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A fraction too much friction: Constructive journalism's subversion of classic news values

Abstract:

Since the inception of reporting, the adage 'bad news is good news' has been central to ideas of what constitutes impactful journalism. This doctrine cuts short the potential for journalism to better serve society. While traditional reporting answers the question 'what isn't working?' it often fails to address the notion 'what can be done about it?'

Media has a strong potential for innovation by drawing on the principles of Positive Psychology. Over the past decade, the field of psychology expanded its reach beyond simply tackling mental disorders in order to also explore possibilities for mental flourishing. 'Constructive Journalism', 'Solutions Journalism' or 'Positive Media' aims to replicate this trajectory within the discipline of reportage; this movement recently emerged in Scandinavia and has since found traction among news organisations including the BBC. The model argues for a 'solutions-based' approach to reporting, one that subverts and balances the belief that 'bad news is good news' by lending equal weight to stories highlighting human resilience, post-traumatic growth, accomplishments, solutions and positive emotions. Through examining that which is best in the human experience, Constructive Journalism may have the potential to not only increase readership, but also to engage audiences with ideas for living better lives.

Biographical Note:

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Introduction: *If it bleeds, it leads*

> *I've never suggested that all news should be good news, because that is not the way the world turns around. But alongside the analysis of things going wrong in society, the problems and the failure, there should be a parallel analysis of the things going right. Journalists are supposed to be holding a mirror up to the world. It is part of our responsibility to do that. And a tremendous number of things in our world are working. People are coming together in an infinite number of ways to work on an incredible variety of projects, which are having real and positive results. Their stories often simply do not get told.*
>
> *– Former BBC presenter Martyn Lewis, CBE[1]*

It is mid-century America and two men are trapped in an argument. One is US President Lyndon Johnson. The other is editor and publisher of *Time Magazine*, Henry Luce. The president has a bone to pick with Luce. He is incensed by the torrent of negative news that lines the pages of Luce's publication. He shakes a copy of *Time* under Luce's nose, then rolls through a recent list of 'good news' stories – one being the fact that, off the back of a new equal opportunity Voting Rights Act, that week 200 000 African Americans had enrolled to vote in the country's south. "Is any of that in there? No. What's in here?" the president hollers. Luce responds laconically: "Mr President, good news isn't news. Bad news is news" (cited Schudson 2003: 49-50).

The 'bad news is news' paradigm is one with staying power. Arguably, it began with muckraking journalism in the late 1800s, and was cemented in the second half of the 20th century, particularly via scandals such as Watergate and the politically divisive Vietnam War (Gyldensted 2012). Public perceptions of what journalism in fact constitutes have been equally immovable. Quoting US statistics, author and *New York Times* columnist David Bornstein (2012) says that when surveyed, 79 per cent of Americans believe that a journalist's job is to highlight bad news.

In this paper, I will discuss an emerging counter paradigm: a movement known as Constructive Journalism, or 'CoJo'. A solid, academically rigorous definition of Constructive Journalism is still being formulated. Essentially, however, it can be characterised as an approach to journalism that subverts Luce's notion that 'bad news is good news'. Instead, Constructive Journalism reframes reportage as a craft that covers both negative and positive stories, and in so doing, reveals outliers on either side of the spectrum.

Before further outlining this idea, let me briefly explain my interest in this topic. A few years ago, I found my own love for the profession of journalism diminishing. I'd been working as a features editor for a major magazine publisher, a job that often felt too lightweight – an exercise in rehashing stories. The other side of the coin, working in hard news, seemed no more appealing.

As part of my role at the time, in 2012 I attended a psychology conference called *Happiness and Its Causes* in Sydney, Australia. There I met the founder of the Positive Psychology movement, Professor Martin Seligman from Pennsylvania State University in the United States. In a session on 'flourishing', the science of optimal living, he mentioned that a small band of postgraduate students from Penn State was investigating how the principles of positive psychology could be applied to journalism.

Seligman dubbed this nascent movement 'Positive Journalism'. But a little bit like 'Creative Non-Fiction', it's now known by numerous terms, including Constructive Journalism, Solutions-Journalism, Problem-Solving Journalism and Transformational Media. Of all these titles, Constructive Journalism has recently risen to the top as a preferred umbrella term (Gyldensted cited Tenore 2012: 2).

This idea excited me. So much so that my love for the profession was, in part, reborn that day. Journalism, I began to see, could add something far more meaningful to society than it was presently managing to do. Rather than simply highlighting our world's darkest corners or regurgitating lifestyle pieces, journalism could offer something more. It could lend weight to investigating and celebrating ideas for doing things better, provoke more engagement with readers and potentially reinvigorate journalism's role in democracy (Gyldensted cited Tenore 2012: 2-4).

Though the ideas of balanced, or solutions-focused news, isn't a new one, a coming together of like-minded thinkers under this set of refreshed terms has only occurred in the last three or so years. In this paper, I'll provide an overview of the work explored thus far within this young space. I'll cover the origins of Constructive Journalism, discuss how Positive Psychology can be applied to journalism and outline Constructive Journalism tools for writing practitioners. I'll conclude by describing ways in which the movement is gaining momentum around the world.

My argument is that Constructive Journalism can create a new audience for media organisations, improve the wellbeing of media makers, reach a broader readership and, most

importantly, refresh a tired model of reportage in order to elevate journalism's social and cultural importance.

Origins: *From a disease model, to a wellbeing model of the world*

> *We in journalism and news reporting are very skilled in the negative disease model of the world, but we know nothing about the positives – which is like a parallel situation to what psychology has gone through. Prior to the Positive Psychology movement, the discipline was framed around the classic 'disease model' which is about addressing where things go wrong. Psychologists only wanted to explore mental diseases, but not situations in which people thrive.*
>
> *– Cathrine Gyldensted, Danish Investigative News Journalist and founder of the Constructive Journalism movement*[2]

Roughly two decades ago, psychologist Martin Seligman proposed a radical rethink of his discipline's scope. He argued that psychology's focus on mental illness—which had provided many practitioners in the years following World War II—centred on moving patients from a state of 'negative ten on the scale, to a neutral zero' (cited in Pinkerton 2012). In other words, psychology was solely pathology orientated. Its aim was limited to repairing damage, using a disease model of human functioning (Gyldensted 2011: 20). The scope of philosophy, however, was far broader. Aristotle and Socrates, for example, opened themselves to the exploration of *eudemonia* or 'human flourishing'. In 1998, Seligman suggested psychology expand its reach in order to research this same zone of enquiry. Positive psychology has since become one of the field's fastest growing sub-genres (Gyldensted 2011: 19-20).

Among Seligman's recent postgraduate students at Penn State is Danish investigative journalist Cathrine Gyldensted. Gyldensted had suffered burnout in her role as US correspondent and, before enrolling at Penn State, was searching for ways to reframe her profession. She believed journalism was ripe for a transformation similar to that which psychology had been through under Seligman's tutelage (Gyldensted 2011). Speaking in reference to the US Code of Ethics for journalists, she writes:

> On the tenet 'Seeking truth and reporting it', it seems to me that the 'truth' we are reporting is solely a pathological version of the world. If we are seeking the truth,

we should definitely include examples of human resilience, post traumatic growth, positive emotions, accomplishments and solutions (2011: 21).

This idea is based on Seligman's PERMA theory of flourishing, which states that optimal living relies on addressing five factors: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and achievement[3] (Seligman 2010).

Along with fellow student, filmmaker and producer, Meghan Keener, Gyldensted began spreading word of this new way of approaching journalism. She would eventually tag this 'Constructive Journalism'. Meanwhile, a group of US writers advocated for a similar movement called 'Solutions Journalism', and UK stalwart Martyn Lewis from the BBC had campaigned for the need to balance coverage of negative news with stories about innovative ideas and things going right. 'There is a momentum going. There will come a point when the tide becomes overwhelming,' said Lewis of this emerging burst of global activity (cited in Cahlane 2012: 1).

Applying Positive Psychology to Journalism: *Redefining news values*

Among the most seminal theorists to provide news values analysis are Norwegian scholars Johan Galtung and Mari Ruge (Watson 1988: 117). Their model of selective gate-keeping was developed in 1965, and among its 12 cited values sits the following element: a story is newsworthy when it includes a 'Reference to something negative: bad events are generally unambiguous and newsworthy' (cited in O'Neill and Harcup 2009: 164-165).

As mentioned in my introduction, Gyldensted and others argue that this view, that bad news is news, gained further ground among media practitioners as a result of reportage conducted in the latter half of last century, including coverage of the Vietnam War and Watergate (Gyldensted 2011: 10-11). During Vietnam, Gylensted argues that press corps became increasingly aware that their primary sources, the White House and the Pentagon, routinely lied to them (2011: 10). This created a 'we catch the crooks' culture among investigative reporters. Similarly, the work of Watergate journalists Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward provided a new benchmark for journalistic heroism.

Journalist and editor with the *Wichita Eagle,* W. Davis Meritt, describes how the ecology of reportage changed as a result of Watergate:

An event that should have been a plateau from which the profession moved on to
even greater heights turned out to be a peak... the journalistic norm became "we
catch crooks". Scalps on the belt, particularly government scalps, were the sign of
rank and the measure of testosterone at gatherings of the tribe. Investigative
reporting continued to prove its value in exposing abuse and corruption. But it
also shaped what journalists came to value above all else – "the relentless
uncovering of wrongdoing, no matter its ultimate importance to the public or the
great scheme of things". The triumph of Watergate gave new shape to the
profession's image of itself – the journalist as folk hero, the astute political
analyst or media star (1995: 62).

For the most part, reporting culture today remains unchanged. As James Fallow, contributor
at *The Atlantic* contends: 'The average journalist, normally directed and morally self-
confident, shrinks instinctively from suggesting solutions' (cited in Bornstein 2012).

So how does this negative framing of news affect audiences? Unsurprisingly, it impacts upon
emotional and physical states, as numerous scientists have found. Here are three research
examples. Christopher Peterson and Tracy A. Steen (2009) argue that negative narrative
framing triggers communal rumination and catastrophic imprinting in the reader or viewer.
Further, Rolf Dobelli asserts the following, with a neuroscience underpinning:

News constantly triggers the limbic system. Panicky stories spur the release of
cascades of glucocordicoid (cortisol). This deregulates your immune system and
inhibits the release of growth hormones. In other words, your body finds itself in
a state of chronic stress. High glucocordicoid levels cause impaired digestion,
lack of growth (cell, hair, bone), nervousness and susceptibility to infections.
News consumers risk impairing their physical health. The other potential side
effects of news include fear, aggression, tunnel-vision and desensitization (2010:
4).

Finally, Gyldensted (2011) herself tested the impact of negatively framed print stories on
readers, but did so with a twist: she simultaneously tested the impact of stories that included a
'solutions element'. What she found was that stories with a negative valence, meaning those

posited on a negative emotional spectrum, had a significantly negative emotional impact. Negative emotions grew and positive emotions faltered. Stories with a positive valence, however, revealed reactions that sat at the opposite side of the scale. I will discuss the specific structure of these stories in the 'tools' section of this paper.

The Viability of Constructive Journalism: *Does it have legs?*

Constructive journalism is viable on a social level, and potentially on an economic level also. This is because it's shared more readily and it appears to sell. Constructive journalism better engages audiences and makes them more likely to take action. Allow me to outline the evidence gathered thus far in favour of this viewpoint. Preliminary studies into the sharing of news—now a traceable phenomenon, thanks to the internet—indicate that among media consumers, there is a demand for news of the positive variety.

In order to understand what makes content go 'viral', over the course of three months US academics, Jonah Berger and Katherine Milkman, studied the 'sharing habits' of 7,000 news articles published in *The New York Times*. Their work was based on Aristotle's principle that content—in his case, speeches—were most likely to be passed from person-to-person when the content in question embodied *ethos, pathos* and *logos*. In other words, when they held ethical, emotional and logical appeal (Konnikova 2014: 1). The researchers' analysis found that virality is partially driven by physiological arousal. Thereby, content that evokes high-arousal of positive emotions, such as awe, or negative emotions, such as anxiety and anger, is more likely to become viral. Content that makes an audience feel sadness, however, embodies less viral potential (2011: 1). Berger and Milkman write: 'While there is a lay belief that people are more likely to pass along negative news, this has never been tested… [Our results] indicate that content is more likely to become viral the more positive it is' (2011: 2-4).

Similarly, University of Texas researchers Alexander Curry and Keith Hammond (2014) performed a study that examined how readers felt after engaging with two versions of a handful of different stories – one was a bare-bones article, and the other included solutions content. To help you visualise this: one 'straight' story examined a lack of clothing supply in India, while the 'solutions' version did the same, but also included a few paragraphs about a 'Cloth for Work' program supported by a non-profit organisation called 'Goonj'. The results indicated that the solutions journalism stories left readers feeling more satisfied. In addition, comments left in response to these stories were more constructive than those left in response

to the bare-bone stories. The latter tended to be more antagonistic and 'black and white'. Curry and Hammond summarise their results thus:

> Readers of solutions journalism finished their article feeling more informed and interested than non-solutions readers. Solutions readers had an increased desire to share what they read, to read more about the issue, and to seek out more articles by news organizations covering stories in a solutions-focused manner. They also felt more optimistic (2014: 1).

The viability of this approach can be seen through the rise of sites such as Upworthy, which has recently teamed up with the Pulitzer Prize winning news agency Propublica (Gyldensted 2014). The trend applies, too, to news with a price tag, as demonstrated by the case of Reporters d'Espoirs. This French collective produce positive news supplements for mainstream newspapers in France, and found that circulation figures grew by between 5 to 20 per cent on days when the supplement ran. What's more, on average, the supplements brought in an additional three pages of advertising (Reporters d'Espoirs 2014; Cahalane 2012).

It could it be said then, that constructive journalism offers a path for luring lost readers back to news pages. After all, most of us are aware of a growing incidence of desensitivity, compassion fatigue[4] and distrust of media[5]. As Gyldensted says of her own study's results:

> Today we face a problem with [the] belief that it is only by focusing on what is wrong with the world that we can keep power accountable and maintain a healthy and well-functioning society… [My study] found that classical negative news left people feeling hopeless and passive. In contrast, articles with a constructive peak midway and a hopeful ending was deemed good reporting and left readers feeling more informed. The data overall suggested that readers of the more positive article were left with more energy to take action (2014: 1).

Tools: *New Constructive Journalism techniques for practitioners*

To date, there are four major tools discussed among the emerging CoJo literature. These include the 'peak-end' (as referred to earlier), the interview, lending a voice to the voiceless, brainstorming story ideas through a PERMA lens, and closely examining solutions.

Peak-end

The 'peak-end' technique is derived from psychological research of Nobel-Prize winner Daniel Kahneman from Yale Unversity. Summarising this theory, Swedish scientist Frank Zenker writes:

> A fairly accurate model of how humans tend to recall episodes—thus judge them, and hence form preferences for future actions—involves taking the average between the greatest intensity of some experienced quality ("peak"), and the experienced intensity of that quality at the end of this episode (2011: 4).

Applied to news, this theory posits that a reader's experience of a given story is closely linked to the way in which that story is constructed. A constructive journalism story would therefore include a positive element at its peak, such as a mention of what is being done to aid a given situation, and a positive end at its conclusion, such as a positive statement from an interviewee (Gyldensted 2013: 4). To be clear, this does not mean that any story information is lost. Rather, solutions focused information becomes an additional inclusion.

Interview

Gyldensted reports that owing to the classical news reporting-style questions reporters ask, eight out of ten news stories foster 'victimology'. This stems from the idea that news should seek to uncover 'dynamic conflict', in other words, explore suffering and setbacks by positing one side against another. Instead, she argues, journalists should also incorporate into their stories questions that explore resilience. She writes:

> I've asked people to be curious about other ways the event affected them, about people who have helped, about other solutions, and about looking for the meaning they take away from the event... Suddenly, you have soundbites of positive

emotion, hope, resilience, and inspiration to put in your news piece, while still being a story [that highlights] the challenges. It leaves the audience with inspiration, hope, and solutions that were already there in the situation, just not uncovered by our earlier questions (2013: 3).

Another revised interview approach pertains to interviews with those in positions of power. This tool is especially relevant to those working in broadcast media who conduct live interviews. A strong tradition within this arena of journalism is to take an oppositional or pseudo-critical approach. But interview expert John Sawatsky says this leaves the viewer, listener or reader with very little:

It's actually the worst way to get to the bottom of things. Because the consequences of becoming an oppositionist is that it just makes the other side argue more vividly on their own behalf. The other side is not going to say: "Oh, you are right and I am wrong." That never happens. So what does happen is that the two sides become more dug in, and the 'conflict' becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. We are not doing our job. Our job is to tell society what is happening in society and to do it in a reliable way and a trustworthy way. If the above happens, we are giving a skewed view, a one-sided view. So the media is giving the negative side, the other side is giving the positive side and the public loses along both ends. They are getting good-bad-good-bad. Most of the truth actually happens in the middle (cited in Gyldensted, 2014: 1).

Instead, where appropriate, interviews questioning those in power could be reapproached so as to work with the subject. Gyldensted suggests that reporters can focus on developing a 'high quality connection'. This is a form of communication whereby respectful engagement minimises defensiveness and maximises clarity. Similarly, interviewers can include a focus on what can be done to change a situation, as well as what can be learnt from a given situation (2011: 34).

Giving a voice to the voiceless

Another method favoured by constructive journalism advocates—though not a strategy unique to this area of thought—is to lend pens, microphones and cameras those rarely given the opportunity for media representation. At a journalism and story-telling summit held in 2012, the World Food Program noted that it gave a camera to a 12-year-old girl called Molly who was living in the slums of Nairobi. As a result, her films had received a notable amount of attention via social media. Similarly, at the same summit, Julie Morrison from the Thomson Reuters Foundation argued that giving crisis zone residents a voice through websites and Twitter feeds provides the public with a more representative view about happenings in war-torn parts of the world (cited Cahalane 2012).

PERMA

When brainstorming constructive stories angles in the editorial meetings, Gyldensted (2013: 4) asks the following questions, based on Seligman's PERMA theory:

- **P**ositive Emotion: Who is happy? Who has solved the problem or conflict?

- **E**ngagement: Who has lost track of time? Who has experienced engagement? Who is passionate? Who is doing something out-of-the-ordinary?

- **R**elationships: Who has helped? Who has been brought together? Any examples of closer ties among people? Any increases in community spirit?

- **M**eaning: Who has learned something or grown? Who has experienced post-traumatic growth? What has been learned that might be life-changing?

- **A**ccomplishment: What has it taken to come to this point? What has been gained? What has been overcome?

Some examples of how this might look in practice are as follows:

1. A story about the New Zealand election might include interviews with people canvassing on behalf of a candidate. In this scenario, the interviewee is asked why the election is important for him or her. This addresses the 'E' in PERMA by highlighting engagement in society;

2. A follow-up story about bushfires in Australia might include examples of first responders finding meaning in the act of helping affected people and places. This covers the 'M' in PERMA; and

3. A personal example: I recently wrote a story about the near extinction of a tiny species of kangaroo in Central Australia known as the 'mala'. As well as including information on the widespread threat that introduced feral animals pose to native Australian animals, the feature included details of local rangers' mala revival efforts. The story ended with Indigenous Traditional Owners' positive reactions to these efforts (Pinkerton, 2014). This targets the 'A' for accomplishment and the 'P' for positive emotions in PERMA.

Close examination of solutions

Constructive journalism techniques can be applied to typically 'hard news' topics when a story critically examines a response to a given problem. As such, a journalist's line of questioning might include the following (Bornstein cited in Rosenstiel 2014):

- What is going on here?
- Is the response working, or not?
- Specifically, what results is it producing and how do we know? How is it new and/or different?
- What are the response's limitations?

Groundswell: *Where is the movement at?*

Before concluding, I'd like to briefly mention pockets of constructive journalism activity from around the world. Demark, where Gyldensted hails from, is the most developed country from a CoJo perspective. There, constructive news reporting courses for professional journalists are held on a quarterly basis; the first textbook on Constructive Journalism, *A Handbook for Constructive Journalists* by Cathrine Gyldensted and Malene Bjerre, was released in Denmark earlier this year, and an English version is due out by the end of the year (Pinkerton 2014). Further, the head of Danish Broadcasting Corporation has reputedly implemented CoJo values in the organisation's newsroom training and operations (Gyldensted 2013).

This Danish cohort of journalists will soon deliver its constructive news reporting courses in the United Kingdom, where BBC Radio is currently piloting a weekly program that covers positive stories. Similarly, the US hosts three solutions-focused columns in major outlets: two

in *The Huffington Post*, 'Good News' and 'Impact', and one in *The New York Times* called 'Fixes' (Gyldensted 2013).

Finally, Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government in 2012 launched ShoutAbout, an engagement tool that enables visitors to 'learn more and take meaningful action on issues without sacrificing editorial independence'. This operates via an icon placed at the end of a story, video or blog, and can include links to a petition, a background briefing, or a relevant non-profit agency. ShoutAbout's motivation is to encourage readers to take further action after engaging with a story (Li Fowler 2012: 1).

Conclusion

> *Journalism at its finest is a key player in democracy. Thus, the importance of taking action to keep our profession dynamic, viable and strong is evident. Let the work begin.*
>
> *– Cathrine Gyldensted*[6]

I'd like with my own 'living example' of CoJo's possibilities. In 2010, *Four Corners*, an Australian investigative journalism program, did something different and I happened to be watching. It aired an episode called *A Good Death* about palliative care services in Sydney (Masters & Carney 2010). In this, a journalist follows four terminally ill patients through the final months and days leading up their deaths. The story reveals that a 'good death' is indeed possible, but that mainstream medicine often fails to give palliative care medicine the respect it deserves. The program's focus rests on the dedicated and full-of-heart doctors and nurses who work in this space; thus, it neatly falls into a Constructive Journalism format.

After seeing this program, the next morning I rang the Sacred Heart Mission, the hospice spotlighted in the *Four Corners* episode, to ask if it needed volunteers. Ever since, I've been a palliative care volunteer. I like to think that my experience proves that when we create and come into contact with constructive journalism, the resulting chemical reaction can spur action and a willingness to help among an audience.

In summary, while there is no doubt that highlighting injustice, disadvantage and disaster in the world holds vital importance, the old adage 'If it bleeds it leads' diminishes the contribution that journalism can deliver. By taking up the idea President Johnson posed to

Time's Luce—namely that good news is news, too—we can realign journalism so as to better aid and reflect society and our collective set of values.

Constructive Journalism's relative success thus far shows that economic and social worth resides in stories that are true, trustworthy, constructive, resourceful and solutions-focused. Though a young movement, and one in much need of further research, Constructive Journalism provides a conduit to revitalise journalism as a craft, as well as to enrich that which we as media practitioners offer audiences – namely engagement, quality information, connection, utility and meaning.

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Endnotes:

1. Cited in Purdy 2013: 1.

2. Cited in Pinkerton 2013: 3.

3. To further explain the elements of PERMA: Positive emotions – feeling good; Engagement – being completely absorbed in activities; Relationships – being authentically connected to others; Meaning – purposeful existence; and Achievement – a sense of accomplishment and success.

4. The term 'compassion fatigue' was originally used within an occupational context but is now also used in mainstream media to refer to the desensitisation of the public toward reports of human tragedies (Kinnick, Krugman, & Cameron, 1996). According to Figley (1998)*,* the easy and instant access to news has possibly led to people feeling overwhelmed by the negative and difficult situations occurring around the world, particularly those that elicit a sense of powerlessness in the observer. As such, people may seek to create a distance between themselves and those who are suffering by dehumanising or stereotyping those most in need of compassion. Constant news of suffering on a large scale may also lead to numbness or a sense of immunity from human suffering (Hoijer, 2004). Therefore, it is thought that withdrawing compassion may provide relief from the damaging effects of negative emotions.

5. Gyldensted reports that a recent Scandinavian survey on traditional media revealed a growing distrust of mainstream media and reporters, so news agencies there are additionally inspired to consider how constructive media might help to regain some of that trust. (cited in Strutzenberger, 2012).

6. Gyldensted *2014:40.s*