and online, the interviews lasted between 36 and 73 min, averaging 53 min. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and encrypted using Whisper OpenAI, manually verified, and coded in NVivo. Participants included key NRK UNG staff and personnel from other departments,

such as senior leadership, analytics staff, and journalists and leaders outside NRK UNG who were involved in the constructive journalism initiative.

All interviewed staff were selected for their involvement in constructive journalism and reaching young audiences at NRK, including the chief editor of the news division. To maintain anonymity, participants were assigned numeric identifiers (e.g., News workers 1–16). The project manager overseeing the constructive journalism initiative was interviewed at the beginning and end of the interview phase, to provide comprehensive insights into the project's development. All interviewees signed consent forms, and the project received approval from SIKT.³ The final draft of the article was sent to all quoted participants for clarity and validation.

Fieldnotes, interviews, and other materials were systematized and analyzed using an inductive approach (Denzin et al. 2023). Second and third rounds of coding and analysis were guided by Ahva's (2017) adaptation of practice theory, especially the deconstruction of elements into activity, materiality, and reflexivity. These iterative rounds of coding in NVivo helped unpack three journalistic practices associated with constructive journalism and news dissemination to reach young people. Within the explanatory, dialogic, and visual practices, I coded for activity, reflexivity, and materiality, inspired by Stepwise Deductive Induction (Tjora 2019), as I went back and forth between the empirical data and Ahva's framework (2017). The following analysis first presents how the staff talked about and reflected on the motivation for the implementation of constructive journalism at NRK and the definitional challenges, before moving on to the practices, addressing RQ1 and RQ2.

Results and Analysis

First, I share insights related to the motivations for implementing constructive journalism to reach the youth with news. The motivations are connected to the definitional challenges, together answering RQ1. Secondly, I present an analysis of the three journalistic practices which emerged from the iterative analysis; the explanatory, the dialogic, and the visual, to respond to RQ2. These practices, building on long traditions within journalism, provide new insights when unpacked through the lens of practice theory (Ahva 2017).

Motivation

During the fall and winter of 2022, the NRK UNG editorial group comprised seven to ten journalists (varying with interns), and an editorial leader. Their task was to experiment with news dissemination to engage and resonate with young audiences. NRK UNG plays a crucial role in reaching younger demographics, managing NRK's daily Snapchat news dissemination⁴ that primarily targets 13–23-year-olds. Following the conclusion of my fieldwork, NRK's main focus has shifted towards prioritizing news for young audiences on proprietary platforms. In general, NRK has reduced its social media presence (NRK 2023). However, NRK still publishes news on Snapchat daily but with reduced resources, using more templates and automated processes (Røsok-Dahl and Olsen 2024). From 2022 to 2023, NRK cut its social media accounts from over 500 to fewer than 20, abandoning Facebook news accounts, banning TikTok on company phones, and suspending the TikTok feed of "Supernytt," a news broadcast for children (Soldal and Solberg 2024).

NRK had conducted a survey directed at young audiences prior to my fieldwork, revealing that a majority of individuals aged 18–25 expressed a desire for more positive news content. The survey indicated that news consumption elicited feelings of depression among youth, who frequently reported actively avoiding news consumption. In a meeting in the fall of 2022, a senior news department leader outlined the motivation behind NRK’s commitment to constructive journalism, and the link between constructive journalism and countering young people avoiding the news:

If we are facing a generation that does not have any relation to editorial media, it is a complete crisis. (Fieldnotes, September 7, 2022)

This statement shows a normative position. NRK staff are bound by a public mandate to provide news universally (Sehl 2020), and the analysis found that staff perceived their role in working towards this mandate as important, especially related to reaching the youth with news. Another quote from one of the NRK UNG staff shows this normative position:

We want to implement more and more constructive journalism. To expand the lens, show the whole picture, show nuances and solutions. This way, we hope that young people will be able to keep their faith. (News worker 5, November 2, 2022)

Against this backdrop, and also catalyzed by the Covid–19 pandemic, NRK initiated the implementation of constructive journalism as a strategic initiative to engage “younger and broader” (NRK 2022). A project group across the organization was established to work on this initiative. A handful of staff members spread out in the large NRK system had already been working with constructive journalism for years, and some of them joined the project group, led by the leader of NRK UNG. The group was responsible for defining constructive news⁵ and setting objectives for its integration within NRK. Two key objectives were iterated: to contribute to integrating constructive journalism into the curriculum of all journalism education in Norway and to position NRK as Europe’s leading media house applying constructive journalism. During the fieldwork, constructive journalism instantly emerged as a central focus within NRK UNG and the broader organization. I followed the implementation process closely for three months. The group’s work was informed by data from NRK’s analytics department and scholarly research, and insights from a staff member who was at that point in residency at the Constructive Institute in Denmark. Throughout the fieldwork, the project group disseminated both motivations and the definition across various divisions at NRK, including the formal board, leadership and editors, and an array of news departments such as investigative news, breaking news, sports, and culture. As I attended several of these meetings, I got a comprehensive understanding of the project group’s methodologies and motivations. As the fieldwork drew to a close in December 2022, the strategic focus on constructive journalism was formally incorporated into NRK’s overarching strategy.

Definitional Challenges

In examining how journalists define constructive journalism, both recurring themes and inconsistencies emerged in discussions and daily practice. The emphasis on constructive journalism was evident in editorial meetings, logs, and everyday conversations during the

fieldwork. Common topics in these definitional discussions included “dialogue,” “nuance,” “hope,” and “explanation,” but also “news avoidance” and “young people feeling depressed by news” (fieldnotes, November 2022). These discussions were viewed as reflexivity through the theoretical lens (Ahva 2017). The follow-up interviews with a wider group of staff revealed varied interpretations, with many journalists addressing the misconception of focusing solely on “happy stories.” Overall, it seemed simpler to articulate what constructive journalism is not, as a senior editor noted:

We must get past the “happy story” term. All of us, around this table, received a journalistic education where conflict was the driver per se. [...] We must change the mentality related to this. We must add another layer to journalism, point to solutions. This represents a change of pace, of how journalism is defined. (fieldnotes, September 9, 2022)

Fieldwork initially illuminated the nuances of implementing constructive journalism, yet few staff members could explicitly recall NRK’s definition 1.5 years later, apart from some editorial leaders. Most interviewees offered personal interpretations, highlighting broader definitional challenges seen in other studies (Lough and McIntyre 2023). The emphasis on elements of the definition varied individually. Discussions also addressed countering polarization, future-oriented perspectives, and concepts such as “expanding the lens” and “seeing the whole picture,” often linked to “explainer videos”. Assessing whether a story was genuinely constructive proved challenging, with occasional disagreements among staff on its definition. Nearly all interviewees found the term somewhat vague or difficult to grasp. The analysis underscored the complexity in defining constructive journalism, despite an established NRK definition. Importantly, neither the interviewees nor the project group aimed for constructive journalism to replace “traditional journalism”. Staff consistently stressed that constructive journalism should complement, not replace, traditional forms such as investigative and breaking-news reporting.

An example highlighting definitional challenges was the introduction of a tick-box in the Polopoly production system for marking journalistic stories as constructive. Reflexivity was observed in connection with the uncertainty in using this feature, as journalists ticked off this box inconsistently, based on varied interpretations of constructive journalism, rendering such measurement subjective and prone to error (Ahva 2017). Some journalists marked stories as constructive excessively, while others refrained entirely. Several interviewees noted that identifying constructive journalism would improve with the deployment of an AI language model, which NRK implemented in fall 2024, after this study’s submission. The analytics department manually reviewed 3,000 stories identified by the model, which indicated higher youth engagement with constructive stories. With motivations and definitional challenges outlined, I will move to the journalistic practices revealed through the analysis.

The Explanatory Practice

In January 2024, NRK introduced “NRK Forklarer” (NRK Explains) as a permanent feature on NRK.no’s front page. These 9:16 explainer videos are crafted by two young journalists who employ straightforward language and editing techniques filled with visual content to simplify complex news topics, targeting younger audiences and individuals with limited formal education – demographics traditionally underrepresented in NRK’s viewership.

While explaining the news is not a novel concept (Fink and Schudson 2014; Forde 2007), what makes NRK's 9:16 explainers novel is the combination of constructive journalism with a vertical video format familiar from Snapchat and TikTok, and how presentation and content aim to explain complex topics without assuming previous knowledge. These short, highly visual, and engaging videos are made specifically to appeal to younger audiences.

The prominent placement of these explainers on NRK.no, with a navigational arrow for accessing previous content, represents a strategic shift towards increasing youth engagement. Building on NRK's experience with news dissemination on Snapchat, this initiative seeks to enhance accessibility, engagement, and visual appeal. Between January and October 2024, "NRK Explains" provided 112 explainer videos on topics such as international relations, personal finance, global conflicts, crime, technology, artificial intelligence, social media, mental health, relationships, and sexual health. The staff emphasized (interviews) how they saw these 9:16 explainers as a key component of constructive journalism: To present youth with comprehensible and visually appealing news, promoting a more inclusive and informed viewership, as shown in this quote:

News should be simple to understand for everybody. It should not be for an educated elite. People should be able to understand what is happening in the world. Generally, journalists should rather make it 'too simple'. Only then can they reach a lot of people who normally avoid the news. (News worker 7)

The analysis highlights journalists' focus on delivering news in a straightforward, accessible manner, which is essential to constructive journalism, especially when explaining complex issues such as the conflicts in Israel/Gaza and Ukraine/Russia, global economic downturns, or the Trump trial. Through the practice theory framework (Ahva 2017) the study unpacked activities such as writing concise manuscripts, on-camera presentation, and fun, snappy editing of explainers. Some of these activities involved tacit knowledge, performed instinctively, more readily observed than described in interviews (Collins 2001). As Ryfe states (2019) doings are only practices through the connection to reflexivity and materiality, through strips of activity that hang together with conventions, rules or strategies. Reflexivity was evident in interviewees' thoughts concerning how explanatory news dissemination resonates with young audiences, ensuring they understand without feeling inadequate. As such, the staff reflected on the role of explainers as a fundamental aspect of constructive journalism, a response tailored to adapt to the needs of young audiences.

The material aspects of the explainers encompass physical and technological elements such as images, text, videos, emojis, and the production tools required. The analysis revealed that materiality, while often overlooked, is integral to the explanatory practice. Elements like editing software, cameras, microphones, and publishing platforms were seldom discussed during fieldwork due to their routine nature, but they were observed as essential. Staff working in NRK UNG needed to be digitally savvy. Measurement systems, crucial to journalistic practices, play a significant role in daily news dissemination and will be further explored in the visual practice section. Materiality also includes the journalists' physical presence in the explainers, in this case two journalists alternately standing, looking directly into the camera, and speaking as though to a friend. Ahva (2017) emphasized the materiality of the human body as a central site of doings and sayings. By alternating a few familiar presenters while maintaining consistent format

and visual presentation, young audiences can easily recognize the explainers. A primary motivation for NRK is to build trust over time and establish a lasting relationship with its audience as a reliable news provider.

The explainer initiative in January 2024 built on years of experimenting with news dissemination on Snapchat (Røsok-Dahl and Olsen 2024). The analysis showed how the journalists were dependent on the IT department developing a new interface which enabled 9:16 format explainers to be published on NRK.no. The integration of this explainer format was pitched by NRK UNG on a “pitching day” during the fieldwork (2022) and was realized in January 2024. Its implementation depended on decisions further up in the NRK hierarchy, as just a fraction of ideas pitched lead to actual change. This demonstrates the temporal aspects of such initiatives that develop from the ground up within large organizations such as NRK. It also underscores how the elements of activity, materiality and reflexivity are related and interconnected in many ways, such as spatially, causally, or intentionally, when they constitute a practice (Ahva 2017; Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, and von Savigny 2001, 51).

The Dialogic Practice

The second journalistic practice identified was NRK’s emphasis on audience dialogue, in this study the dialogue with young audiences. The initiative “NRK Svarer” (NRK Answers), invites readers to submit questions online, which are then addressed by journalists or experts. Leading up to the 2023 Norwegian elections, NRK made some of these questions into news stories, specifically selecting topics raised by young people’s inquiries. This resulted in 16 news stories covering youth-relevant topics from various parts of Norway, significantly increasing readership among young audiences. The most successful story⁶ achieved a 23% share of readers under 30 years old, compared to the standard 7–8% share in this age group. One staff member involved in the dialogue project explained:

We received more than 320 questions about the election, and we could pick those asked by young people. For example, Sigurd (17) asked: Who provides information to politicians, so that they can make decisions? This became a thorough, well written news story. (News worker 16)

This story on political decisions achieved a youth engagement rate of 14.8%. Most interviewees identified audience dialogue as a core aspect of constructive journalism. NRK aims to maintain ongoing dialogue with its audience on multiple levels, a theme emphasized in all presentations of the constructive initiative observed during fieldwork. The following quote encapsulates this:

We listen to the audience. And we can provide answers. [...] When I see that we perform so well with those stories, I experience a sudden surge of happiness. (News worker 16)

The materiality in the dialogic practice shares many elements with the explanatory practice (objects, bodies, places). In addition, experts were occasionally invited to physically be present at NRK to answer questions during a live broadcast. One example (fieldnotes) was the official World Mental Health Day, when a panel of external experts answered questions live related to depression, suicidal thoughts, or feelings of worthlessness. Prior to the “NRK Answers” live event on NRK.no, the planning involved thorough discussions. These

involved how to talk about suicide focusing more on hope, which was identified as part of constructive journalism. These and similar discussions were categorized as reflexivity.

A critical material aspect is the measurement system. Research has demonstrated the impact of audience metrics on news production (Dodds et al. 2023). Snapchat Story Studio analytics provided detailed insights, such as user demographics, age, gender, and most-shared snaps (Rø sok-Dahl and Olsen 2024). This accumulated data significantly influenced topic selection for Explainers and Dialogic practices. In contrast, NRK.no metrics lacked comparable detail due to many users not logging in, thereby not providing age or other demographic information. Consequently, staff frequently relied on Snapchat metrics for content decisions on NRK's proprietary platform. This data was understood as a form of indirect dialogue with the audience. Awaiting the implementation of an AI model intended to assess a story's "constructiveness," NRK faced challenges in accurately measuring what constitutes constructive news and its effectiveness in engaging youth. Measurement concerns were shared among analytics staff, journalists, and leaders, as reflected in this quote (fieldnotes, 7 September):

It's hard to measure. Constructive stories per day? Per week? How are we going to count this?

The Visual Practice

The last practice identified in the analysis was the visual one. That the visual matters in journalism is nothing new (Caple and Bednarek 2016). Visual practices include editing or presenting, but also image selection (Matich, Thomson, and Thomas 2025). The analysis showed how the visual practice was interconnected with both explanatory and dialogic practices. Visual practice was manifested through *activity* (drawing, animating, photographing, filming, designing, editing), *reflexivity*, (talking about, reflecting upon, discussing and criticizing what visual quality is or isn't) and *materiality* (tools and technology needed to draw, film, edit, enhance, animate, photograph, publish). Staff highlighted and reflected upon the visual as an essential part of constructive journalism specifically to engage the youth. Journalists not directly involved in youth-targeted news production often broadly stated, "The visual aspect is very important." In contrast, NRK UNG journalists who were dedicated to reaching young audiences, provided more nuanced reflections. Their staff frequently prioritized the visual aspect equally or even more than the textual content. They reflected on that while the visual practice is not explicitly defined in NRK's concept of constructive journalism, they saw it as a key component. The visual was reflected on as a "make or break" for topics to become news for young people or not, essential for engagement. This also meant that if they could not provide high visual quality for a certain story, there would be no news story for young audiences, whether on Snapchat or NRK.no. High-quality visual content was described as a motivation to keep reading or watching. This quote sums up the interconnectedness between the explanatory and the visual practice, and how the visual practice was key in reaching young audiences:

When we talk about reaching the youth, presentation is key. There is often an explanatory element in the design itself. (News worker 5)

The NRK UNG leader reflected on how it is easier to identify "what works" – namely, to identify which stories enhanced by effective visual design were performing well. However,

the analysis reveals challenges in understanding why certain visual stories excel. Success may stem from visual design that enhances comprehension, aligning with constructive journalism principles. Fieldwork provided numerous instances of staff categorizing images or videos as “good,” “bad,” or “mediocre” during story pitches or evaluations of previous productions. NRK UNG staff highlighted the role of visual elements, such as drawings or animations, in clarifying complex issues, especially when photos or videos are unavailable, as with abstract themes such as mental health. In this context, explanatory and visual practices intersect, suggesting that the visual also could be regarded as values or strategies. This complexity is encapsulated in the following quote:

My individual style as an illustrator is uncomplicated and almost simple and naïve. This approach can render topics that might initially seem dramatic or intimidating, more accessible. Many readers find it challenging to engage with extensive blocks of text without visual interruptions. The prevalence of illustrations in children’s books highlights their effectiveness in maintaining sustained interest over time. (News worker 8)

Interviewees reflected on the competition with platforms like YouTube, Netflix, Instagram, and TikTok, as another motivation for focusing on the visual. There, young audiences are accustomed to high-quality visuals. Staff also emphasized the importance of capturing young viewers’ attention visually within the first few seconds.

We must capture their attention and sustain their interest to keep them engaged in the story. The visual strategies employed must be abundant and varied. One should never take young people’s attention for granted; that era is certainly over. (News worker 8)

The analysis through a practice theory lens revealed that while “the visual” is deemed important in reaching young audiences with news, assessing visual quality can be challenging. The link between the visual and constructive journalism should be further explored. Applying a practice theory lens across all three practices helped unpack the interplay between activity, reflexivity, and materiality. In turn, the analysis prompts reflections on change and continuity regarding what constructive journalism is and how it is defined.

Discussion and Conclusion

Journalism faces tangible and existential threats to its continuation (Belair-Gagnon and Usher 2021). Constructive journalism has emerged amid socio-cultural, technological, and economic shifts (Hermans and Drok 2018), offering an approach that builds on long-standing journalistic traditions (Bro 2024). Principles of constructive journalism align with pleas for journalism that transcends traditional values and norms (Deuze and Witschge 2018; Hermans and Drok 2018). One significant threat is the difficulty legacy news media face in building relationships with youth (Galan et al. 2019). This study provides valuable insights regarding the connection between constructive journalism and reaching young people with news from a PSM perspective. Specifically, four key contributions are made:

First, the study highlights staff motivation for using constructive journalism to engage 13–23-year-olds. Motivations stem from PSM obligations (Sehl 2020), increasing news avoidance among the youth (Galan et al. 2019), and prior experiments with explanatory news on Snapchat (Røsok-Dahl and Olsen 2024). The analysis reveals multiple processes such as adapting to audience logic (Blassnig and Esser 2022) and social media logic (Van Dijck and Poell 2013) on proprietary platforms.

Second, the study reveals definitional challenges and ambiguity in understanding and practicing constructive journalism, consistent with prior research (Bro 2024). While NRK has established a clear, yet broad, definition, individual staff members have diverse interpretations of what constructive journalism entails and how it should be practiced. The broadness of NRK's definition – which includes nuances, solutions, countering polarization, and creating dialogue – allows for a subjective interpretation by individual journalists. From a practice theory perspective, the range of interpretations can be seen as manifestations of cultural schemas, “loosely organized and often incomplete,” making it possible for people to “apply different schemas to the same situation (and that both may be right)” as iterated by Ryfe (2021, 66). The broadness of the definition could lead to “everything and nothing” being interpreted as constructive journalism, which represents challenges for practitioners as well as researchers on constructive journalism, if there is no consensus about the term.

Third, the study demonstrates how constructive news stories resulted in a slightly higher youth-share than other stories, which was documented through NRK's manual run-through of constructive stories. The analysis suggests that the implementation of constructive journalism is a promising path in engaging young audiences with news, through explanatory, dialogic, and visual practices, attracting more people under 30 than the average story. These insights are relevant to industry and media scholars globally. Although the study documented a higher youth share for constructive stories overall, the total amount of young people accessing news via NRK's proprietary site remains significantly lower than for older age groups. A crucial question persists: how, when, and whether young audiences will establish a connection with NRK on its proprietary platforms in the future.

Finally, constructive journalism must be understood both in terms of continuity and change within journalism (Ahva 2017; Carlson and Lewis 2019). Practice theory's strength lies in its ability to analyze multiple levels: from micro-level performance to meso-level practice, and macro-level social fields (Ryfe 2018). Although this study focuses on the micro-level and on practices within a specific editorial group, it offers globally relevant insights. It points to how the implementation of constructive journalism opens to broader, enduring questions in journalism studies; regarding normativity, objectivity, the evolving nature of news, what news *is* and how it is practiced. Previous initiatives, like public journalism in the 1990s, called for closer public engagement to promote democracy. Constructive journalism shares similarities with prior movements, indicating both change and continuity. The stability of journalism's core – trusted individuals collecting and disseminating information for the public good – remains crucial (Zelizer 2019). This study shows that the ability of any reform movement to make an impact is linked to its ability to encourage professional reflexivity (Ahva 2013). This study did not specifically investigate normativity or journalistic core values, and whether these are altered in the quest for young audiences. Instead, adaptation to young audiences was unpacked through explanatory, dialogic and visual practices, manifested in the selection of sources, topics, format, design, and presentation. The study demonstrates that these practices have several similarities with prior attempts to connect with young audiences. It resonates with studies on the effect of constructive journalism on young audiences (Kleemans et al. 2017) as well as studies unpacking what young people think of as news (Swart and Broersma 2024). It also demonstrates how this editorial group considers

young people's point of view, demands for high-quality visuals, and need for explanation when adapting news to them, through direct and indirect dialogue with the audience. Thus, the implementation of constructive journalism must be understood as representing both continuity and change when adapting to young audiences.

An ethnographic case study, while rich in longitudinal data, has inherent limitations. Different interviewee samples might have revealed more critical perspectives on constructive journalism. This study focused on journalistic practices targeting young audiences in relation to constructive journalism; future research should examine the normative implications of implementing constructive journalism, particularly in relation to the objectivity norm and journalists' perceptions of their role as society's "watchdog" (Bro 2019). The connection between constructive journalism and reaching young people should be explored further, also linked to AI in journalism, as a measurer of "constructiveness". Holistic perspectives from other angles researching the production side regarding how journalism is adapting to young audiences, are also needed. Given the scarcity of ethnographic studies on journalistic practices and the adaptation of news to young audiences, I specifically encourage more ethnographic studies related to both constructive journalism and news dissemination directed at young audiences in general.

Notes

1. For a history of practice theory in journalism, see Ryfe (2018).
2. For more details, see Røsok-Dahl and Olsen (2024)
3. Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research
4. Around 300,000 subscribers, May 2025
5. NRK's definition: Constructive journalism at NRK is defined as journalism that highlights solutions and nuances while counteracting polarization by promoting a healthy debate climate (NRK 2022, 43).
6. <http://bit.ly/44Jobul>.

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Author contributions

CRedit: **Heidi Røsok-Dahl**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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