Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München
Institut für Kommunikationswissenschaft und Medienforschung

# Definition, Implementation and Effects of Constructive Journalism in German Print and Online Media

A Qualitative Research

Wissenschaftliche Arbeit zur Erlangung des Grades Master of Arts (M.A.)

Gutachter: Prof. Dr. Thomas Hanitzsch
Betreuer: Abit Hoxha, M.A., M.Sc.

Vorgelegt von: Leonie Gubela
(Matrikel-Nr.: 11545450)
E-Mail: leoniegubela@gmail.com
München, 29. Juni 2018

# Table of Contents

# 1 Introduction

"More urgent than ever should we as journalists ask ourselves which role we want to play in society. Do we want to increase the upset, inflame the witch hunts and fuel hysteria? Or do we want to do the exact opposite – something I strongly make a case for" (Di Lorenzo, 2016, transl.[1]).

In 2016 Giovanni Di Lorenzo, editor-in-chief at the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*, appealed during a speech in Dresden to his colleagues to be more self-critical and courageous in times of perceived decreasing trust in the media and its reputation being at stake.

Scandalization and doom-mongering would in the end depoliticize societies and damage the connection between recipients and the media.

"But most of all, it will more and more blur the distinction between important and irrelevant news and lead to a fatalistic attitude: 'Everything's bad.'" (transl.)

Di Lorenzo wants German editorial departments to resist joining in the overall "grumbling" and instead be more forward-looking.

With these requests he (intentionally or not) supports an approach, that has become increasingly popular worldwide in the sector during the last few years – constructive journalism.

## 1.1 The Emergence of a New Journalistic Approach

One fundamental assumption, out of which this journalistic trend emerged, is the so-called "negativity bias" in the media. There are several studies about its repercussions (Cohen, 1983; Biswas, Riffe & Zillmann 1994; Newhagen, Reeves, 1992): The daily examination of "bad" news makes readers and audiences cynical and stressed and results in a worldview that is gloomier than reality (Gerbner, 1998; Hamilton, 2014). Consequently, they develop "compassion fatigue" (Associated Press, 2008, p. 17), amplified among others by "a lack of solutions to social problems being provided" (Kinnick et al., 1996, p. 687, as cited in McIntyre, 2015,

---

[1] transl.: The quotation is a translation by the author of this thesis.

pp. 5-6). Thus, people are better informed about what is wrong with society than about the actions that are taken to improve the current state (Curry, & Hammonds, 2014, p. 5).

Nevertheless – there are inquiries indicating a media consumer's awareness of this issue and a demand for change: According to a current survey of the Bundesverband Deutscher Zeitungsverleger (BDZV), the generation of 15- to 35-year-olds wishes for less negative and crises-fixated news, but instead for more solution-oriented reporting in their daily media consumption ("Mit Krisen auf Kriegsfuß", 2017).

Scientists from the University of Southampton found out that an overemphasis on negative news has no impact on the state of society but exclusively on the audience's mental wellbeing (Baden, 2015). In 2015, the newscast *RTL Aktuell* ordered a study, which revealed that 80 percent of those polled requested more constructive coverage, 35 percent said, the news made them scared (Hein, 2015; Meier, 2015).

In the US, the Solutions Journalism Network (SJN), founded in 2013 by three publicists, works together with English-language newspapers and magazines to integrate constructive journalism into everyday reporting. One outcome is the *New York Times* column "Fixes" that each week presents solutions to social problems like gun violence, campus rape and drug addiction.

In Denmark, the Netherlands and Germany (with *Perspective Daily*) platforms have been launched within the last couple of years, which solely "work constructively" – and also several established media houses are starting to present their readers and audiences solution-oriented content.

The nationwide newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* for example developed a few months prior to the general election 2017 the so-called "Democracy Lab" in which editors, readers and experts tried to work up approaches to political issues; since fall 2017, the *ZDF* broadcasts the programme "Plan B" about ways out of old-age poverty or new concepts for affordable rents – "NDR Info Perspektiven" is a similar show, also produced by the public-service broadcasters, on the radio.

Moreover, a number of online news media like *Spiegel Online* or *Zeit Online* are experimenting with constructive articles and columns. In February, the British *Guardian* reported on its website on the success of the constructive-news-series "The

Upside": In comparison to other articles, editor Marc Rice-Oxley wrote, the column was more often clicked, read until the end and shared on social media (Rice-Oxley, 2018). Chief Operating Officer of the *Solutions Journalism Network*, Keith Hammonds (2016), supports Rice-Oxley's observations by referring to journalistic formats the SJN developed: "It's not just that online traffic to solutions stories seem to be higher; reader's comments are more positive and constructive, indicating a changed more hopeful conversation".

One of the pioneers on the field of constructive journalism, the Danish journalist Ulrik Haagerup, whose ideas will be investigated in more depth in the course of this thesis, emphasises that constructive reporting has to be clearly demarcated from "positive stories" with only little or no societal relevance. In his book "Constructive News: Why Negativity Destroys the Media and Democracy – And How to Improve Journalism of Tomorrow" he calls upon editorial departments to find the "best available version of the truth" but not to fixate on good news (Becker, 2018). The founders of *Perspective Daily*, too, emphasise on their website that constructive journalism has to meet the standards of balance and accuracy of "classic journalism" but moreover has to critically illuminate coherences, backgrounds and problem-solving approaches ("Über uns", n.d.).

Nevertheless, there are many different critical voices concerning constructive journalism. Some media professionals fear that a more active journalistic self-understanding leads to the emergence of "campaign-journalism" and a loss of objectivity. Some claim that the constructive approach would patronize the media consumer, others argue that – considering the everyday-workload in hectic newsrooms – the feasibility of regular constructive reporting is simply unrealistic.

## 1.2 Research Questions and Implementation

In the following chapter, an overview of the academic literature on this relatively young approach is given. Fundamental for outlining a definition of constructive

journalism are the two different schools of thought by the aforementioned Ulrik Haagerup and Cathrine Gyldensted, who is known for her research on combining behavioural sciences like positive psychology with journalism. Subsequently and as a part of demarcating what constructive journalism stands for, parallels with and differences from similar approaches like solutions journalism, peace journalism, positive journalism and public journalism will be examined. After that, this thesis discusses examples of constructive journalism in the German media and the most discussed points of criticism on constructive reporting within the professional field.

The core findings from several guideline-based expert interviews, conducted for the purpose of this study, will form the final part of this work. The group of experts consists solely of practitioners – altogether ten journalists, including several freelancers, an editor-in-chief of a magazine, founders of constructive news platforms and editors of regional newspapers. A detailed discussion of their answers and conclusions regarding the implementation of constructive journalism in Germany drawn from their statements will constitute the major section of the paper. For the purpose of this thesis, they have been interviewed on the topical basis of the following research questions.

**RQ1)** How do the experts define the core functions of constructive journalism?

**RQ2)** According to the experts' experiences: How is constructive journalism realisable on a daily basis? Where are the limits?

**RQ3)** How do the experts describe the relationship with their readers?

**RQ4)** According to the experts' experiences: Which topics have turned out to be suited best for constructive reporting? Which journalistic formats work out best for constructive reporting?

**RQ5)** How do the experts define their journalistic self-conception?

**RQ6)** What are the experts' stances on the most common points of criticism regarding the approach?

**RQ7)** What are the experts' expectations on trying to report more constructively?

# 2 Literature Review

In contrary to the research field of constructive journalism, which still needs further development (Mast, Coesemans, & Temmerman, 2018, p. 1) – plenty of studies have been conducted on how the above mentioned negativity in the media influences the consumers' wellbeing and worldview. The outcomes can be seen as a starting point for constructive journalism and the debate on a change in journalistic thinking when it comes to approaching and telling news stories (Schmidt, 2017, p. 16). Not only does the constant consumption of negative news lead to fear, sadness and compassion fatigue, it also causes distrust towards politicians and benefits a phenomenon called "learned helplessness" (Galician, & Vestre, 1987; Veitch, & Griffitt, 1976; Kleinnijenhuis, van Hoof & Oegema, 2006), which has been defined by Harcup (2014) as the idea "that media audiences can become inured to horror and tragedy as a result of repeated exposure to human suffering via the media […]" (p. 62). The term first was coined by the American psychologist Martin Seligman to describe a concept explaining the emergence of depression. In the 1970s, it was picked up by Lawrence Levine who performed a content analysis about the evening news in the US. He found out that some degree of "helplessness" was displayed in 71 percent of the examined TV-newscasts. Levine (1977) then poses the questions as to whether or not "the viewing of real and fictionalized 'helplessness' models suggest to some that helplessness is for many a way of life?" and if the environment is generally seen as "uncontrollable and unpredictable" (p. 101). He states that "in some ways, the network's rendering of the story" was what conveyed "helplessness" – not the news itself (p. 105). A national survey by Thomas Patterson (2000), conducted decades later, corresponds with Levine's findings: 84 percent of the respondents described the news to be "depressing", 77 percent as "negative" (p. 6). In addition, intense adoption of a news topic, that might be very present in the media and is negatively reported on, can result in a general frustration of the recipient with the subject matter. This "topic-sullenness" expresses itself in the recipient's wish to no longer see or hear anything about it and can lead to an active avoidance (Kuhlmann, Schumann, & Wolling, 2014, p. 20). However – Marc Trussler and

Stuart Soroka (2013) from the McGill University in Montreal claimed in a paper that cynical and negative news are, despite what those polled usually state in questionnaires, just the kind of news consumers demand. In a lab experiment, they investigated the participants news-selection-biases with the result that, regardless of how they described their news preferences in a survey beforehand, participants were more likely to choose the negative content because "they seem more informative" (p. 19). In the concluding chapter of their study, Trussler and Soroka introduce the thought that "perhaps what is needed is a move towards negative, *yet constructive*, political news" (p. 20) – which on the one hand would "hold the attention of citizens" and on the other would be a way to avoid political cynicism.

Another explanation for a recipients' orientation towards "the bad" is the emotional factor. "Bad information is processed more thoroughly than good" and negative events have in general a much greater impact on individuals when it comes to working through and remembering it (Baumeister et al., 2001, p. 1). To reserve a negative emotion, people need to experience positive emotions three times more. The 3-to-1 ratio has been established by Dr. Barbara Fredrickson (2009), Professor of Psychology. She claims that, when this ratio is achieved, people develop a greater openness to new ideas (Gyldensted, 2011, p. 15).


According to a study by researchers from the University of Pennsylvania, who used a data set of *New York Times* articles, it is the positive content rather than the negative, that is more viral on Social Media. The higher the recipient's physiological arousal, the more likely they share the story online. Articles that elicited the emotion "awe" became most viral (Gyldensted, 2015, pp. 22-23).

A quasi-experiment, conducted by the Solutions Journalism Network and the Engaging News Project in 2014, revealed some supporting results in favour of solution-focused stories. 1,500 American adults were presented a news story about a social issue that either contained a potential solution to this issue or not. Those who had read the solution-oriented story reported afterwards to have "more perceived knowledge about the topic, higher self-efficacy in regard of a potential remedy and greater intentions to act in support of the cause" (McIntyre, 2015, pp. 33-34). Curry and Hammonds (2014) describe the findings as very promising in order to tackle the

supposed shortcomings of editorial offices, especially regarding "News Negativity", "News Thoroughness" and "Readership Decline" (pp. 6-7). In her dissertation, Karen Elizabeth McIntyre (2015) tried to find out whether the inclusion of constructive-journalism-techniques into news stories "ultimately improve individual and societal wellbeing". For that purpose, she included solution information into articles about homelessness with the effect that readers were more likely to give the story a "thumbs up" on social media and "feel good" (pp. iii-iv). In a second study with the same topic, McIntyre interspersed the text with facts that evoke positive emotions such as hope, elevation, pride, joy and happiness – this caused individuals to be more active on the issue and for example donate money or sign a petition (p. iii). A quite similar experiment was conducted by Klaus Meier (2018), Professor at the University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, who investigated the impact of a news article and a reportage, which were written in two different versions (one contained constructive elements, one did not), and were presented to four distinct groups of readers. The results match with those of Karen McIntyre: After reading the constructive texts, participants reported to "feel better" and claimed to be willing to raise attention for the issue on social media and talk to people about it – whether they actually go through with their announcements and if constructive journalism helps to improve the reputation of a media brand can, however, not be proved (p. 4).

## 2.1 Journalistic Theories

The following subchapter deals with the media's agenda, how it emerges and which role the interdependency between news outlets and the audiences plays. Subsequently, Galtung and Ruge's criteria for newsworthiness are revisited, extended and applied to today's digital age.

### 2.1.1 Agenda Setting

"The press [...] may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about" (Cohen, 1963, p. 13). This quote by political scientist Bernard Cohen sums up what

the agenda-setting-theory insinuates. Established in the 1960s, it explains why recipients find certain societal problems more significant than others – namely because they have been covered more extensively in the mass media (Maurer, 2016, p. 419). The agenda-setting-theory implies that the media's emphasis on certain topics influences the reader's awareness for societal problems – the more medial coverage certain issues get, the more people will find this issue significant. The approach, which belongs to the field of media effects research, is also regarded as part of journalism studies because it includes research on how the media agenda emerges. According to Maurer, there are three major influences (ibid.).

Firstly, the audience agenda supposedly has an impact on what the media reports on because journalists want to cover topics that are on their reader's minds. This means, there is an reversion within the theory that, as aforementioned, in the first place explains the impact of the journalistic process of selection on the recipients notion of what is important. Secondly, the political agenda might play a crucial role because the media picks up on current events and politicians supposedly want to influence the way them personally or their policies are dealt with – and thirdly, different medias presumably influence each other in their topic selection and coverage, the so-called intermedia-agenda-setting (p. 420).

The aforementioned "reversion within the theory", according to Maurer, is based on the idea of the mass media regarding itself mostly as arbiter between politics and citizens. It is integrated in many journalists' self-understanding that they react to what is on their audience's mind and make politicians aware of these problems (p. 424).

To sum up, the concept of agenda setting implies that the public awareness of problems is coined by the current state of events as well as the interests of journalists and politicians (pp. 427-428). A cycle that ideally leads to an accurate depiction of societal issues – as long as politics or the media do not illustrate them as more pressing or dramatic than they really are (p. 428).

## 2.1.2 News Values

Since the way the media portrays reality has a significant impact on the recipient's images of reality, it is of central importance for democratic societies that the

journalistic news selection leads to a proper description of this reality. Are the factors for news selection suitable to filter the information that is relevant for democratic participation? – is the question Eilders (2016) identifies as central in news values research (p. 432).

In the 1920s, the American publicist Walter Lippmann remarked that certain criteria for defining an event as "newsworthy" might influence journalists in their news selection and lead to a depiction of reality that is not as adequate. In Europe, his deliberations have been first picked up by Einer Östgaard (1955), who assumed that events were more likely to be reported on when they contained a high potential for identification (proximity, participation of elite-persons or a strong personalisation of abstract issues) or aspects that could easily be sensationalized (gossip, accidents or conflicts). He stated that these aspects resulted in the portrait of a world that has to deal with more conflicts and crises than in reality (p. 55). Shortly after Östgaard, Galtung and Ruge published the most cited work on the topic. In "The Structure of Foreign News" (1965) they suggest that the following factors help to determine the likelihood of a development being covered as news: Frequency, Threshold, Unambiguity, Meaningfulness, Consonance, Unexpectedness, Continuity and Composition. Those factors are considered "culture-free" whereas these additional four are culture-bound and mostly refer to north-western cultures (Eilders, 2016, p. 433): reference to elite nations, reference to persons, reference to something negative (Caple, & Bednarek, 2014, p. 3). Galtung and Ruge's approach has been revisited by many journalism scholars and social scientists, two of them being Harcup and O'Neill, who in 2001 and 2017 came up with updated factors for newsworthiness. Their most recent revised list – the result of an empirical content analysis – is supposed to apply to the digital age. According to Harcup and O'Neill, among the relevant criteria are Exclusivity, Bad News, Conflict, Surprise, Drama, Follow-up, Relevance, Magnitude, Celebrity, Good news, the News organisation's agenda and the so-called "Shareability" (p. 1482) – which has been casually defined by *Guardian* editor Janine Gibson as "stuff that makes you laugh and stuff that makes you angry" (Newman, 2011, p. 24). According to a study mentioned in the introduction to chapter 2, stories evoking high-arousal emotions are shared the most.

Harcup and O'Neill outlined the importance for further research on how the organisation's aspiration for shareable content influences their news selection. (p. 1482). Nevertheless, critics remark that a central weakness of the research tradition on news values is the focus on abstract criteria without involving, for example, the political orientation of the journalists who select the news as well as economical pressure or the general alignment of the news media (Eilders, 2016, p. 439).

## 2.2 Constructive Journalism Defined

Before the ideas of the two most influential proponents will be outlined in chapters 2.2.1 and 2.2.2, the following paragraphs give an overview of how constructive journalism has been defined.

A quick look into the dictionary reveals what "constructive" means in a general sense: "Helpful to someone instead of upsetting and negative".

However, constructive journalism's goal is not to turn the "negativity bias" into a "positivity bias" but to illuminate partial – maybe unconventional – solutions to social problems while being balanced, societally relevant, critical and accurate (Schmidt, 2017, pp. 17-18, Dagan Wood, 2014). Constructive journalism is supposed to foster a "flourishing society" by empowering recipients to engage into or even initiate a public debate ("FAQ", n.d.; Dagan Wood, 2014) and trying to find and depict "well-being models of the world" – in contrary to contributing to the "learned helplessness"-phenomenon by portraying the "diseased model" ("FAQ", n.d.).

"While we continue to cover the stories of what's not working – political dysfunction, corruption, wrongdoing, violence and disaster" – as relentlessly as we always have, we want to go beyond 'If it bleeds, it leads'" (Huffington 2015).

In her announcement that the *Huffington Post* is going to report more constructively in the future, Ariana Huffington emphasizes that the online media will at the same time hold on to journalism's core functions which are, among others, to investigate and reveal what is "bad". And then "go beyond": present ways to act, research possible solutions, show prospects and hope (Meier, 2018, p. 4). The founders of *Perspective Daily* stress on their website that constructive journalism always has to

meet the standards of balance and accuracy of "classical journalism" but, moreover, must investigatively shine a light on coherence, context, backgrounds and solutions ("Über uns", n.d.). Most proponents of constructive journalism view the approach as a continuum of "standard journalism", not as counterpart or dichotomy (McIntyre, 2015, p. 10; Schmidt, 2017, p. 23). The approach, thus, "subscribes to a fundamental, and widely shared, conception of journalism's raison d'être but rethinks how contemporary journalists could, or should, fulfil their democratic and societal roles" (Mast, Coesemans, & Temmerman, 2018, p. 3).

In a *Tedx Talk*, Séan Dagan Wood (2014), Co-Founder of the Constructive Journalism Project and editor-in-chief of the British *Positive News* outlined what Journalists will get from reporting more constructively:

"It strengthens journalism's commitment to truth by giving a fuller picture of reality and it commits journalism to its fundamental ethics such as minimizing harm."

In an article for *Zeit Online*, Andrea Hanna Hünninger (2017) writes that many of her colleagues refer to themselves as "bad-news-conveyer" and have come to terms with it.

The following subchapters primarily deal with the ideas of two journalists who – like Séan Dagan Wood – do not agree with this role and are convinced that members of their profession have the responsibility to constructively shape the news they convey.

## 2.2.1 Ulrik Haagerup: Why Bad News Destroy the Media

For Ulrik Haagerup, a Danish investigative journalist, former editor-in-chief of *Danske Radio* (*DR*) and now head of the Constructive Institute in Aarhus, the tool for fulfilling this responsibility is adding an extra question after asking "Who?", "What?", "When?", "Where?", "Why? and "How?" – "What now?".

Haagerup is one of the first practitioners to define constructive journalism and explain why the approach might be essential to overcome the prevalent negativity in the media. In his book "Constructive News: Why bad news destroy the media and democracy – and how to improve journalism of tomorrow", he argues that in the digital age journalism has to gain back its audiences' attention and trust by providing "a new balance between critical and educational functions of journalism on the one

hand – and solutions, examples of best practice and stimulus for acting on the other"
(Pranz, & Sauer, 2017, p. 104). Adding constructive thought into reporting would
have a strengthening impact on media democracy and the economic situation of
publishing houses (ibid.). According to Haagerup, the *DR* was able to increase the
audience rating for its main newscast after implementing the practice (Sauer, 2017,
pos. 402).

To his mind, the approach is not about evoking positive emotion in the recipient but
to enrich a public debate by presenting every aspect of a news story (pos. 396).
Moreover, he claims that – according to psychologists – the relentless reporting on
local and global conflicts leads to their prolongation. In this case, news media are
functioning as observers and participants: By echoing provocative statements from
both sides, "we do not only inform about the conflicts. We keep them alive, we even
compound them" (Haagerup, 2015, p. 69, transl.).

For the implementation of constructive news in editorial departments, he has
identified several guidelines and pitfalls: Constructive news should not be confused
with positive news and aspire to depict the "best version of the truth" (p. 195,
transl.). Objectivity and neutrality have to be preserved and solutions should never
be presented as universal or as "the single right one". Constructive news are no
replacement for investigative journalism but a supplement to mainstream news
journalism (p. 196). He advises editorial offices not to set a "quantitative target" for
constructive news. Haagerup fears that too much pressure on journalists when
producing constructive stories results in a rise of positive news without relevance (p.
198).

## 2.2.2 Cathrine Gyldensted: The Concept of Positive Psychology

Ulrik Haagerup's maxim – finding the best version of the truth – shows that he
defines constructive journalism as a more considerate way of selecting and
presenting stories that includes incorporating constructiveness as a central "news
criterion" (Bro, 2018, pp. 12-13). Cathrine Gyldensted, herself a Danish investigative
journalist and colleague of Ulrik Haagerup, supports his approach but focuses in her
explanations on what constructive journalism can achieve more on its impact on the
audiences' engagement. Both agree that journalistic coverage actively constructs

reality through selection and production of news – and is therefore much more than a reflection of what is happening (Gyldensted, 2015, p. 5). But while Haagerup narrows his demands down to a more balanced depiction of reality, Gyldensted (2015) wants constructive journalism – as she states in her book with the subtitle "From Mirrors to Movers" – to "Move the world!" (p. 27).

She once described constructive journalism as "Yes-We-Can-Reporting" that is capable of energizing or lifting people up with stories, which leave them "more engaged, inspired, and positive than before" (McIntyre, 2015, pp. 7-8). The fact that she defines constructive journalism as an interdisciplinary approach, which takes behavioural sciences into account, stems from her studies in positive psychology. During her time at University of Pennsylvania she conducted a study where she presented different versions of the same news story to the participants. With the findings that the "classical" version, which contained negative aspects, seemed to depress the recipients and that it takes multiple stories that convey positive emotions to counter the impact of the classical, yet negative, story (Gyldensted, 2011, Abstract; Gyldensted, 2015, p. 191). As a consequence, Gyldensted promoted the idea of applicating the concept of positive psychology into journalism. "[…] in an effort to create productive, engaging and comprehensive coverage, while holding true to journalism's core functions. The approach offers a way to rehabilitate journalism […]", Karen McIntyre remarks (2015, Abstract), who wrote her PhD thesis on Gyldensted's school of thought. In both Gyldensted's and Haagerup's opinion, the Anglo-Saxon journalistic self-understanding of an independent observer and uncoverer leads to the conveyance of a distorted "state of the world" (Schmidt, 2017, p. 16). Contrary to the "traditional detached" journalist, Gyldensted defines a constructive journalist as more active and involved in "shaping the story" (McIntyre, & Gyldensted, 2017, p. 22). Transferred to professional practice, especially interviewing, she encourages to ask protagonists for "learning curves", "overcoming setbacks" or, in general, questions "oriented towards the future" (Gyldensted 2015, p. 27) – without leaving out the crisis: "[...] constructive journalism makes a conscious choice not to escalate the conflicts or to make them chronic. Instead, it also seeks and reports on resources, realistic solutions and compromises (pp. 48-49). Gyldensted's recipe for constructive stories goes by the acronym PERMA: including

**p**ositive emotion, examples of **e**ngagement, good **r**elationships, **m**eaning, and **a**chievement in the news process (McIntyre, & Gyldensted, 2017, p. 28) – a construct based on psychologist Seligman to overcome the "learned helplessness"-phenomenon (p. 10).

## 2.3 Differentiation from Similar Forms of News

There are many other journalistic approaches that resemble constructive journalism in its core characteristics and even overlap in certain fields.

In the following subchapters the definitions of solutions journalism, peace journalism, positive journalism and public journalism are displayed as well as their similarities with and differences from constructive journalism.

### 2.3.1 Solutions Journalism

A term that has often been used synonymously and is closely connected, almost interwoven with constructive journalism, is solutions journalism. Constructive journalism is regarded as an umbrella label (McIntyre, 2015, pp. 7-8): A news story that includes a solution can also be considered constructive – constructive journalism does not necessarily require the incorporation of a solution (p. 16). According to McIntyre (2015) both approaches employ positive psychology techniques (p. 13).

The Solutions Journalism Network defines the approach as a form of explanatory journalism that has characteristics of watchdog reporting, "highlighting effective responses to problems in order to spur reform in areas where people or organizations are failing to respond adequately, particularly when better options are available" (Curry, & Hammonds, 2014, p. 6). In 1998, Benesch differentiated solution-oriented journalism from traditional journalism by stating that "instead of pointing out what's wrong in the hope that someone will fix it, solutions journalism points out what's right, hoping that someone can imitate it" (p. 39).

One of the first columns to present solution journalism is the *New York Times* series "Fixes".

## 2.3.2 Positive Journalism

Although many practitioners use the terms synonymously, positive journalism can not be interchanged with constructive journalism (McIntyre, & Gyldensted, 2017, p. 26). While constructive news should have societal relevance, news with "positive" content mostly lack meaningful information and fulfil the sole purpose of being uplifting and entertaining, respectively demonstrating to the audience that the world is not as gloomy as it may seem (ibid.). Readers choose positive articles to improve their mood, not to be informed. The newspaper *taz* irregularly publishes a special issue on "Good News", the *Huffington Post* has a column called "Good" and *Zeit Online* has started to push its user one positive news item a day on their smartphones in 2016 (Weissenburger, 2016).

## 2.3.3 Peace Journalism

Like constructive journalism, peace journalism stems from criticism on the factors for news selection – especially negativity, but also proximity to elite countries and elite nations (Hanitzsch, 2007, p. 2). Johan Galtung who, as set out in 2.1.2, identified these factors for news values, a few years later came up with the concept of peace journalism. To him, peace journalism "tries to depolarize by showing the black and white of all sides, and to deescalate by highlighting peace and conflict resolution as much as violence" (Galtung, & Fischer, 2013, p. 99). The solution-oriented focus and the pursuit for socially responsible reporting are characteristics that peace and constructive journalism share. Peace journalism illuminates coherences and background information and what is being done to solve the conflict (McIntyre, & Gyldensted, 2017, p. 25). According to Lynch and McGoldrick (2005), peace journalists try to shed a light on "non-violent responses" (p. 5). This thematic prioritization shows that peace journalism has a strong normative view (Hanitzsch, 2007, p. 2).

Similarly to constructive journalism, there is no clear conceptualization of peace journalism and critics reproach proponents of both approaches of inventing

journalistic movements that reflect nothing but "good and many-sided journalism" (p. 7).

## 2.3.4 Public Journalism

According to Jay Rosen (1999), one of its founding fathers, public journalism is based on the conviction that journalists should help societies to become more active instead of just informing them about their problems. With the result of commonly getting involved in public affairs (p. 22). The approach, which developed at the turn of the century, views citizens as participants rather than spectators or even victims enabled by journalists who try to "facilitate public debate" (McIntyre, 2015, p. 12) by organizing, for instance, events where politicians and readers can come together to discuss social issues (ibid.; Bro, 2018, p. 7).

Like constructive journalism, public journalism wants to create a "healthier public climate" (Rosen, 1999, p. 4) and needs journalists willing to shape a story in a forward-oriented direction (McIntyre, & Gyldensted, 2017, p. 22) – but especially Haagerup demarcates the constructive approach by limiting its core functions to "offering inspiration, presenting solutions and giving suggestions" without calling on the audience to take action (ibid.).

The idea of public journalism originated in the US as a consequence for criticism on journalists allegedly moving too close to politics, disregarding their audience – "the very people they claimed to be working for" (Bro, 2018, p. 7). The approach, which also spread to other countries including Denmark, has over time also been called civic journalism, participatory journalism or democratic journalism (McIntyre, 2015, p. 10) – an indicator for the lack of its conceptual clarity, which is also one of the main points of criticism on constructive journalism. The founding fathers justified their hesitation to come up with a concrete definition for the simple reason that they are still "inventing it" and that a clear conceptualization might get in the way of further experimentation. However, this reluctance led to supporters evolving many different interpretations of the approach so that its core functions became blurred and according to Bro (2018) "critics of the movement started associating public journalism with whatever they considered wrong with journalism" (8).

## 2.4 Constructive Journalism in the German Media

In addition to the remarks in the introduction, this chapter gives an overview of projects, initiatives or start-ups based on the constructive approach that emerged in the German media landscape over the last years.

### 2.4.1 Journalistic Start-Ups: *Perspective Daily* and *Kater Demos*

*Perspective Daily* is an online-platform that in spring of 2016 managed to generate a lot of public attention through famous proponents (like actress Nora Tschirner, TV-host Klaas Heufer-Umlauf and ex-football-player Mehmet Scholl). In talk shows, they promoted *Perspective Daily*'s approach, spread its take on constructive journalism and recruited supporters for the platform's crowdfunding-campaign. As of June 2018, *Perspective Daily* has 13,000 paying members and publishes only one article a day on its website. Regarding content, *Perspective Daily* does not divide its texts into the classical departments, but instead focuses on "peace and war", "climate", "food", "drugs" and "environment". On perspective-daily.de, the founders Maren Urner, Han Lageslag (both neuro-scientists) and Bernhard Eickenberg (a chemist) discuss their understanding of constructive journalism, which is based on six fundamental characteristics: the integration of plans and visions for the future; the search for potential solutions (,which might be found in research institutes, other countries and cultures, or in the minds of single individuals); the perception that there are no universal solutions or one "simple recipe" for the great issues of mankind but many approaches and partial solutions that are evolving within society; the conviction that empirical studies should be the basis for any discussion; the importance to ask "why" and find out the origin of a problem; and the fact that societal challenges are temporary and changeable situations ("Über uns", n.d.).

The founders emphasize the significance of positive psychology in journalism and potential consequences negative reporting can have on the consumer's psyche. Moreover, they underline their dedication to journalistic standards and its core

functions. In the past, *Perspective Daily* has been criticised for its sound being too academic, which might be due to the founder's scientific background (Wolff, 2017).

Democracy, labour, media or surveillance – each topic on 136 pages: The political magazine *Kater Demos*, financed via crowdfunding and published every six months, creates monothematic issues and in-depth examinations of political and societal areas. The young journalists around founder and editor-in-chief Alexander Sängerlaub want to create a counterbalance to the daily news, which, to their minds, solely deal with "deviations from the norm like crises, catastrophes and resignations" ("Utopie", n.d., transl.).

*Kater Demos* doubts that everyday news consumption leads to more than just a superficial understanding of what is happening in the world and, therefore, made it their task "to put a single information into bigger coherences, in an interdisciplinary manner and by proposing possible solutions" (ibid., transl.). Especially this last aspect results from *Kater Demos*'s self-concept as an "utopian" publication. Based in Berlin and Cologne, *Kater Demos* describes itself as NGO, that entirely renounces ad revenues.

## 2.4.2 Regional Newspapers: *Sächsische Zeitung* and *Westfalenpost*

In November 2016, the regional newspaper *Sächsische Zeitung*, based in Dresden, started to mark some of its articles as "good to know". The inherent label (the sketch of a smiley face in between two frustrated-looking faces) from then on indicated that these stories have been written to "inspire and motivate" (Reinhard, 2016, transl.). "Gut zu wissen" is considered a measure against the general disenchantment with politics and the media (Gerlach, 2018). The rubric is based on Ulrik Haagerup's ideas which have been dealt with by the editorial staff. The stories, for example, focus on normal citizens, who might once found themselves in a perceived hopeless situation but managed to find their way out by proactively searching for a solution. Or, on a more political level, reporters investigated what lead to a small municipality giving the then flourishing right-wing party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) the lowest share of the vote of all municipalities in Saxony.

According to *Sächsische Zeitung*, an analysis of the readerships' reading behaviour, which was conducted from November 2016 until February 2017, showed that the constructive texts were more popular than other articles (Meier, 2018, p. 9).

The editorial goal is to offer stories that are closer to the reader's reality of life instead of concentrating on what is going wrong in the world.

Making the readers, their wishes, fears and improvement proposals for the environment they live in into the central subject matter of reporting is an approach the *Westfalenpost* (*WP*) chose.

In the course of the project "Was braucht Hagen?", the *WP* questioned in 2015 and 2016 citizens of the city the newspaper is (among others) based in, in which areas of public life Hagen can and should be changed, and how this change could be pursued. The result: About 400 people submitted qualitative input that served as foundation for further coverage and, moreover, as leverage on local politicians. The *Westfalenpost* then organized town hall meetings to create space for public discourse and continued to cover further developments.

## 2.4.3 Nationwide News Media

Concomitant with the emergence of constructive journalistic start-ups or the initiatives of regional newspapers like *Sächsische Zeitung* and *Westfalenpost*, the nationwide print- and online media started to experiment with constructive formats as well.

For a considerable time, the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*, the Berlin-based newspaper *taz* and the magazines *Brand eins* and *chrismon* are regarded as "constructive" – although most of these publications never formulated their attachment to the principles of the approach (Pranz, & Sauer, 2017, p. 102). In 2015, *Spiegel Online* then editor-in-chief Florian Harms announced to publish more articles "that go further" and increase the number of texts that "foster hope, show a way out and illuminate much-discussed topics from different perspectives" (Harms 2015, transl.). Consequently, *Spiegel Online* started the column "Früher war alles schlechter", in which the authors on a weekly basis support the thesis that there are, in contrary to the subjective perception, actually many positive developments when it comes to, for

example, world hunger, peace, and education. Since November 2017, Michaela Haas, freelance journalist and member of the Solutions Journalism Network, writes a column for the *SZ-Magazin*, in which she describes unconventional and inventive solutions like "How scientists try to reanimate extinct animals" (Haas, 2018, transl.) or "How 3D-zebra crossings may keep drivers from speeding" (Haas, 2018a, transl.). Two constructive projects that resemble "Was braucht Hagen?" are the Democracy Lab, initiated by *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, and Z2X, which is organised by *Zeit Online*. The Democracy Lab has been created as a "discourse-experiment" and a way to find out what is on people's minds a few months prior to the general election 2017 ("Besser mitreden im Democracy Lab", n.d.). In different cities in Germany, editors, readers and experts started a conversation and tried to work up approaches to political issues. The annual Z2X-festival centers around the question "How do we want to love, live and work?" – and over the course of a weekend 800 people try to find answers (Krex, A. et al., 2017).

## 2.5 Criticism

Rudolf Augstein, founder and longstanding publisher of the significant news magazine *Der Spiegel* formulated the following guiding principle for his employees and succeeding generations of journalists in Germany decades ago: "Sagen, was ist" can be paraphrased as "Accurately portraying what is happening" and is often referenced in various critical texts and statement on constructive journalism. Constructive journalists are reproached for reinterpreting Augstein's motto as "Sagen, wie man es gerne hätte" (in English: "Portraying how they want it to be") and influencing the audience by spreading one certain variant of a story. A method that could be very dangerous in times of decreasing trust in the media and "lying press"-accusations (Winterbauer, 2017).

Sebastian Pranz and Christian Sauer (2017) who published a paper on the pedagogical component of the approach, go as far as to describe journalism that focuses on the "negative" like accidents, wars, violence, political crises, bad

decisions and slovenliness as self-cleaning power of democracy and foundation for societal discourse (p. 105).

In 1948, political scientist Harold Dwight Lasswell identified one of the functions of the communication process in society as "surveillance of the environment" and "disclosing threats and opportunities affecting the value position of the community [...]" (p. 228).

A constructive viewpoint leads, in author Kathrin Hartmann's opinion, to a journalism that is affirmative and misses to reflect on where change is really necessary. In the worst case, it hampers political involvement – which would be the oppositional development of what proponents of constructive journalism, especially those who support Cathrine Gyldensted's approach, want to achieve. Hartmann adds that an "extreme-pragmatism", which tries to find solutions for every kind of social problem, could result in an overall apolitical attitude within the profession (Sauer, 2017a, pos. 457-471). Heribert Prantl, member of the main editorial office of *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, claims in an article, published in 2017, that the constructive approach means a retraining of journalists into "wellness-coaches" (Prantl, 2017, transl.). Other colleagues polemically remark that constructive journalism tries to "incapacitate" investigative reporting (through wasting resources like working hours, which could be used on muckracking) (Pranz, & Sauer, 2017, pp. 104-105) and transform it into "North-Korean sugarcoating-journalism" (Fidler, 2014, transl.).

And what if the editorial deadline approaches and there have been no positive or solution-oriented news to even up the bad?, Ursula Ott (2017) wonders in her essay "Die Katastrophe wegatmen?". She warns journalists against compulsively publishing constructive texts, especially when pressured for time because it could result in an increased temptation to cover the "forward-looking", "future-oriented" press releases of NGOs, lobbyists or other associations with hidden self-interests (p. 291). Particularly in news agencies or newsrooms, where journalists work in a hectic environment and often have to instantly react on new developments, constructive journalism of high quality is regarded as rather unimaginable (Pranz, & Sauer, 2017, pp. 105-106).

Moreover, there are voices which question the whole concept of constructive journalism – and justify their criticism by claiming that good journalism already entails constructive components. "Journalists naturally make bigger coherences communicable by reducing complexity, constructing actualities and often creating societal realities" – which makes journalistic storytelling a constructive profession (Pranz, & Sauer, 2017, p. 100, transl.). Reporters should always bear solutions, peace and hope in mind – an explicit label for this mentality is therefore simply not necessary (Meier, 2018, p. 8; Ott, 2017, p. 288).

Stefan Winterbauer (2017) remarks in an article on *meedia.de* that the start-up *Perspective Daily,* which initially got a lot of medial attention does not differ from other "normal" news media in its topical focus on science and sustainability.

Other practitioners insinuate that constructive journalism might easily drift off into the field of pedagogy. Journalists presenting solutions for making the world a better place might come across as patronizing or in a know-it-all manner "forcing the audience to go to school" (Pranz, & Sauer, 2017, p. 114, transl.).

Bro (2018) criticises that it is "somewhat unclear" what constructive journalism really implies. One reason he adduces is the fact that many different persons and organizations worldwide have agreed on changing journalism in the direction of a more solution-oriented approach but without defining one single identity of constructive journalism or naming an authority "for deciding what the concept entails" (p. 5): "But the elusiveness might [...] be the most problematic aspect of this movement, since the history of journalism has several examples of how some movements gain popularity for a few years […], only to wither away thereafter", he warns (ibid.). This "lack of conceptual clarity" makes the approach on the one hand an easy target for critics, who can "caricature and dismiss" the practice, on the other hand leave supporters "puzzled" because of potential contradictions (Mast, Coesemans, & Temmerman, 2018, p. 4). Pranz and Sauer (2017), too, perceive this conceptual ambiguity as a weakness which can lead to news media instrumentalizing constructive journalism as fig-leaf for campaign-journalism (pp. 103-104).

# 3 Methodology

The following subchapters address the method "expert interview" and illuminate what characterizes an expert, which conversational partners were chosen for the purpose of this study, how the guideline-based interview was developed and how the researcher proceeded in terms of the evaluation.

## 3.1 Definition of an Expert and Selection of the Interviewees

According to Bogner, Littig, & Menz (2014) experts generally possess three sorts of knowledge that are relevant for a study. The **technical knowledge** contains dates, facts and other information the experts have privileged access to. The technical knowledge is assumed to be objective (pp. 17-18). But – since the interviewee might be mistaken on exacts numbers or statistics – expert interviews offer more reliable insights when it comes to **knowledge on processes** and **knowledge on interpretation**, which are more subjective and based on personal experiences (p. 18). Knowledge on processes comprises insights in courses of actions, interactions or certain events the person questioned was involved in. It is bound to a single place and a single individual's perception. Knowledge on interpretation, too, stems from a highly subjective perspective and, additionally, has a normative alignment because it entails aims, evaluations or proposals for improvement. Although the collected data for knowledge on interpretation is subjective, it does not mean it is individual. Experts expressing similar views add another "collective dimension" to the findings and make them more distinct (p. 19). Which statements belong to which sort of knowledge (is either a "fact", an "experience" or an "interpretation") has to be allocated by the researcher (p. 20).

Experts have knowledge, that is gained from professional practice and might impact future decisions of people in a similar field (p. 13). "Expert knowledge […] is so important because of its social efficacy" (ibid.) or according to Hitzler et al. (1994) experts "possess an institutionalized competence to construct reality" (Hitzler,

Honer, & Maeder, 1994, as cited in Bogner, Littig, & Menz, 2014, p. 13, transl.).
Since they can provide practical inside information, experts represent a larger group
of people. They are normally easier to persuade to participate in a study because they
agree on the social significance of the research (Bogner, & Menz, 2005, p. 8).

The experts selected for the purpose of this study are all practitioners, who have
made experiences with constructive journalism in several different print and online
media.

They are freelance journalists, who give seminars on constructive storytelling or
publish columns, founded journalistic start-ups, have come up with constructive
initiatives at their regional newspaper, work at magazines that are considered best
practice or try to implement constructive reporting at a wide-coverage news website.
The following table gives an overview of the ten experts, their current position and
the date they were interviewed.

|  | Name | Position | Date of the Interview |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Oliver Reinhard | Editor-in-chief (Feuilleton) at *Sächsische Zeitung*, Initiator of "Gut zu wissen" | 16.05.2018, 1 pm |
| 2 | Michaela Haas | Freelance Journalist, member of the Solutions Journalism Network, author of the *SZ-Magazin* column "Lösung für alles" | 18.05.2018, 6 pm via Skype |
| 3 | Alexander Sängerlaub | Founder of *Kater Demos* | 22.05.2018, 4 pm |
| 4 | Christian Sauer | Freelance Journalist, former editor-in-chief of *chrismon* | 23.05.2018, 10 pm |
| 5 | Jost Lübben | Editor-in-chief of *Westfalenpost*, Initiator of the project "Was braucht Hagen?" | 23.05.2018, 1 pm |
| 6 | Merle Bornemann | Editor at *Schleswig Holsteinischer Zeitungsverlag* | 24.05.2018, 2 pm |
| 7 | Michael Gleich | Freelance Journalist, for example *Geo, stern, Die Zeit* | 25.05.2018, 9 pm |
| 8 | Anja Willner | Editor-in-chief (Politik, Panorama) of | 25.05.2018, 1 pm |

| | | _Focus Online_ | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 9 | Gabriele Fischer | Editor-in-chief of _Brand eins_ | 29.05.2018, 3 pm |
| 10 | Dirk Walbrühl | Author at _Perspective Daily_ | 30.05.2018, 11 am |

## 3.2 Categorization and Composition of the Interview

The type of expert interview chosen for this thesis focuses on the expert's knowledge on interpretations which is, as mentioned above, centered around subjective perspectives on routines or maxims for decision-making (Bogner, Littig, & Menz, 2014, p. 25). Bogner, Littig, & Menz (2014) classify this variant as theory-generating expert interview – and therefore a suitable origin for the development of theories (p. 75). Contrary to systematized expert interviews, that are conducted to get general information on a topic, the guideline-based questions for theory-generating expert interviews do not have to be posed identically every time but can be varied according to, for example, the professional function of the interviewee (p. 28). In order to compare statements, it is sufficient to ask with reference to the research-relevant issues (ibid.). "Expert interviews are about creating a conversational atmosphere, which encourages interviewees to depictions that let them develop […] evaluations – with reference to certain topics that are connected to the research question" (p. 32, transl.).

It is important to state that questions asked in the interview can differ from the pre-formulated research questions since the latter have been developed in regard of theoretical assumptions and interview questions are aimed at the practical knowledge and experiences of the expert (pp. 33-34).

All interviews were conducted via telephone or Skype between the 16th and 30th of May, 2018. The ten conversations which lasted from 20 to 50 minutes were recorded and fully transcribed (except for a few off-topic or redundant remarks that have been respectively marked). The transcriptions are attached to this thesis. All quotations in the findings-chapter have been translated from German into English.

## 3.3 Evaluation

By adopting a theory-generating evaluation the researcher's goal is to find out which implicit norms and acting orientations can be extracted from the expert's statements (Bogner, Littig, & Menz, 2014, p. 76). In the course of the evaluation, a thorough analysis of the transcriptions should lead to the identification of a certain structure, which might be manifested in shared principles, rules and values of the experts (p. 76). This method is called "Grounded Theory", which is an inductive approach and means the development of general assertions based on single findings (p. 77).

By comparing the interviews, the researcher needs to ascertain statements with which common pattern of interpretations can be reconstructed (p. 78). Since the experts represent one particular group of people (in this study's case constructive journalists) and the interviews have been conducted by following one certain guideline, comparability is assured and makes similar statements in thematically relevant passages very likely (p.78).

On basis of the research questions (1.2), each interview contains eight major topics which – after reading the transcribed responses closely – can be divided into three sub-categories. These sub-categories are stances and experiences many experts share and help structure the findings-chapter. Passages referring to the following topics and sub-categories are marked accordingly for further comparison (see attachments).

1. **Definition for constructive journalism and journalistic work ethic**

   1.1.  Reference to a particular school of thought

   1.2.  Work routines

   1.3.  Differentiation from similar forms of journalism

2. **Constructive journalism's feasibility in editorial departments on a daily basis**

   2.1.  Questioning the norm

   2.2.  Starting from scratch

   2.3.  Implementing a person responsible for constructive journalism

**3. Constructive journalism and its recipients**

    3.1.    The reader's feedback

    3.2.    Fostering the dialogue

    3.3.    The reader's perspective


**4. Topical focus**

    4.1.    Topics that are easy/difficult to report on constructively

    4.2.    When constructive reporting is inappropriate

    4.3.    Basing topics more on what the readers demand


**5. Formats**

    5.1.    Advantages and disadvantages of the column

    5.2.    Constructive journalism needs space

    5.3.    Events


**6. Journalistic self-conception**

    6.1.    More attitude/responsibility

    6.2.    Change of perspective

    6.3.    Objectivity as an illusion


**7. Dealing with criticism**

    7.1.    Constructive journalism and wasting resources

    7.2.    Constructive journalism and pedagogy

    7.3.    Constructive journalism and activism


**8. Expectations on constructive journalism**

    8.1.    Gaining significance

    8.2.    Winning back the reader's trust

    8.3.    Portraying reality more accurately

In a next step, passages throughout all interviews that are thematically equal and contain similar interpretations, experiences or principles, are systematized, bundled and interpreted by the researcher.

The evaluation's outcome should be the reconstruction of a "bigger picture", which is based, among others, on the expert's depiction of processes, actions and decisions (p. 80).

## 3.4 Limits of the Chosen Method

Kassner and Wassermann (2005) remarked that experts might not tell the "whole truth" and researchers had to be aware of this possibility (p. 91). Nevertheless, there is nothing the interviewer can do about a lying or euphemizing expert. Regarding this particular study, a content analysis on the outlet's journalistic work might have been helpful to confront the experts with their media's actual implementation of constructive journalism.

Another point of general criticism of the chosen method is its somewhat unclear concept. Since there are no determined rules for structure, conduction, evaluation and interpretation of the conversation – "it is predestined for a proliferation of approaches" (Bogner, & Menz, 2005a, p. 34, transl.). The construct of an expert is, as well, questionable because the status "expert" is not a personal ability but an attribution by the person conducting the study (p. 11).

# 4 Findings

The "collective dimension" of each interview – regarding the above mentioned categories – is what the following pages are centered on. This chapter is divided into seven subchapters in which the experts' statements are quoted or paraphrased and eventually discussed.

## 4.1 Definition for Constructive Journalism and Journalistic Work Ethic

Although constructive journalism does not – according to Haagerup and Gyldensted – necessarily mean the inclusion of a palpable solution into a story, the majority of experts name "finding and illustrating solutions" an essentiality of constructive journalism (Sängerlaub, p. 1; Willner, p. 1; Sauer, p. 1; Walbrühl, p. 1; Fischer, p. 1; Gleich, p. 1; Reinhard, p. 1). To them, the approach entails "going beyond the scope of a problem-analysis" (Sängerlaub, p. 1), showing a societally relevant problem in all its facets, including a solutions (Willner, p. 1), opening up public debates by presenting solutions (Sauer, p. 1), taking a societally relevant problem as a starting point to then focus the research on finding a solution (Gleich, p. 1) or trying to compare how other municipalities or even countries dealt with the same problem (Reinhard, p. 1). Reinhard, Willner and Sauer all referred to Haagerup's claim for journalists to always ask "What now?", which leads to the question to what extent experts named a particular school of thought in the interview.

### 4.1.1 Reference to a Particular School of Thought

Michaela Haas is the only expert who explicitly states that she fully adopts Ulrik Haagerup's definition of constructive journalism (p. 1) – Willner (p. 4), Reinhard (p. 1) and Sauer (p. 1; pp. 5-6) mention, as stated above, the importance of posing the "What now?"-question (by Haagerup) in addition to the common W-questions. Lübben says, he agrees with most of what the Dane writes in his book but finds that "everyone has to develop their own philosophy" (p. 1) of constructive journalism.

Walbrühl even emphasizes that there are many different definitions of constructive journalism and the editorial staff of *Perspective Daily* has one "that works for them" (p. 1). None of the interviewees refer to Cathrine Gyldensted and/or her concept of adding positive psychology into reporting but there are distinct stances on activating recipients (an aspect Gyldensted supports), which will be further discussed in 4.3.

## 4.1.2 Constructive Routines

Merle Bornemann wants editorial offices to bury the guiding principle "only bad news are good news" because it results in valuable stories not being covered "for the simple reason that – for once – something worked out" (p. 1). In order to work constructively journalists had to step out of their own universes and "take a look at other cities, regions or even countries" (p. 1). All of the experts agree that constructive journalism requires additional effort when it comes to research as well as high demands on oneself and one's journalistic standards. For Sauer, constructive journalism means "going a step further" (p. 7) and significantly expanding the research and examination of a topic (p. 6). Bornemann, too, emphasizes that, for example, meeting protagonists takes a more intense preparation because the journalist has to know beforehand what the "constructive spin" might look like (p. 4). Moreover, authors have to be willing to invest more time in the search of a conversational partner since they might not be the most obvious. Sauer calls it the "quest for a positive derivation" and "thinking outside the informal box" (pp. 3-4): "When I have to cover the high indebtedness of German municipalities, I will be looking for a city with a balanced budget and ask the administration what it does differently. Which structures it has, which competences, which methods?". Gleich adds that if he does not find a "positive derivation" in Germany, he then directs his perspective on foreign countries (pp. 3-4). He also advises to consult foundations, NGOs or social entrepreneurs and ask them for examples of best practice internationally (pp. 3-4). Haas stresses that solution-oriented reporting requires persistence and the journalist's disposition to observe a development for the longer term. "Many, especially underprivileged, countries lament over reporters only flying in when there's a disaster happening. But solution-oriented journalism is about long-term-coverage and building relationships based on trust with the people we are

reporting on" (p. 5). There is a consensus among the experts that constructive journalism has to always meet the fundamental standards of balance and accuracy or even exceed them: "We dig deeper, we go into it more further" (Reinhard, p. 8). Haas argues that rigorous research is the starting point of every column and that she proceeded to link scientific studies in her texts and thinks about listing references at the bottom (pp. 4-5). Lübben also promotes to make the *Westfalenpost*'s journalistic requirements transparent and focuses on using many different sources: "We have to make clear that every issue entails diverse positions and that we are not part of the system." Reinhard, as well, emphasizes that there must not be onesidedness or a "presentation of facts compliant to our sentiments" (p. 7). Sängerlaub states that discussing solutions necessitates an all the more critical attitude "because I have to know whether an idea could prove successful" (p. 5). Gleich warns that dealing with organisations or human beings that dedicated themselves to implementing solutions might quickly evoke the reporter's sympathy. "Meaning well does not necessarily mean doing well", he says and stresses the importance of an independent and critical view.

### 4.1.3 Differentiation from Traditional and Similar Forms of Journalism

In what way constructive journalism differs from traditional journalism is treated by Sauer and Gleich, who agree that constructive journalism basically is an inseparable part of quality journalism. "But this facet of high-quality journalism – the presentation of solutions – has been faded into obscurity", Gleich remarks. "This is the only reason we even talk about constructive journalism: Economic pressure has led to an overemphasis of the negative, the dramatic, the misfortune, the alarming" (p. 4). For Sauer, constructive journalism entails showing the world with all its deficiencies but inclusive of developments "that we are able to find" (p. 1).

Gleich (p. 4) and Haas (p. 7) even go so far as to categorize constructive journalism as a form of investigative reporting – directed at solutions.

Many experts vented their discontent with news outlets supposedly confusing constructive with positive journalism. Walbrühl (p. 2) accused these outlets of willingly misunderstanding the approach to improve their reputations and pretending to be progressive. Once an article deals with an isolated case instead of a societally

relevant issue, it is "positive news" and "we are blurring the definition by considering it constructive", Gleich (pp. 2-3) says. In Willner's opinion, "good news" are "a nice relief" to mix up the composition of the website as long as they are not labeled "constructive" (p. 3). Sängerlaub describes positive journalism as sugarcoating which has nothing to do with what constructive journalism entails, namely "a broadening of relevant content" (p. 1).

## 4.2 Constructive Journalism's Feasibility on a Daily Basis

Constructive journalism is not a complex concept: The approach is based on journalistic core functions and predominantly requires, according to what has been stated above, an increased effort in research. That again needs time. So the question arises, how constructive journalism is implementable in editorial offices that publish on a daily basis. Since many of the experts are freelancers or work for monthly magazines, their statements are based on assumptions.

### 4.2.1 Questioning the Norm

Implementing a new journalistic approach means breaking out of old habits, Lübben says, "but after 30 years of experience I have realized that critical self-reflection is not easy for many of us" (p. 8). For Lübben, this lies in the nature of his profession. "Journalists rather want to tell others what they've done right or wrong" (p. 8). He, as editor-in-chief, regards it as his duty to convey the "constructive thought" to his colleagues (p. 5). Not by distributing Haagerup's book, but by changing the setting. He relies on the power of group dynamics and regularly releases his contributors from every day duty to develop new formats in the so-called "Zukunftslabor" (p. 4). Oliver Reinhard from *Sächsische Zeitung* also mentions "constructive" workshops led by the editor-in-chief to implement the approach in a playful manner. Merle Bornemann, who works at a regional newspaper in northern Germany, thinks that an announcement from the "executive floor" might be necessary to strengthen constructive journalism within her editorial department. Thus far, constructive approaches by members of the team were limited to individual initiatives (p. 1).

To Willner's mind, it is a learning process for everyone to break out of "the old understanding of what news are" (pp. 1-2) and that her editorial department at *Focus Online* just now came to realize that authors who research stories with a constructive spin have to be given more space (p. 4). Sauer thinks that it is essential to change the structure of conferences to implement constructive thinking: "We have to regularly ask ourselves whether the upcoming issue is constructive enough." In order to improve procedures, constructive journalism should be a fixed item on the agenda (p. 3).

## 4.2.2 Starting from Scratch

Adjusting the course of a conference might be one possibility to slowly integrate the approach into editorial routines. Furthermore, Willner and Bornemann promote additional measures – for example in the form of short formats. The box next to articles, which is normally used for "extra facts, figures or dates", could be suitable to discuss "another perspective", Bornemann proposes. "Which may come in the shape of a quick interview with the mayor of a city that has solved a particular problem" (p. 2). Or as supplementary space for background information on how certain data has been gathered – "for example, in the field of crime coverage, there is a contradiction between the actual numbers and the subjective feeling of security" (Willner, p. 1) Prominently placed boxes could illuminate this issue. Sauer emphasizes that it is not too time-consuming to ask a conversational partner "who we have on the phone anyway: 'And what next?'" (p. 2).

Another method to change editorial structures is to install a commissioner for constructive journalism: "This person is allowed to intervene, join in and annoy everyone by reminding them of searching for the constructive spin" (Sauer, p. 3). The commissioner, according to Sauer, should also be responsible for the final approval of the whole article including pictures. In the initial stage, Gleich, too, finds it important to exempt a member of the staff from their duties to fully dedicate themselves to the implementation of constructive journalism (p. 2) – and to incorporating the "new way of thinking" because "it should always be about convincing everyone to go along with it" (p. 2).

## 4.3 Constructive Journalism and its Recipients

Since constructive journalism has evolved on the basis of the media's negativity bias and its impact on recipients, it can be presumed that the reader occupies a central role in a constructive journalist's everyday work. The following subchapters illuminate this aspect.

### 4.3.1 The Reader's Feedback and Fostering the Dialogue

Feedback on constructive articles usually is more detailed and profound, Michaela Haas and Jost Lübben say. The editor-in-chief of Westfalenpost refers to over 400 responses the newspaper received after asking its readers what bothers them about Hagen and how the city could become worthier to live in (p. 2). Michaela Haas describes reactions to her column as "enthusiastic" in comparison to emails and letters she received concerning non-constructive articles. Moreover, readers regularly submit topic-proposals for further columns, that "partially are very good" (p. 3), Haas says. Nevertheless, most of her non-constructive articles have more clicks – "but", she adds, "users more often read the column until the end and share them on Facebook over a longer period of time." According to Haas, her column has a more extensive "lifespan" because the topics are mainly timeless (p. 4).

For Lübben, taking reader's feedback seriously is a crucial part of a constructive self-conception (p. 5). Willner has the feeling that readers appreciate the effort to tell a story to its full extent (p. 2) and Reinhard says that a large-scale reader-survey conducted by *Sächsische Zeitung* revealed that more constructive texts lead to a higher approval rate of the newspaper (p. 5).

*Perspective Daily*, as well, asked their readers "how trustworthy they find us or whether they think our style of writing could be more nonchalant every now and then" (Walbrühl, p. 8). Now the authors have the courage to sound a little less "bone dry". Sauer emphasizes the importance, especially for regional newspapers, to be close to its audience: "Because readers, when asked, often say: 'Actually I do not really want to read about this and that, you should rather tell me…'" (p. 7). Lübben, too, is convinced that it is a regional newspaper's duty and (fundamental for

fostering constructive journalism) to exactly know who its "clients" are – their demographic and social structure, as well as what is on their minds (p. 10).

## 4.3.2 The Reader's Perspective

A core value of constructive journalism is to take the reader seriously, says Sauer. This contains being highly aware of the media's negativity bias and its repercussions on the recipient (Sauer, p. 5; Willner, p. 2; Bornemann, pp. 2-3).

Walbrühl agrees by saying that a journalist should always consider the effect their articles might have on the reader – and make sure it is interesting enough and may entice the recipient to "think further" (p. 2). In Sängerlaub's opinion, journalists today have to keep in mind that the world has become more complex and that this development impacts the audience: "We need a journalism that takes things slower and tries to calmly pin down world affairs" (p. 5). Fischer, Lübben and Reinhard promote adjusting coverage to the readers' reality of life. *Brand eins* – a magazine that accompanied the nation's transition from an industrial to a knowledge-based society – has been focusing for years on the question which new opportunities have arisen for people who are no longer qualified in their professional field or companies that due to this development need to explore new business areas (Fischer, p. 1). *Brand eins* helps readers "to cope with the unfamiliar situation" (pp. 1-2).

This "mission" has to be preceded by the awareness that readers have worries and fears and want to be given a voice (Lübben, p. 6). "Thus, we ask ourselves on a weekly basis: Do we depict what our readers deal with?" (Lübben, p. 10). Reinhard's approach is to regularly portray "ordinary" people "who have their problems but somehow found a solution for themselves and say: 'I don't complain, I try to improve my situation'". As an example he instances inhabitants of economically underdeveloped regions who instead of moving to a bigger city try to increase the quality of life by organizing cultural festivals (pp. 3-4).

## 4.4 Topics and Formats

"[…] education, health, inclusion, integration, demographic change, climate change, environment – when there are problems, there are people or organisations somewhere working for solutions. It is as easy as that", Michael Gleich says (p. 4). Sauer agrees and refers to his workshops with authors from different sectors and with diverse thematic backgrounds: "I have never experienced that anyone had no idea for a constructive approach" (p. 2) He particularly points out departments like "technology" and "science", fields on which innovation and progress are pivotal (p. 2). Walbrühl finds "highly emotional" topics like death rather problematic to write constructively about because the prospects for improvement are mostly rather limited. "The same goes for 'war' for example – I think because the overall outlook is sobering, either." (Walbrühl, p. 3) Sauer emphasizes that there are always (tragic) instances where compulsively looking for a constructive perspective is simply inappropriate: "This, as well, is a characteristic of constructive journalism: Not overdoing it" (p. 6). *Westfalenpost*'s reader-oriented projects and Michaela Haas's column that subsists on readers' topic proposals are examples for basing content on what the audience wants. In Bornemann's opinion, newspapers need to prioritize the dialogue with their readers and pick up what is talked about on town square, she says (p. 4). Gleich wonders, whether journalists are too self-referential and trapped in a bubble. He fears that journalists too often have "reported past the reader's reality" (p. 5). An aspect that will be focused on in more depth in 4.7.

The experts agree on "the column" being a suitable format for initially implementing constructive journalism and a "tool for self-discipline" (Reinhard, p. 9). Especially in the beginning, the column can be a good concept to give constructive journalism a try and communicate to the reader that "we are changing and this is what it's called" (Gleich, p. 5). For Sauer, columns or labels are means to create commitment. He calls this format a "crutch", which can be "thrown away" when the editorial staff "has started to think and report constructively" without having to be reminded (Sauer, pp. 8-9; Gleich, p. 5). For the central aim should be to implement constructive journalism throughout the whole product: "To include a structurally

underexposed part of reality-depiction" – as Gleich phrases it (p. 5). Columns are a way to ghettoise constructive journalism and might imply to editors and readers that the approach is an "alien element" or "isolated case" (Gleich, p. 8; Reinhard pp. 9-10; Bornemann, p. 6). Constructive journalism should not become a tokenism to make up for the fact that "this week has been really dark" (Reinhard, pp. 9-10).

Since societal issues are mostly complex, solutions are complex as well – "and this complexity needs space", Gleich remarks (p. 4). As the most suitable formats he denotes "background-reports, reportages, interviews" and again emphasizes that news journalism normally can not meet the requirements of constructive journalism because it is not expected to "reveal structures" (Gleich, p. 4). For Bornemann, constructive journalism needs to be embedded in storytelling (p. 2) and Lübben highlights that the "optical editing" has become much more significant during the last years. He stresses the importance of graphics visualizing complex coherences can be visualized and "displayed on whole pages with one singular topical focus" (p. 2).

For Lübben and the *Westfalenpost* another aspect of constructive journalism is "audience engagement" – realised with debates between editors, politicians and readers (pp. 2-3) or workshops with citizens under 30 wanting to discuss how the region might get more attractive for young professionals (p. 3).

## 4.5 Journalistic Self-Conception

Journalists nowadays should have a higher sense of responsibility and be more concerned about how articles might affect the reader's mindset – is a thesis postulated by many experts. Sauer summons journalists to have more awareness of the consequences of their coverage (p. 8). Walbrühl mentions the Germanwings-catastrophe[2] and the subsequent "medial discussion on people with mental health issues where the worst stereotypes were reproduced for days on end"

---

[2]In March 2015, the Germanwings Flight 9525 from Barcelona to Düsseldorf crashed in the French Alps. 150 people were killed. The co-pilot, who has been treated for mental health issues, has caused the crash deliberately.

as "personal watershed", which led to his conclusion that the media had to be less sensationalist and alarmist and become more responsible (p. 1).

Haas says that she always tries to bear in mind and foresee what her words could cause and what impact she wants to achieve (p. 6). Sauer wants journalists to have a stronger, more displayed attitude, be less self-referential and give positive impulses (p. 8). Moreover, in that context, he wonders in that context whether what journalists understand by "professionalism" might be too limited (p. 8). Lübben stresses that "we are more than a vehicle" and that being a professional means the examination of oneself's attitude (pp. 7-8). To his mind, the traditional journalistic role and key functions of "observing and accompanying" a development is insufficient. For him "simply writing commentaries on an issue" is not enough – since it can not be considered an adequate contribution towards changing the situation (p. 7).

Gleich promotes the concept of "transparent subjectivity" since "objectivity is a myth […] and there is always a field of consternation and attachment" (pp. 6-7). To his mind, the reader needs to know from which perspective the author is looking on a topic – "subjectivity in journalism is not a problem but its concealment is" (pp. 6-7). Sängerlaub, as well, finds the "strange aspiration for over-objectivity" not compliable and wishes for journalists making their stances clearer.

## 4.6 Dealing with Criticism

Confronted with the reproach that constructive journalism wastes resources, which might better be invested in investigative reporting, most experts vehemently oppose by stressing the importance of both approaches (Sängerlaub, p. 6; Bornemann, p. 5; Fischer, p. 3; Gleich, p. 7; Haas, p. 7).

Sängerlaub says that today more than ever "we need editorial offices being as multifaceted as possible to make profound journalism" (p. 6).

In Gleich's opinion, constructive as well as investigative reporting is necessary to induce positive social change: "When there's mischief covered up, this is followed by a societal impulse to eradicate this mischief" – and, according to Gleich,

constructive reporting has a similar impact. Possible solutions brought to the surface might lead to some kind of investment into this solution (p. 7).

Michaela Haas points out that constructive journalism can even be a necessary continuation of investigative reporting and instances the #MeToo-debate[3]: "After covering up, for example, what Weinstein and Wedel did […], the question how we deal with this societal problem stays. What are we going to do about sexual harassment in the workplace? This is why, for me, both approaches go hand in hand" (p. 7).

Another point of criticism, mentioned in 2.5, is that constructive journalism might easily get pedagogical traits – which are reflected in journalists creating a societal target state, "portraying the world as they want it to be" or even dictating the audience how to behave.

Walbrühl thinks that this is an obvious attitude, journalists who start reporting constructively might automatically fall into. "It takes experience to get rid of it" (p. 7). Bornemann, however, finds that nowadays "Sagen, was ist" is not enough "because the society has so many problems". Journalism has to deliver more than depicting the actual state (p. 5). For Sängerlaub, constructive journalism is about illustrating a possibility space instead of demonstrating "this is how it should be" (p. 2). Reinhard remarks that Sächsische Zeitung is especially cautious when it comes to pedagogical or even paternalistic nuances in journalism. "The people of the former German Democratic Republic had to deal with media that were forced in line until 1989. Media which told them how to be a good socialist. […]. We know that they do not want to be lectured" (p. 6).

Asked about if and where the experts draw a line between journalism and activism, all appoint to journalistic core values and that the constructive approach naturally means keeping a high standard of quality. "I may be even more critical because I want to know whether an idea could prove successful", Sängerlaub remarks (p. 5).

---

[3] #MeToo is an international movement against sexual harassment and assault, that went viral on the internet in October 2017. Shortly after allegations of sexual misconduct against former film producer Harvey Weinstein became public, many female celebrities used social media to post about their experiences with sexual harassment and assault. Since January 2018, the above mentioned director Dieter Wedel has been accused of sexual misconduct by several actresses.

Sauer, as well, admonishes that a sceptical stance and meticulous fact-checking have to stay indispensable and Haas refers to the founders of Solutions Journalism Network who promote rigorous research and stress that in terms of approaching a topic, it should make no difference whether it is about a solution or about depicting a current state (pp. 4-5).

Fischer emphasizes the importance of always reminding the reader that the described solution is one of "maybe 50" (p. 2) and Bornemann compares herself with a referee, who does not try to join in the game but is responsible for ensuring that it is played by the rules and has the power to bring in 'instant replay' (pp. 3-4). In contrary to her colleague Lübben, editor-in-chief of *Westfalenpost*, she declines the idea of letting the newspaper ascend to becoming a central player. Sauer applauds *Westfalenpost* for this "certain kind of activism", that entails "higher commitment" (p. 4). Walbrühl takes the offensive by claiming that "traditional journalism" purposefully blames constructive journalism for being activist to demarcate itself and underline that it is unnecessary to overthink traditional journalism (p. 5).

## 4.7 Expectations on Constructive Journalism

"It is about the media gaining back significance. […] it is about the willingness to pay for information. To get people to dive into an article, although it will take ten minutes to read it. […]. And this is also a form of trust. I trust the medium that it tells the story in a way that arouses my interest and makes me willing to pay for it. […]. And I believe, this is where constructive journalism can be of help. Because when I put the newspaper or the magazine away, I will have a different feeling. Not the feeling of being informed, but a feeling of being enriched instead of overwhelmed by all the political processes stagnating. And maybe I have a different view on the world now. And I believe, this is how journalism could gain back significance" (Walbrühl 5).

Asked about the expectations and hopes he attaches to implementing constructive journalism, Jost Lübben has a similar answer. He compares journalism to the auto industry, on the ground that both sectors are confronted with the "future issue". He says that the auto industry as well as journalists are asking themselves at the moment: How can we still be indispensable when nowadays there are so many ways to be mobile or get access to information? "We […] as journalists have to create proposals for the people's need for information as well as participation, virtue and to be heard" (Lübben, pp. 8-9). This is why the Westfalenpost has condensed the idea

of constructive journalism to "supplying platforms for discussion, contributing to the development of the region and coining a modern *Heimatbegriff*" (p. 4). Traditional media is no longer the exclusive arbiter of information and by the time a newspaper is published, the world has already changed again. "But readers have a lot of questions when it comes to their personal and professional life and they need space and opportunities to meet politicians and discuss these questions. And we can bring them together." *Westfalenpost* tries to be on a par with its audience, the editor-in-chief says. Reinhard, too, takes up the stance that the constructive point of view entails focusing more on the reality of the readers' lives. Because people, in their microcosms, experience a lot of positive things – "and we have to reflect this as well."

Regional newspapers have to overcome their reactionary and dusty images, Lübben says – Bornemann stresses the importance of developing a unique characteristic to contrast strongly with the competition (pp. 2-3): "By conveying the notion to the audience that things are not as bad as everyone says and there are people giving thought to the future" (pp. 2-3). In his workshops, Gleich recognizes the journalists' hope that over the long term they can win a more loyal audience with constructive journalism (Gleich, p. 5).


In terms of online-traffic or subscriptions, none of the experts has evidence or high hopes that constructive journalism leads to an increase. Haas and Bornemann have noticed that their articles about celebrities, sex, crime and Donald Trump are clicked much more often (Bornemann, p. 4; Haas, p. 4), but, according to Haas, readers of her solution-oriented column are more likely to read the full text (p. 4).

In fact, the experts tend to stress that potentially improving sales figures or the number of hits on the website has never been an incentive for trying out constructive journalism.

Reinhard, for example, states that the editors at *Sächsische Zeitung* do not delude themselves when it comes to circulations. Instead "it is about affirming trust and having a good reader-newspaper-relationship" (Reinhard, p. 4). "The plan was to offer our readers a better journalism", Willner says (p. 8). And adds that the implementation of constructive journalism can be regarded as a positioning to the

supposed loss of trust in the media (p. 2). Many experts name this phenomenon a decisive factor for pursuing the approach, although, according Schemer et al. (2017), the overall trust in the media is actually increasing in Germany.

The *Sächsische Zeitung*, based in Dresden where the right-wing populist and xenophobic organisation PEGIDA originated and still is the most active in all of Germany, has dealt intensively with "lying press"-accusation over the course of the past years. The editors have come to the conclusion that the reader's reality of life has to be portrayed more accurately because "when we concentrate on the negative, we undermine the belief in the functioning of democratic structures and entities", Reinhard emphasizes (pp. 1-2). A newspaper without a single solution-oriented, forward-looking article "should not be published because this actually *is* "lying press". We are depicting a wrong image of reality" (Reinhard, p. 2).

Gleich approves this stance by saying that the "lying press"-accusations have let to an increased self-reflection in the sector and a call for credibility. "And constructive journalism is regarded as trust-building and an approaching to the audience's reality" (p. 5).

Sängerlaub criticises "traditional journalism" for not looking at the world in its entirety (p. 1). To Walbrühl's mind, journalism focuses too much on the past and has a blind spot regarding ideas or inventions that already exist in the present and might have potential "to positively impact mankind" in the future (Walbrühl, p. 7). But the traditional media's rationale is, according to Walbrühl: "We do not cover this topic because it has not asserted itself" (p. 7). Gleich agrees by pointing out that there "is incredible social progress, which is not reported on because it is slower and less spectacular" (p. 1). Sängerlaub, as well, promotes a journalism that "takes the time to be calm and collected" (p. 5) since the world has become more complex (p. 5). Fischer admonishes that everything is ceaselessly changing and consequently a journalism is needed, which, instead of pointing out the difficulties, describes the ways people can prosper (p. 1).

To sum up, the experts have quite similar expectations on constructive journalism. Especially the editors of regional newspapers emphasize the importance of gaining back significance and rely again on their core competencies, which are openly discussing the reader's concerns and depicting their reality of life more accurately.

Other experts criticise traditional journalism for ignoring developments that are too unspectacular to fulfil the criteria for news value – in times that demand more than ever for a considerate and prospective journalism.


# 5 Conclusion

A common critique of constructive journalism – its lack of conceptual clarity – is justified by the experts' statements. While some vaguely referenced Ulrik Haagerup's suggestion to add the "What now?"-question, others remarked that every editorial department needs to develop its own philosophy or find a definition "that works for them". This elusiveness, which Bro (2018) named the most problematic aspect of the approach, could lead to constructive journalism slowly vanishing into insignificance (like once public journalism) or getting instrumentalized as fig-leaf for campaign-journalism.

After all, the findings have illuminated that the experts essentially agree on two main characteristics of constructive journalism: On the one hand, there is the strong demarcation from positive journalism. All interviewees emphasize that the approach must under no circumstances be a reversion of the negativity bias into a positivity bias. Media offering positive news but labeling it "constructive" were severely criticised and, by some experts, accused of intentionally misunderstanding the approach in order to claim that they follow a progressive trend.

This attitude reflects a contradiction because the fact that there is no agreement on a single identity of constructive journalism even leads to the possibility of the concept being easily misused.

On the other hand, there is a consensus among the experts about constructive journalism being fundamented on the core values of quality journalism (– which to the minds of the interviewees already preempts a potential tendency to PR or campaign-journalism).

Integrated in these core values is the general notion that journalists consider themselves as detached observers, "limiting themselves to (merely) report on social reality and to intervene by no means" (Mast, Coesemans, & Temmerman, 2018, p.

3). The majority of the experts, and especially Jost Lübben, editor-in-chief of *Westfalenpost*, finds this concept outdated. He regards his newspaper as central player in the region which together with its readers takes practical measures against problems to gain back significance. Once again, constructive journalism's conceptual weakness is brought to the surface: What Lübben declares as "constructive" actually is public journalism as examined in 2.3.4.

In the literature on constructive journalism, no study can be found on regional newspapers trying to implement constructive journalism. Since this thesis showed that there are newspapers discovering the approach and – partially – interpreting it as a very proactive practice to gain back significance, further research in this field might be interesting.

Regarding activism, Lübben is, in comparison to the other experts, "most affectionate" to the idea of a more involved journalistic role – nonetheless, many see the necessity to blur the lines of what is defined as professionalism and argue in support of a journalistic role that is more than the "objective" observer.

Bornemann and Reinhard, the other two experts who are editors at regional newspapers, also name factors like "becoming important, unique and indispensable again" as basis for introducing constructive journalism. It seems like regional papers consider the approach as essential advancement, whereas nationwide news media like *Focus Online* view constructive journalism more as a variety and simply a broadening of the content.

Moreover, the expert interviews revealed that constructive journalism basically is "good and many-sided journalism" so that the question as to whether the approach needs an extra label is not far to seek.

The researcher believes that on the basis of this thesis it can be argued that constructive journalism combines in itself what traditional journalism contemporarily is said to lack.

But instead of lamenting over the current state of journalism, it might be more productive for editorial departments to support a "new and promising" approach – which potentially leads to other newspapers and magazines pressured to take action because they would otherwise miss a trend.

Aside from that, the experts stressed constructive journalism's proximity to investigative journalism and pointed out that both approaches even build a continuum. Since investigative journalism is regarded as prestigious and recipients are evidently more willing to pay for investigative stories – integrating this aspect into a central definition for constructive journalism might strengthen the reputation of the approach within the professional field.

# Works Cited

Besser mitreden im Democracy Lab (n.d.). *sueddeutsche.de*. Retrieved from http://gfx.sueddeutsche.de/apps/e442481/www/, [2018, May 26].

FAQ (n.d.). *Constructive Journalism Project*. Retrieved from https://www.constructivejournalism.org/faq/, [2018, April 11].

Mit Krisen auf Kriegsfuß (2017, April 13). *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, p. 28.

Über uns (n. d.). *Perspective Daily*. Retrieved from https://perspective-daily.de/ueber_uns#/about, [2018, April 4].

Utopie (n. d.). *Kater Demos*. Retrieved from http://katerdemos.de/utopie/, [2018, May 19].

**Associated Press** (2008). A New Model for News. Studying the Deep Structure of Young-Adult News Consumption.

**Baden, D.** (2015, March 27). Shock! Horror! Behind the Ethics and Evolution of the Bad News Business. *The Conversation*. Retrieved from http://theconversation.com/shock-horror-behind-the-ethics-and-evolution-of-the-bad-news-business-39211, [2018, April 7].

**Baumeister R. F. et al.** (2001). Bad Is Stronger Than Good. *Review of General Psychology* (5.4), 323-370.

**Becker, A.** (2018, February 23). Constructive-News-Vordenker Haagerup: Warum konstruktiver Journalismus die Medienindustrie retten kann . *meedia.de*. Retrieved from http://meedia.de/2018/02/23/constructive-news-vordenker-haagerup-warum-konstruktiver-journalismus-die-medienindustrie-retten-kann/ (meedia.de), [2018, February 27].

**Benesch, S.** (1998). The Rise of Solutions Journalism. *Columbia Journalism Review* (36.6), 36-39.

**Biswas, R., Riffe, D., & Zillmann, D.** (1994). Mood influence on the appeal of bad news. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* (71.3), 689-696.

**Bogner, A., & Menz, W.** (2005). Expertenwissen und Forschungspraxis: die modernisierungstheoretische und die methodische Debatte um die Experten. Zur Einführung in ein unübersichtliches Problemfeld. In Bogner, A., Littig, B., & Menz, W. (Eds.), *Das Experteninterview. Theorie, Methode, Anwendung* (pp. 7-30). Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

**Bogner, A., & Menz, W.** (2005a). Das theoriegenerierende Experteninterview. Erkenntnisinteresse, Wissensformen, Interaktion. In Bogner, A., Littig, B., & Menz, W. (Eds.), *Das Experteninterview. Theorie, Methode, Anwendung* (pp. 33-70). Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

**Bogner, A., Littig, B., & Menz, W.** (2014). *Interviews mit Experten. Eine praxisorientierte Einführung*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.

**Bro, P.** (2018). Constructive journalism: Proponents, precedents, and principles. *Journalism*, 1-16.

**Caple, H., & Bednarek, M.** (2013). Delving into the Discourse: Approaches to News Values in Journalism Studies and Beyond. *Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism*, 1-29.

**Cohen, B.** (1963). The press and foreign policy. Princeton: University Press.

**Curry, A., & Hammonds K. H.** (2014). The Power of Solutions Journalism. *Engaging News Project.* Retrieved from https://mediaengagement.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/ENP_SJN-report.pdf, [2018, April 7].

**Dagan Wood, S.** (2014, September 15): The positive future of journalism. [YouTube]. *Tedx Talk*. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zPy0xnymGR0, [2018, May 17].

**Di Lorenzo, G.** (2016, February 29). Unser Ruf steht auf dem Spiel. Zeit Online. Retrieved from https://www.zeit.de/kultur/2016-02/dresdner-rede-dresden-giovanni-di-lorenzo, [2018, April 15].

**Eilders, C.** (2016). Journalismus und Nachrichtenwert. In Löffelholz, M., & Rothenberger, L., *Handbuch Journalismustheorien* (pp. 419-430). Wiesbaden: Springer VS.

**Fidler, H.** (2014, January 26)**.** Wir zeichnen ein falsches Bild der Welt. *Der Standard.* Retrieved from https://derstandard.at/1389857918776/Wir-zeichnen-ein-falsches-Bild-von-der-Welt, [2018, April 17].

**Fredrickson, B.** (2009). *Positivity: Groundbreaking research reveals how to embrace the hidden strength of positive emotions, overcome negativity, and thrive*. New York, NY: Crown Publishers/Random House.

**Galician, M.-L., & Vestre, N. D.** (1987). Effects of "good news" and "bad news" on newscast image and community image. *Journalism Quarterly* (64.2), 399-525.

**Galtung, J., & Fischer, D.** (2013). *Johan Galtung – Pioneer of Peace Research*. Heidelberg: Springer VS.

**Galtung, J., & Ruge, M.** (1965). The Structure of Foreign News. *Journal of Peace Research* (2.1), 64-91.

**Gerbner, G.** (1998). Cultivation analysis: An overview. *Mass Communication & Society* (1.3-4), 175-194).

**Gerlach, A.** (2018, April 2). Neue Themenzugänge gegen den Auflagenschwund. Deutschlandfunk. *Deutschlandfunk*. Retrieved from https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/konstruktiver-journalismus-neue-themenzugaenge-gegen-den.2907.de.html?dram:article_id=414529, [2018, June 5].

**Gyldensted, C.** (2011). *Innovating news journalism through positive psychology*. Retrieved from https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1024&context=mapp_capstone, [2018, April 18]

**Gyldensted, C.** (2015). *From Mirrors to Movers. Five Elements of Positive Psychology in Constructive Journalism*. Lexington, KY: GGroup Publishing.

**Haagerup, U.** (2015). *Constructive News. Warum "bad news" die Medien zerstören und wie Journalisten mit einem völlig neuen Ansatz wieder Menschen berühren*. Salzburg: Oberauer.

**Haas, M.** (2018, March 23). Die Auferstehung der Ausgestorbenen. *SZ-Magazin*. Retrieved from https://sz-magazin.sueddeutsche.de/die-loesung-fuer-alles/die-auferstehung-der-ausgestorben en-85358, [2018, May 10].

**Haas, M.** (2018a, March 8). Lass dich täuschen. *SZ-Magazin*. Retrieved from https://sz-magazin.sueddeutsche.de/die-loesung-fuer-alles/lass-dich-taeuschen-85379, [2018, May 10].

**Hamilton, J.** (2014, July 10). Bingeing On Bad News Can Fuel Daily Stress. npr. org. Retrieved from https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2014/07/10/323355132/binging-on-bad-news-can-fuel-daily-stress?t=1530171565630, [2018, April 6].

**Hammonds**, K. H. (2016, December 2). Lab test: Solutions journalism beats brand X. *Solutions Journalism Network*. Retrieved from https://thewholestory.solutionsjournalism.org/lab-test-solutions-journalism-beats-brand-x-b9 d730108155, [2018, May 5].

**Hanitzsch, T.** (2007). Situating peace journalism in journalism studies: A critical appraisal. *Conflict & communication online* (6.2), 1-9.

**Harcup, T., & O'Neill, D.** (2017). What is news? *Journalism Studies* (18.12), 1470-1488.

**Harcup, T.** (2014). Compassion fatigue. In T. Harcup (Ed.), *A dictionary of journalism* (p. 62). Oxford: Oxford UP.

**Harms, F.** (2015, August 14). Artikel, die weitergehen. *Spiegel Online*. Retrieved from http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/gesellschaft/florian-harms-constructive-journalism-artikel-die-weitergehen-a-1048166.html, [2018, May 9].

**Hein, D.** (2015, September 10). Zuschauer wünschen sich mehr "Constructive News". *Horizont*. Retrieved from https://www.horizont.net/medien/nachrichten/RTL-Umfrage-Zuschauer-wuenschen-sich-me hr-Constructive-News--136308, [2018, May 16].

**Hitzler, R., Honer, A., & Maeder, C.** (Eds.) (1994). *Expertenwissen – Die institutionalisierte Kompetenz zur Konstruktion von Wirklichkeit*. Opladen: Westdeutscher.

**Huffington, A.** (2015, June 2). What's working: All the news that's fit to print. The Huffington Post. Retrieved from https://www.huffingtonpost.com/arianna-huffington/whats-working-all-the-news_b_6603924 .html?guccounter=1, [2018, May 13].

**Hünninger, A. H.** (2017, February 18). So satt von schlechten Nachrichten. *Zeit Online*. Retrieved from https://www.zeit.de/kultur/2017-02/bad-news-journalismus-schlechte-nachrichten-10nach8, [2018, April 14].

**Kassner, K., & Wassermann, P.** (2005). Nicht überall, wo Methode draufsteht, ist auch Methode drin. Zur Problematik der Fundierung von ExpertInneninterview. In Bogner, A., Littig, B., & Menz, W. (Eds.), *Das Experteninterview. Theorie, Methode, Anwendung* (pp. 95-112). Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

**Kinnick, K. N., Krugman, D. M., & Cameron, G. T.** (1996). Compassion fatigue: Communication and burnout toward social problems. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* (73.3), 687-707.

**Kleinnijenhuis, A., van Hoof, M.J., & Oegema, D.** (2006). Negative news and the sleeper effect of distrust. *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* (11.2), 86-104.

**Krex, A. et al.** (2017, September 4). Berliner Hipster, zieht nach Hamm. *Zeit Online.* Retrieved from https://www.zeit.de/campus/2017-09/z2x-festival-zehn-beste-projekte, [2018, May 27].

**Kuhlmann, C., Schumann, C., & Wolling J.** (2014). "Ich will davon nichts mehr sehen und hören!" Exploration des Phänomens Themenverdossenheit. *Medien & Kommunikationswissenschaft* (62.1), 5-24.

**Lasswell, H. D.** (1948). The structure and function of communication in society. In Bryson L. (Ed.), *The Communication of Ideas* (pp. 215-228). New York: MacMillan.

**Levine, G. F.** (1977). "Learned Helplessness" and the Evening News. *Journal of Communication* (27.4), 100-105.

**Lynch, J., & McGoldrick A.** (2005). *Peace journalism*. Stroud: Hawthorn. Press.

**Mast, J., Coesemans, R., & Temmerman, M.** (2018). Constructive journalism: Concepts, practices, and discourses. *Journalism*, 1-12.

**Maurer, M.** (2016). Journalismus und Agenda-Setting. In Löffelholz, M., & Rothenberger L., *Handbuch Journalimustheorien* (pp. 419-430). Wiesbaden: Springer VS.

**McIntyre, K., & Gyldensted, C.** (2017). Constructive Journalism: Applying Positive Psychology Techniques to News Production. *The Journal of Media Innovations* (4.2), 20-34.

**McIntyre, K. E.** (2015). *Constructive Journalism: The Effects of Positive Emotions and Solution Information in News Stories*. Retrieved from https://cdr.lib.unc.edu/indexablecontent/uuid:83b99a42-951c-4205-a129-44c9bf7ad8f3, [2018, April 19].

**Meier, C.** (2015, September 10). RTL-Studie: Fast jeder Zweite findet Nachrichten zu negativ. *Welt Online*. Retrieved from https://www.welt.de/kultur/article146253129/Fast-jeder-Zweite-findet-Nachrichten-zu-negativ.html, [2018, April 20].

**Meier, K. (2018).** Wie wirkt Konstruktiver Journalismus? Ein neues Berichterstattungsmuster auf dem Prüfstand. *Journalistik* (1.1), 4-25.

**Newhagen, J. E., & Reeves, B.** (1992). The evening's bad news: Effects of compelling negative television news images on memory. *Journal of Communication* (42.2), 25-41.

**Newman, N.** (2011). *Mainstream Media and the Distribution of News in the age of Social Discovery*. Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

**Östgaard, E.** (1965). Factors Influencing the Flow of News. *Journal of Peace Research* (2), 39-63.

**Ott, U.** (2017). Die Katastrophe wegatmen? Der Hype um den "konstruktiven Journalismus" treibt manchmal seltsame Blüten. Ein journalistischer Ansatz zwischen gut, gut gemeint und gefährlich. In Renner K.N., Schultz Z., & Wilke J. (Eds.), *Journalismus zwischen Autonomie und Nutzwert* (pp. 285-297), Cologne: Herbert von Halem.

**Patterson, T. E.** (2000). Doing well and doing good: How soft news and critical journalism are shrinking the news audience and weakening democracy – and what news outlets can do about it. (Faculty Research Working Paper No. RWP01-001). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.

**Prantl, H.** (2017). Prantl: "Journalismus muss nicht rosarot sein". NDR Kultur. Retrieved from von http://www.ndr.de/kultur/kulturdebatte/Kommentar-Brauchen-wir-Konstruktiven-Journalismus-constructivejournalism112.html, [2018, May 3].

**Pranz, S., & Sauer, C.** (2017). "Konstruktiver Journalismus" – Reflexion über einen Branchentrend, der alte Fragen zum Verhältnis von Pädagogik und Journalismus neu aufwirft. In Allmann S., *Kon-Texte* (pp. 99-122), Wiesbaden: Springer VS.

**Reinhard, O.** (2016, November 29). Gut zu wissen. Warum die Sächsische Zeitung ab heute stärker auf konstruktiven Journalismus und gute Nachrichten setzt. *Sächsische Zeitung Online*. Retrieved from http://www.sz-online.de/sachsen/gut-zu-wissen-3551810.html, [2018, May 23].

**Rice-Oxley, M.** (2018, February 12). The good news is…people like to read good news. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/12/but-first-here-is-the-good-news-, [2018, April 5].

**Rosen, J.** (1999). The Action of the Idea. Public Journalism in Built Form. In Glasser, T. L. (Ed.), *The Idea of Public Journalism* (pp. 21-48), New York: The Guilford Press.

**Sauer, C.** (2017). Die Kernaussagen von Ulrik Haagerup. In Grüner, U., & Sauer, C., *Kritisch-konstruktiver Journalismus. Impulse für Redaktionen* (pos. 377-402). Hamburg: Books on Demand [eBook].

**Sauer, C.** (2017a). Kritik am konstruktiven Journalismus. In Grüner, U., & Sauer, C., *Kritisch-konstruktiver Journalismus. Impulse für Redaktionen* (pos. 432-478). Hamburg: Books on Demand [eBook].

**Schemer et al.** (2017). Medienvertrauen in Deutschland 2017. *JGU Mainz*. Retrieved from http://www.uni-mainz.de/downloads_presse/02_publizistik_medienvertrauen_grafiken.pdf, [2018, June 7].

**Schmidt, J.** (2017). Graduate Section: Konstruktiver Journalismus – ein Ansatz zur kosmopolitischen Vermittlung fernen Leids? *Global Media Journal* (7.2), 1-26.

**Trussler, M., & Soroka, S. (2013).** *Consumer Demand for Cynical and Negative News Frames*. Retrieved from https://www.cpsa-acsp.ca/papers-2013/Trussler-Soroka.pdf, [2018, April 23].

**Veitch, R., & Griffitt, W.** (1976). Good-news-bad news: Affective and interpersonal effects. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* (6.1)*, 69-75.

**Weissenburger, P.** (2016, July 27). "Gutes erscheint uns langweilig". taz. Retrieved from http://www.taz.de/!5327982/, [2018, May 29].

**Winterbauer, S.** (2017). Constructive Journalism – ist der Hype um den Weltverbesserer-Journalismus schon vorbei? *meedia.de*. Retrieved from http://meedia.de/2017/02/14/constructive-journalism-ist-der-hype-um-den-weltverbesserer-journalismus-schon-wieder-vorbei/, [2018, May 3].

**Wolff, L.** (2017, January 25). "Perspective Daily" will Lösungen bieten. *NDR.de*. Retrieved from https://www.ndr.de/fernsehen/sendungen/zapp/Konstruktive-Nachrichten-Perspective-Daily-,perspectivedaily106.html, [2018, May 25].

# Declaration of Authenticity

The work contained in this thesis is original and has not been previously submitted for examination which has led to the award of a degree.

To the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

Munich, June 29th, 2018

_____

Leonie Gubela

# Attachments: Transcriptions of the Interviews