Constructive Journalism: Concepts, Practices, and Discourses

Jelle Mast*, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, jelle.mast@vub.be
Roel Coesemans, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, roel.coesemans@vub.be
Martina Temmerman, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, martina.temmerman@vub.be
*Corresponding author

Abstract

Constructive journalism as a (news) philosophy and practice is gaining ground around the globe as both new journalistic ventures and legacy news media variously experiment with so-called “constructive” approaches, and specialized (nonprofit) organizations and training programs have been established. While scholarly interest in the subject has steadily grown accordingly, constructive journalism as a research field in its own right is arguably still in need of further development. Therefore, we set out to explore, advance, and shape a research agenda, and to build a theoretical and empirical foundation for constructive journalism, providing a 360-degree view by bringing together an international body of scholarship approaching the topic and the issues raised through different disciplinary, conceptual and methodological lenses. As such, we aim, first, to contribute to the conceptual development of constructive journalism by refining its roots in positive psychology and carefully delineating its position along related and divergent types of journalism, identifying its core values and principles, the lineages and digressions. Second, we seek to advance theory building in this nascent research domain based on empirical data and insights variously derived from quantitative and qualitative methodological approaches exploring, describing, and testing through large-scale or in-depth analyses, how constructive journalism can be interpreted and put in practice, how it materializes and with what effect. In doing so, we adopt an overall stance of “critical appreciation” towards the subject, engaging in foundational thinking while not shying away from an assessment of the potential and effective critique or controversy stirred by this proliferating “alternative” branch of journalism.

Keywords

Constructive journalism, constructive news, solutions journalism, journalism practice, journalism culture
This special issue emerges from a two-day international academic conference on constructive journalism organized by the Brussels Institute for Journalism Studies of Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium, in December 2016. The initiative, one of the first of its kind, is inspired by the proliferation and increased salience of the central theme in professional practices and the public conversation. Indeed, constructive journalism as a (news) philosophy and practice is gaining ground around the globe as both new journalistic ventures and legacy news media variously experiment with so-called constructive approaches, and specialized (nonprofit) organizations and training programs have been established (e.g. the “Constructive Journalism” study program at Windesheim University College, the Netherlands; the “Constructive Institute” affiliated with Aarhus University, Denmark; or, closely related, the “Solutions Journalism Network”, partnering with news outlets across the US). While scholarly interest in the subject has steadily grown accordingly – to which this publication, and the meeting that preceded it, testifies – constructive journalism as a research field in its own right is arguably still in need of further development. Therefore, we set out to explore, advance, and shape a research agenda, and to build a theoretical and empirical foundation for constructive journalism by bringing together an international body of scholarship approaching the topic and the issues raised through different disciplinary, conceptual and methodological lenses.

Acknowledging that journalism has always been multifarious and variable (Schudson, 2012; Zelizer, 2009), we argue that the contemporary news media environment, characterized by a plethora of innovative and experimental platforms, and a Zeitgeist of transparency and reflexivity, has created a vigorous space for reimagining what journalism is, could be, or should be (Carlson, 2016). As a consequence, long-held conceptions and practices, such as the “news paradigm” and its associated core value of “objectivity” (Reese, 1997), are evermore subject to debate and challenged by new or revitalized ways of understanding and practicing journalism (e.g. Mast, Coesemans and Temmerman, 2017; Peters and Broersma, 2013, 2016). Against this background, professional and general public concerns about declining levels of trust in (amongst others) the (traditional) institution of journalism, growing polarization in society, and the sheer complexities of an interconnected world (cf. Hermans and Gyldensted’s as well as Bødker’s articles in this special issue), all seem to have informed a growing interest in rethink[ing journalism somehow in terms of more “constructive” approaches.

Surely, notions of “constructive” or, relatedly, “solutions-oriented” journalism are not new as such (see, for instance, Bro’s, and Lough and McIntyre’s contributions to this special issue). Yet, it would be fair to argue that constructive journalism as a distinctive and specialized journalistic practice gained momentum and reached an international audience lately, fuelled by broader societal developments and, especially, through the sustained efforts of the Danish journalists Cathrine Gyldensted and Ulrik Haagerup (who, amongst others, established the study program at Windesheim and the institute affiliated with Aarhus University respectively). In one of Gyldensted’s publications on the subject, From Mirrors to Movers: Five Elements of Positive Psychology in Constructive Journalism (2015), the title of which is indicative of the author’s more “interventionist” or “active” conception of the term compared to Haagerup’s idea of “constructive news” (see Bro’s article for a more elaborate discussion in this regard), a working definition of “constructive journalism” is provided. Gyldensted and McIntyre (2015: 14) outline a
journalistic approach that “implements techniques from positive psychology and related fields” and “adheres to one or more of journalism’s core functions” in bringing stories of “high importance to society”. It is clear, however, that this leaves ample room for interpretation and conceptual as well as contextual specification – which this special issue aims to further explore.

Although there is still a lot of diversity in both journalistic and academic thinking about constructive journalism, most proponents of this kind of journalism tend to start from journalism’s distinctive status in democratic societies as a Fourth Estate, committed to serving the public by acting as a watchdog holding the powerful accountable, and by enabling an informed citizenry (e.g. Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2007; Deuze, 2005). Constructive journalism thus subscribes to a fundamental, and widely shared, conception of journalism’s raison d’être, but rethinks how contemporary journalists could, or should, fulfill their democratic and societal roles. It takes issue with the formulaic, immediate, and event-centered nature of much (mainstream) reporting, the tendency for “news” to be (about the) negative, primarily crisis and conflict oriented, and traditions premised on the conviction that professional journalists should remain detached observers at all times, limiting themselves to (merely) report on social reality and to intervene by no means. Proponents of constructive journalism argue instead for an “alternative”, more inclusive and accountable practice of journalism that actively looks for positive values and emotions when gathering and telling the news, and that points out possible solutions, in doing so bringing affirmative, inspiring and often untold narratives. The idea of engaging citizens, in the sense both of offering perspectives or resources the public could act upon, or actual participation and co-creation (cf. “produsage” (Bruns, 2008)), is central to the communal and sustainable project that the constructive journalism movement envisions.

As is typically the case when established understandings – or one could argue, dominant professional ideologies – of “legitimate journalism” (Hanitzsch, 2007; Carlson, 2016; Deuze, 2005) are being challenged by “newcomers”, constructive journalism’s emergence on the scene has not been without controversy. Moreover, the debate on constructive journalism’s meaning and implications for contemporary journalistic practice is confounded by the politicization and commercial appropriation of the notion, as well by ill-informed or derisory interpretations reducing the notion to “uncritical reporting” or simply “happy news”. This turns constructive journalism into a rich site for debate and analysis, raising – amongst others – pertinent questions about the boundaries between constructive journalism and other “alternative” types of journalism which share similar premises such as “peace journalism” (e.g. Lynch and Galtung, 2010), “public journalism” (e.g. Rosen, 1997; Romano, 2010), and “slow journalism” (e.g. Le Masurier, 2015); about its entanglement with alternative, community-based and grassroots media, and a digital, networked media culture; about journalistic role perceptions, routines and narratives; about news values, discourses and frames, and the effects of “positive emotions and values” and “solutions-oriented” forms of journalism on public understanding of societal issues, empathy and engagement; and about constructive journalism’s strategic usage as a discursive construct.

In this special issue, we aim to provide a 360-degree view of constructive journalism, which spans multiple dimensions and draws several different connections.
First, it contributes to the conceptual development of constructive journalism by refining its roots in positive psychology and carefully delineating its position along related and divergent journalistic “others”, their associated ideologies, forms, and practices. Such clarification is much needed if we are to have a meaningful conversation on the merits and pitfalls of constructive journalism, and avoid speaking at cross-purposes, which seems particularly relevant in light of cursory descriptions of the term circulating in and outside of academia, lacking depth and nuance. Therefore, if constructive journalism is to further develop both as a topical area or subfield of scholarly interest and an alternative journalistic practice in its own right, a solid definition and identification of its core values and principles, the lineages and digressions, seems indispensable.

Similarly, this themed issue advances theory building in the nascent research domain of constructive journalism based on empirical data and insights variously derived from quantitative and qualitative methodological approaches exploring, describing, and testing through large-scale or in-depth analyses, how constructive journalism can be interpreted and put in practice, how it materializes and with what effect. Looking into how constructive journalism is conceived, practiced, and received, the present studies comprise the tri-partite perspectives of production, product, and reception, situated within a broader context. This contextual awareness also translates into the varied locale of the reported studies – extending from the hyper-local to the global comparative – and the different media types (print, broadcast, and online, or mainstream and alternative) and communicative modes (visual and verbal) covered.

Peter Bro is the first author of this special issue who tries to theoretically develop the concept of constructive journalism. In his paper “Constructive journalism: Proponents, precedents and principles” he pleads for more conceptual clarification concerning constructive journalism, so that this – in his eyes – valuable movement does not fade out like other similar journalistic movements in the past, such as public journalism or peace journalism. After all, he argues, a lack of conceptual clarity makes a journalistic movement vulnerable to critics, who can easily caricaturize and dismiss the promoted journalistic practice, while its supporters are left with too many imponderables or could be puzzled by possible ambiguities or even contradictions.

In order to contribute to the foundations of constructive journalism Bro first presents a historical overview, presenting a variety of influential media professionals, who all believed in the “constructiveness” of journalism, ranging from Walter Williams, who founded the first American journalism school in 1908, over Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst to early twentieth century reporter and reformer Jakob A. Riis. Hence, Bro illustrates that aspects of constructive journalism have deep roots in the history of journalism. However, all of the figures mentioned above struggled with the tension between idealism and commercialism, a tension that is also relevant for today’s approaches to constructive journalism.

Next Bro draws lines between constructive journalism and similar movements in past and present. Constructive journalism is not completely new, as it shares its depolarizing, nuancing and deescalating tendencies with peace journalism, its problem-solving goals with solutions journalism, its collaborative or participatory nature with
citizens’ journalism and its awareness raising and audience empowering aims with public journalism. Bro compares the different kinds of journalism to each other by means of his model of the Journalistic Compass. Looking at the purpose and perspective of journalism Bro identifies in his Journalistic Compass more active vs more passive types of journalism and more deliberative vs more representative practices to conclude that constructive journalism holds the middle ground between active, passive, deliberative and representative.

This can be partly explained by the different stances of the two most influential proponents of the current constructive journalism movement: Ulrik Haagerup, the former news manager of the national Danish broadcasting company and now head of the Constructive Institute at Aarhus, who believes “constructive news” is a news value that should influence news selection and production processes, while journalist and researcher Catherine Gyldensted defends a more proactive stance, in which “constructive journalism” is a practice that wants to influence news consumers in particular, and society in general. Combining the (slightly) different viewpoints, Bro concludes that constructive journalism offers news that stimulates people to take positive action, that inspires and that offers solutions instead of problems. More specifically, constructive journalism is claimed to be problem-solving and future-oriented with an active purpose.

The aim to advance the conceptualization of constructive journalism is continued in the paper “Cafébabel and ‘Génération Bataclan’ — Cosmopolitan Identities and/as Constructive European News”, by Henrik Bødker. Relating notions of constructive news, journalism as practice, and identity formation, and connecting the local to the global, the author develops his argumentation through a case study of Cafébabel, a participatory, multilingual current affairs online magazine co-funded by the EU, and the way it appealed to a “generational and transnational cosmopolitan identity” in its coverage of the November 2015 terror attack on the Bataclan theatre in Paris. The starting point is that it could be argued that this “disruptive” event targeted a liberal and cosmopolitan youth generation, and triggered mediated reflections on community, identity and belonging.

Bødker conducts an interpretive textual analysis of Cafébabel’s writings on the Bataclan attack and its editorial charter, structured around themes of “mobility” and “neighbourhoods” as “generational communities”, which proceeds on the basis of a conceptual framework inspired by practice theory and cosmopolitanism studies. Here, it is argued – borrowing from Ahva (2017) – that Cafébabel contributors could be understood as “in-betweeners” both in the sense that they, as citizen-journalists, engage in “trans-field” participatory practices, and because of the platform’s trans-border and European focus. At the same time, Cafébabel’s profile and writings are connected to the performance of a “cultural cosmopolitanism” (Robertson, 2012), that is, to performing an “orientation of openness to the world” as a “lived experience” or “model identity” (Ong, 2009), “in”, “through”, and “around” journalism (Ahva, 2017). As such, Cafébabel (arguably to some extent instrumentally) differentiates itself from (national) legacy media, which it perceives to be part of established, privileged institutional structures, narrowly approaching Europeanization and globalization, as well as terrorism, through
the prisms of nationalism, a “closed” (Ong, 2009) and/or a political cosmopolitanism, scepticism, and conflict.

In the conclusion, the author reflects on the broader ramifications of the case study for contemplating constructive journalism, tying together ideas of a (generational and transnational cosmopolitan) identity performance, participatory practices, and key elements of “constructive” news such as a solutions-oriented framing, empowerment, and co-creation (identified, most notably, by Gyldensted and McIntyre). It is argued that in order to bring these tenets of constructive journalism profoundly into fruition, providing orientation, offering solutions, and empowering communities in a highly complex, interconnected world, will require a reconsideration of (professional) journalistic role perceptions and understandings of participation, as “digital developments have made it possible for citizens to act as journalists, (but) they have also made it possible for journalists to participate as citizens.”

Next, the paper “Elements of constructive journalism: Characteristics, practical application and audience valuation” by Liesbeth Hermans and Cathrine Gyldenstedt starts with a definition of constructive journalism as a public-oriented practice which seeks to cover current affairs and news, adding solution-, action- and future-oriented perspectives. They explain how positive psychology informs constructive journalism. Traditional journalism has been shown to focus mainly on problems and conflicts and to have created an atmosphere of distrust in society. The aim of constructive journalism therefore is to lead to more positive emotions such as hope and optimism in the audience and to have a mobilizing function.

The authors discern six key elements in constructive journalism: (1) solution-oriented framing of the news, (2) future-orientation, (3) diversity and inclusiveness, (4) empowerment of the audience, (5) providing context and (6) co-creation. In this paper, they report on a survey that has been taken on how the audience appreciates the six key elements and in what way background characteristics like gender, age, educational level and news interest influence their appreciation. The survey was taken in The Netherlands and had more than 3000 respondents.

On the whole, the results show that people prefer a form of journalism which includes a diversity of sources that contain a multiplicity of perspectives, and news that provides in-depth information. Respondents in the age group 50-65 appear to appreciate constructive elements more than the younger respondents, higher educated respondents and people with a high news interest show a higher preference for diversity and in-depth elements and gender appears to be a negligible factor in the appreciation of constructive journalism. On the other hand, an orientation to solutions appeals to people who are often considered to be a difficult group to reach for traditional news organizations: younger people, people with a lower and middle education and the group that is not really interested in news. The authors find the results of their study encouraging for constructive journalism and believe that its further development will provide ways to counter the dissatisfaction of a large part of the audience with the current journalistic routines and aims.
The paper “Impact as driving force of journalistic and social change”, by Andrea Wagemans, Tamara Witschge and Frank Harbers, similarly focuses on how constructive journalism’s societal value is understood but shifts attention to the practitioners’ perspective. The authors propose “impact” as the keyword for defining new forms of journalism. They want to understand the diversity of the conceptualizations of journalism by putting constructive journalism in a broader perspective. They point out that the aims of constructive journalism (viz. orientation to the future, to solutions and to inspiring change in society) are not limited to the journalism of Western and affluent democracies.

For them, it is important to take the diversity of national, economic, cultural and political contexts that journalists work within worldwide into account and to contextualize the main features identified in the discourse on ‘constructive journalism’. What is orientation to solution in one context, is not necessarily so in another, and inspiring change may be labelled as an act of protest or subjective reporting in one instance, while being conceptualized as empowering audiences and watchdog reporting in another.

In this approach, both constructive journalism and entrepreneurial journalism are new forms of journalism in which “impact” is central to the journalistic self-understanding. The authors critically investigate how entrepreneurial journalists position themselves in relation to other journalists and society by exploring their understanding of journalism’s impact in society. They have interviewed 129 entrepreneurial journalists on four continents in the period 2014-2017. The interviews show that, whereas “impact” is often constructed as a monolithic concept in the literature on constructive journalism, for the interviewees in this study it is a multifaceted concept. Not only is it possible to identify impact on three different levels (the individual, the community and society as a whole), also for some interviewees the impact of journalism should go beyond the traditional boundaries and be extended to e.g. advocacy for social causes, activism against government policy, and the organization of and participation in demonstrations.

The authors conclude that their data show that we cannot simply continue the perceived dichotomy of active versus passive or neutral versus activist to analyze entrepreneurial journalistic startups worldwide as the interviewees’ understandings and practices do not necessarily fit only one of the two categories, neither do the entrepreneurial practitioners see tensions between them.

The idea of “impact” is further explored in the next paper, “Children’s cognitive responses to constructive television news”, by Mariska Kleemans, Roos Dohmen, Luise F Schlindwein, Sanne L Tamboer, Rebecca NH de Leeuw, and Moniek Buijzen who look into the effect(iveness)s of constructive journalism on child audiences. In doing so, the authors start from the premise that constructive journalism, through its solution-based framework and positive emotional appeal, provides television producers with a potentially useful strategy to cope with the contrasting aims of informing children about relevant (negative) events and shielding them from emotionally distressing and, therefore, potentially harmful content. While earlier effect studies have centered on the affective impact of constructive news, the present study breaks new ground by examining cognitive effects. Building on information processing theory, particularly Lang’s Limited
Capacity Model of Mediated Message Processing (LCM), the authors investigate how constructive, as compared to nonconstructive, news reporting affects recall of information, and whether negative emotions (i.e. levels of fear and sadness) elicited by this news mediate this relation.

In order to do so, a between-subjects experiment was conducted with Dutch primary school students, \(N = 281\) children, age 9-13 years, in which participants watched a constructive versus nonconstructive version of a newscast on the 2011 tsunami hitting Sendai, Japan. Both conditions received a similar opening item which provided basic information (5W’s and H), yet, follow-up items that approached the reported events differently, offering stories either oriented towards solutions and positive emotions, or towards problems and negative emotions. Participants filled out a questionnaire prior to and after exposure, which allowed to measure demographics, emotional state before and after watching the newscast (using visual analogue scales), and (free) recall of the general and specific information provided.

The experiment yields “mixed” findings, so it is argued, as children in the constructive condition demonstrated better recall of the specific information provided in the distinctive (constructive) part of the newscast, yet, proved less able to remember the shared (negative) information, compared to those in the nonconstructive condition. Moreover, constructive (versus nonconstructive) reporting directly affected, that is, reduced the levels of fear and sadness experienced when watching negative news, yet, these emotional responses did not mediate the relation between news reporting style and recall. As the authors conclude, these insights point at the need for more (advanced) empirical research in this area to grasp the complexities of constructive versus nonconstructive information processing and the kinds and degrees of news information being stored, so as to enable scholars and “constructive” journalists alike to find the “optimal balance” in tailoring news to children’s preferences, without distracting them from elementary information about particular news events.

Like Kleemans et al.’s article, the next paper charts new territory in the developing research field of constructive journalism. In “Visualizing the solution: An analysis of the images that accompany solutions-oriented news stories”, Kyser Lough and Karen McIntyre point out how extant research on the subject has tended to overlook the role of the visual component of news stories (which links up with Kleemans et al.’s call for further research on the workings of “verbal and visual memory codes” (emphasis added)). This observation is particularly salient in light of the discussion on “impact” given the meaning potential of images, their demonstrated key role in directing audience interest and cognitive and affective investments, and their potential to overwhelm verbal content in the story and in the reader’s memory. By shedding light on the type of images that accompany solutions-oriented news stories, the authors add new insight to understanding how this kind of journalism materializes and works while providing an empirical basis for future research into the effect(iveness) of the multimodal, and potentially incongruous, messages conveyed.

Applying a systematic-quantifying content analysis on a purposive sample of 1,241 news stories from the Solutions Journalism Network’s “Story Tracker” database of
international articles, the authors explore what types of photos accompany solutions-oriented news stories. More specifically, they focus on whether or not the photos published alongside solutions-based news stories reflect any of the solutions discussed in the article – with “solutions” operationalized as “success factors”, or “methods critical to a response’s success or failure”, with which SJN tags stories in its database. Additionally, they coded the type of photos used in regard to genre (based on the NPPA’s categories), topic, positioning, latent meaning (using, amongst others, Elbert’s Emotional Hierarchy and a “nonverbal expressions” index created by the authors), as well as the source of the photo (i.e. who took the picture).

They find that while photos were frequently included in news stories drawn from the database (81.1%), these photos did not always reflect the solutions presented in the story they accompanied (63.5%). Furthermore, feature photos, non-dominant photos, photos taken by an internal source, images related to human-focused success factors and “enterprise or evergreen stories”, emotionally and graphically appealing photos, and images exhibiting positive non-verbal expressions, were all more likely to reflect a success factor. As such, the results of this study tie human and emotional connection and positivity to “solutions”, in line with the conceptualization of “solutions-oriented” and “constructive journalism”. Besides indicating the need for further research, including the analysis of text-visual interactions, effects, and editorial decision-making, the authors also ponder some meaningful practical implications of their findings. Most notable in this regard is the argument that the future of solutions-oriented journalism will depend as much on the ability of journalists to “think critically about their full news packages and recognize the importance of visual storytelling on audiences”, as on overcoming possible limitations emerging from industry trends and news routines, such as increased commercialization, staff reductions, and a heightened sense of immediacy.

Contrary to most studies in constructive journalism, which are set in European and American media landscapes, Sanne Rotmeijer critically scrutinizes (constructive) journalism practices on the Caribbean island of St. Maarten, which she describes as a state characterized by a young democracy struggling with political, and socio-cultural issues, partly resulting from a colonial past. In her paper “‘Words that Work?’ Practices of Constructive Journalism in a Local Caribbean Context” Rotmeijer shows that both St. Maarten’s print and online journalism shows characteristics of constructive journalism, but at the same time it is clearly not self-evident to practice constructive journalism in this postcolonial context.

First Rotmeijer makes a distinction between the constructive approaches that she studied and practices of journalism that can be categorized as development journalism. Constructive journalism shares with the latter a focus on socio-economic development, providing constructive critique on governments, and solution-oriented reporting. But it is less prone to the risk of becoming a tool of government propaganda, as development journalism often tends to promote (instead of critically assess the effectiveness of) government policies.

On the basis of ten months of fieldwork at the newsroom of the St. Maarten’s main newspaper, The Daily Herald, and behind the screens of the island’s most important
news bloggers, doing participatory observation and interviews, Rotmeijer discovers three motives to practice constructive journalism on St. Maarten: (i) to promote local economic development; (ii) to stimulate transnational community building and belonging; and (iii) to foster sociopolitical stability. However, she not only describes and illustrates constructive journalism techniques to achieve these goals, she also discusses how constructive journalism on St. Maarten is constrained by local political, economic, socio-cultural and professional contexts.

When St. Maarten’s news media both in print and online rely on sponsors and advertisers to survive economically, it seems more expedient than constructive to focus on positive economic stories, often highlighting company successes, especially when most of the businesses, including the media companies themselves, are in the hands of a small economic elite. When immigrant reporters rely on work permits, issued by the government, it is pragmatic to write positive stories about government. When political crises have divided the island, journalists disclosed that they prefer a stable society under the current leadership than discrediting all of the politicians who have been named in corruption scandals. By taking such contextual factors into account Rotmeijer comes to the somewhat contradictory conclusion that “practicing constructive journalism under St. Maarten’s restricted political, economic and socio-cultural conditions not only risks reflecting the status quo, but also may play into the hands of the ones in power”. That is why she believes that news media in postcolonial states like St. Maarten do not need to be constructive, but rather disruptive, unsettling and deconstructing the hegemonic power dynamics.

Even smaller than the local context of St. Maarten is the hyperlocal context of participatory Brussels neighborhood news that is studied in Victor Wiard and Mathieu Simonson’s paper “‘The city is ours, so let's talk about it’: Constructing a citizen media initiative in Brussels”. Both researchers investigated and at the same time took part in the citizen media project of Dewey. Founded by a nonprofit organization, the Dewey project developed into a network of four hyperlocal online platforms managed by groups of citizens from four municipalities of Brussels. Dewey’s general aim is to support grassroots, collaborative, citizen news, made by locals in reaction to mainstream news media that are felt to ignore or to provide a distorted picture of the municipalities involved.

The hyperlocal news platforms of Dewey are labelled as citizen media, which are placed under the umbrella of constructive journalism (see also Bro in this issue) by Wiard and Simonson, based on their action research. They define citizen media as media that allow citizens to contribute to journalistic projects or products, independently of institutionalized structures and professional routines. By their portrayal of citizen media as an opportunity for social change and citizen empowerment the link with constructive journalism becomes apparent.

On the one hand, Wiard and Simonson present a general definition of constructive journalism as “every form of news production that aims at improving society in one way or another”, relating it to public and participatory forms of journalism. In that sense, the studied Dewey news platforms could be called constructive in that they promote positive
news stories about hyperlocal events and successful community practices, often left in the dark by mainstream media. Moreover, they aim to bring people from different cultural backgrounds together so as to strengthen the social fabric of the diverse neighborhoods, although they also acknowledge that the groups of citizens participating in the project tend to be rather homogenous, so that they do not always reach the mix of generations and ethnicities which they had in mind.

On the other hand, Wiard and Simonson address Gyldensted’s (2015) more specific positive psychology perspective in which constructive journalism is seen to yield constructive news that engages and inspires the producers, sources and consumers of news. In that sense, it is considered as a reaction against the disproportionate attention to negativity, noting that such news need not be exclusively positive to be constructive. Constructive news can be about conflicts and problems as long as they are covered in a way that empowers the readers and informs them about possible solutions. Also in that more narrow view, the hyperlocal news platforms of the Dewey project show characteristics of constructive journalism according to Wiard and Simonson, since most pieces published in the Dewey network appeared to be solution-oriented and tried to confront stereotypes. They conclude that constructive journalism is possible at a hyperlocal level, but it is not without its difficulties, as they learnt that an open, non-institutional and decentralized structure characterizing the hyperlocal Dewey news media can be hampered by weak participation and coordination issues.

As argued above, the aim of this special issue is twofold. On the one hand, it seeks to move beyond working definitions and advance the conceptualization of constructive journalism. On the other hand, it wants to explore how constructive journalism can be practiced in different geographical and professional contexts. In doing so, this special issue adopts an overall stance of “critical appreciation” towards constructive journalism, engaging in foundational thinking while not shying away from an assessment of the potential and effective critique or controversy stirred by this proliferating “alternative” branch of journalism and the challenges it poses to established notions of journalism and ways of doing things. For only by taking the subject seriously can a meaningful and productive – or indeed, “constructive” – dialogue develop that moves beyond the shallowness of both caricature and (self-)promotional discourse, and that is both critical, contextual, and (forward-)oriented towards a profound (re-)consideration of the viability and place, present and future, of constructive journalism in the broader (news) media and societal environment.

References


**Author biographies**

Jelle Mast is an assistant professor of journalism studies in the department of Applied Linguistics at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), Belgium. As the coordinator of the Brussels Institute for Journalism Studies, his main research interests are in the areas of visual communication, journalism practice, genre hybridization and professional ethics.

Roel Coesemans is an assistant professor of Dutch linguistics and journalism studies at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), Belgium. His research focuses on the pragmatics and multimodality of news discourse in mainstream and alternative news media.

Martina Temmerman is an associate professor at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), Belgium. She is the programme director of the Masters in Journalism at the Department of Applied Linguistics, where she teaches linguistic discourse analysis and journalistic writing classes. Her research focuses on the linguistic analysis of journalistic communication.