

Beyond Negativity: Exploring the Core Elements and Emerging Trends in Constructive Journalism

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Abstract

This systematic review analyzes 71 publications on constructive journalism elements, examining six core components: solutions, future orientation, inclusiveness, empowerment, context, and co-creation. The review reveals a general consensus on element definitions, while highlighting variations in operationalization and application across research contexts. Emerging elements, such as visual reporting and cultural-specific components, are identified as expanding the constructive journalism framework. The analysis demonstrates the significant impact of these elements on audience responses, news content, and journalistic practices. However, challenges including inconsistent operationalization, lack of longitudinal studies, and implementation difficulties in certain news contexts are noted. The study proposes a novel classification of elements into principle-based and practice-based categories, offering a new perspective on their interrelationships and roles in guiding journalistic work. Additionally, it examines how these elements are shaped by and navigate within competing ideological forces in contemporary media production. This comprehensive synthesis advances the theoretical understanding of constructive journalism, identifies research gaps, and provides valuable insights for both scholars and practitioners in enhancing the positive impact of news media on society.

Keywords: constructive journalism; constructive elements; systematic review; ideological impact

1. Introduction

Constructive journalism is a news reporting approach that aims to provide audiences with a fair, accurate, and contextualized picture of the world, without overemphasizing the negative aspects (Constructive Institute, 2024). Rooted in the social responsibility theory, it is a public-centered practice that shifts the focus from conflict and negativity by integrating positive elements (solutions, future orientation, inclusiveness and diversity, empowering people, context and explanation, co-creation) into news production and content (McIntyre & Gyldensted, 2018; Hermans & Gyldensted, 2019; van Antwerpen et al., 2022). This approach values information that empowers individuals to take constructive actions in both their public and private lives, advocating for a more informed and engaged society (McIntyre & Gyldensted, 2017; Ahva & Hautakangas, 2018; McIntyre, 2020; Bro, 2023).

As a new news approach (McIntyre & Gyldensted, 2017), a tool and genre (Hermans & Drok, 2018), a brand-new news form (McIntyre & Lough, 2021), a set of principles and practices (Bro, 2023), a paradigm (Lough & McIntyre, 2018), a new professional value—or news criteria (Vodanovic, 2019), a mindset to supplement the traditional criteria for news (Haagerup, 2015), a journalistic reform and theory (Ahva & Hautakangas, 2018), a movement (Hermans & Drok, 2018), constructive journalism emerged as the times required (Gyldensted, 2015a; Baden et al., 2019; Hermans & Gyldensted, 2019; Lough & McIntyre, 2023).

In 2008, Ulrik Haagerup, then head of the news department at the Danish Broadcasting Corporation, embarked on an experimental transformation of television programming to salvage viewer ratings, introducing a concept known as constructive journalism (Haagerup, 2008; Tang & Yin, 2019). This idea was subsequently brought into the academic realm by fellow Danish journalist Cathrine Gyldensted and American scholar Karen McIntyre, who initiated a series of academic and empirical analyses (Gyldensted, 2011; McIntyre, 2015). As noted by scholar van Antwerpen, this movement gradually bifurcated into two schools: one aimed at nurturing practitioners within the journalism industry, and the other striving to establish constructive journalism as a theoretical framework within journalism studies (van

Antwerpen et al., 2022). Despite sharing a core philosophy, these two schools diverge in their characterizations of this emerging journalism approach's attributes and operational ways.

From the latter's perspective, the constructive elements play the pivotal role in the theoretical framework of constructive journalism. They reshape traditional news reporting. There is a set of elements—solutions, future orientation, inclusiveness and diversity, empowering people, context and explanation, and co-creation—also known as positive elements in constructive journalism or constructive journalism elements (McIntyre & Gyldensted, 2018; Hermans & Gyldensted, 2019). First, solutions or solution-oriented framing encourages journalists to explore potential solutions when covering problems, providing audiences with a more comprehensive perspective. Second, future orientation, an interviewing technique that prompts reporters to ask "what now?" in addition to the traditional "5W" questions, offering a forward-looking view of events (Gyldensted, 2015a). It is also a specific method to achieve empowering people. Third, Inclusiveness and diversity, which entails incorporating more voices and perspectives and countering polarizing dynamics. It tends to set standards for the selection of news sources. Fourth, empowering people, which involves asking questions that inquire about resources, collaborations, common ground, and solutions. In the context of "empowering people," the term "people" specifically refers to the interview subjects. Journalists seek out more diverse interviewees and use various interviewing techniques to develop their perspectives. Fifth, context and explanation, which focuses on providing context, using data and infographics to explain the news, shift from incident-based to context-based reporting, and switch the focus from isolated incidents to broader contexts (van Antwerpen et al., 2022). Sixth, co-creation encourages active engagement between media and audiences, enabling the public to participate in shaping news content and fostering a two-way collaborative process in journalism (Hermans & Gyldensted, 2019).

Originating from the Journalism Department at Windesheim University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands, these six elements were distilled from existing teaching methodologies within constructive journalism and its professional applications (Hermans & Gyldensted, 2019). Termed as the "underlying points of application," they encapsulate the core principles or tenets of the constructive journalism theoretical framework, aiming to translate the ideology of constructive journalism into tangible paths and methodologies for practice (Hermans & Gyldensted, 2019). They are serving as the operational handbook for constructive journalism and offering journalists a set of standards and guidelines to follow (Grijalva, 2018). They transform the abstract concept of "constructive journalism" into a tangible and practical approach, providing concrete measurement criteria, rather than merely staying at an abstract conceptual level (van Antwerpen & Fielding, 2023).

For journalists, these elements enable quick and accurate production of news reports aligning with the constructive journalism philosophy (Rusch et al., 2021). For scholars, the presence of these elements within a text allows content identification as belonging to constructive journalism, facilitating research and analysis (Tang & Yin, 2019; Bro, 2023). Past researchers contend that this journalistic philosophy has long been rooted in journalism practices of many countries (Rusch et al., 2022; McIntyre & Lough, 2023), and by utilizing constructive elements, it becomes possible to identify news practices embodying constructive journalism principles, even if not explicitly labelled as such (Hermans & Gyldensted, 2019; van Antwerpen et al., 2022).

The concept of "constructive elements" plays a crucial role in understanding the principles and practices of constructive journalism. However, despite their significance, there remains ambiguity and inconsistency in how scholars interpret and apply these concepts. The distinctions and scope of the elements remain unclear (Lough & McIntyre, 2023). As the research points out, research designs employing stimuli vary considerably in their selection and combination of elements, leading to inconsistent operational definitions. Some studies utilize elements not included in the standard list, while others combine multiple elements. This lack of uniformity hinders comparability across studies and impedes generalizable conclusions (Lough & McIntyre, 2023; McIntyre & Lough, 2023). Another research highlights the uncertainty surrounding the optimal balance of elements in news reporting. It remains unclear what constitutes the ideal "proportion" and implementation of elements. Excessive or insufficient use of elements may impact the effectiveness of news stories (Hermans et al., 2023).

These issues underscore the need for a more precise understanding that the role of constructive elements in journalism. In this context, "role" encompasses both their theoretical functions—such as defining the contours of constructive journalism and complementing traditional news paradigms—and their practical effects, including fostering public dialogue and facilitating solutions-oriented reporting. To unpack these dimensions, this study addresses three interrelated questions, which correspond to the structure of the findings section: conceptualization (Section 3.1), dynamics and extension of the framework (Section 3.2), and operationalization in practice (Section 3.3).

RQ1: How are the core elements of constructive journalism conceptualized in academic literature, and how are they used to define the boundaries of constructive journalism?

RQ2: How do these proposed elements interrelate with each other, and what new elements have been proposed to extend the constructive journalism framework?

RQ3: How are the constructive elements operationalized in empirical studies and journalistic practice, and what are their impacts and challenges?

2. Methodology

This study uses a systematic literature review approach, combining systematic review methods with qualitative content analysis (Booth et al., 2016). The literature search follows PRISMA guidelines to ensure transparency (Dhingra et al., 2024), enabling a comprehensive, bias-minimized examination of the literature on constructive journalism.

2.1 Data Collection

The literature selection followed PRISMA guidelines to ensure transparency and reproducibility (Page et al., 2021).

Identification. A comprehensive initial search was conducted using the Scopus academic database, covering publications up to January 2024. The search string used was: TITLE-ABS-KEY (constructive AND journalism) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (constructive AND news), encompassing peer-reviewed articles and conference papers in English. This search strategy was designed to capture a broad range of literature on constructive journalism, following established guidelines for systematic reviews (Bramer et al., 2017). Additionally, reference lists from key constructive journalism publications were cross-checked to identify potentially relevant studies not captured in the database, a method recommended for ensuring comprehensive literature coverage (Booth et al., 2016). These publications included seminal works and review articles in the field, such as McIntyre & Gyldensted (2017), McIntyre & Gyldensted (2018), selected for their foundational role in constructive journalism scholarship. Studies were considered for inclusion if they were cited in at least three of the reviewed publications, indicating their significance in the field. This process identified three additional works: Karen McIntyre's doctoral dissertation (2015), which provided foundational insights into constructive journalism's theoretical framework; Cathrine Gyldensted's master's thesis (2011) and monograph (2015a), which were instrumental in conceptualizing constructive elements. In total, 583 publications were identified (580 from Scopus, 3 from reference list cross-checking).

Screening. The publications were imported into Zotero for management and analysis. Duplicates were identified and removed through careful examination, resulting in 399 publications. Subsequently, publications that did not align with the research topic were excluded by rapidly scanning titles and abstracts, following standard screening practices (Harari et al., 2020). In this step, 263 irrelevant publications were excluded, leaving 136 publications to proceed to the next stage.

Eligibility. For the 136 publications that passed the screening stage, a thorough full-text review was conducted based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. To be included, literature had to specifically discuss constructive journalism; publications that only briefly mentioned constructive journalism in side notes, footnotes, or author biographies were excluded. This step ensured that only literature closely aligned with the research purpose was retained, following best practices for systematic reviews (Belur et al., 2021). After review, 65 publications were excluded, leaving 71 publications for inclusion.

Inclusion. A total of 71 publications that met all criteria were ultimately included for qualitative synthesis. To illustrate the diversity and relevance of the sample, these publications were categorized into three groups based on their contributions and publication characteristics (Rethlefsen et al., 2021). The first group consists of foundational theoretical works, including seminal studies that established the conceptual framework of constructive journalism, such as Karen McIntyre, Cathrine Gyldensted, and Peter Bro's work. The second group comprises empirical and practical studies, which provide insights into the application of constructive angle in journalistic practice, including works by Mariska Kleemans, Christian Overgaard, and Natasha van Antwerpen, among others. The third group includes special issues dedicated to constructive journalism from high-impact journal articles, such as in *Journalism Practice* and *Journalism*. Some overlap exists across groups, as certain studies contribute both theoretically and empirically or were published in high-impact journals; in such cases, they were categorized based on their primary contribution. This categorization ensures that the sample captures the theoretical, practical, and emerging dimensions of constructive journalism, directly supporting the study's objective of clarifying the role of constructive elements. Specifically, it provides insights into the conceptualization of core elements and their role in defining the boundaries of constructive journalism (RQ1); explores emerging elements and their relationships with core elements (RQ2); and illuminates the manifestation of these elements in practice, along with their impacts and challenges (RQ3).

Appendix A is a representative sample of the 71 publications included in the qualitative synthesis, selected to reflect the diversity of the sample in terms of theoretical contributions, empirical applications, and publication types. It is worth noting that while all these publications address constructive journalism, not all explicitly discuss or conceptualize constructive elements. This variation in framing and terminology represents a gap in the literature that merits further exploration in future research.

2.2 Data Analysis

This study employed qualitative content analysis to systematically examine constructive elements in the academic

literature (Riffe et al., 2019). Guided by the three research questions, we developed a two-level coding framework (Table 1). At Level 1, three primary dimensions were distinguished—conceptualization (RQ1: element definitions and purposes), dynamics and extension of the framework (RQ2: interrelationships among core elements and proposals of new elements), and operationalization (RQ3: applications of elements, their contributions, and challenges). Under each dimension, Level 2 codes capture finer analytical targets. This deductive framework guided initial coding while remaining open to inductive emergence of additional themes (Chandra & Shang, 2019). Additionally, an "unclear/other" category was established to accommodate excerpts that did not clearly align with any of the predefined codes.

Table 1. Two-level coding framework aligned with RQ1–RQ3

Level 1 Dimension	Level 2 Code		Description	Related RQ
Conceptualization	1a	Definition	How elements are defined in the literature.	RQ1
	1b	Purpose	The stated purposes or theoretical roles of each element.	RQ1
Dynamics and Extension of the Framework	2a	Interrelate	Interrelationships among the original six core elements.	RQ2
	2b	Emergence	Newly proposed elements and their conceptual rationale.	RQ2
Operationalization	3a	Application	How elements are applied in empirical research or journalistic practice.	RQ3
	3b	Impact	Reported contributions or positive impacts of applying these elements.	RQ3
	3c	Challenge	Identified challenges or barriers in conceptualizing or applying the elements.	RQ3

Description: Table 1 presents the two-level coding framework developed for this study, showing how each of the three primary dimensions (Conceptualization, Dynamics and Extension of the Framework, and Operationalization) is broken down into specific Level 2 codes, alongside brief descriptions of each code and the corresponding research question (RQ1–RQ3) it addresses.

For the transparency and reproducibility, coding was conducted line by line: any sentence or paragraph matching a code's criterion was tagged accordingly. For instance, a passage explicitly defining "solutions orientation" was coded as 1a (conceptualization), while a description of "how empowerment techniques increased reader engagement" was coded as 3b (contribution in practice). Each segment assigned to only one Level-2 code—whichever theme it most directly addressed. In cases where a segment could fit multiple codes, the "dominant theme" was chosen based on its alignment with the corresponding research question and the prominence of the discourse (e.g., definitional statements received 1a over any operational examples) (Hennink et al., 2020). The full codebook—with detailed decision rules and additional examples—is provided in Appendix B. Detailed representative excerpts demonstrating how the data were transformed into results are provided in Appendix C.

To ensure the reliability of the coding process, the researcher conducted an intra-coder reliability test by independently coding the same 5 articles (7.1% of the total sample) at two different points in time, with a two-week interval between the first and second coding sessions (Riffe et al., 2019). The Cohen's Kappa values for all variables ranged from 0.85 to 1, indicating "almost perfect agreement" between the two coding sessions (McHugh, 2012; Koo & Li, 2016). These high levels of intra-coder consistency demonstrate the stability and reproducibility of the coding process, ensuring the reliability of the data analysis.

Finally, a total of 234 excerpts were identified and coded from the 71 selected publications. Below is a quantitative overview that substantiates the qualitative findings and demonstrates the relative emphasis placed on different aspects of constructive elements in the literature.

Table 2. Distribution of coded excerpts across analytical framework categories

Code		Related RQ	Number of Excerpts	% of total (n=234)
1a	Definition	RQ1	49	20.9
1b	Purpose	RQ1	12	5.1
2a	Interrelate	RQ2	9	3.8
2b	Emergence	RQ2	12	5.1
3a	Application	RQ3	91	38.9
3b	Impact	RQ3	26	11.1
3c	Challenge	RQ3	31	13.2
	Unclear/others		4	1.7

Description: Table 2 presents the coding framework applied in this study, showing both the frequency, percentage distribution, and the hierarchical structure of codes aligned with the three research questions.

3. Findings

3.1 Conceptualization of Constructive Journalism Elements

Section 3.1 addresses RQ1 by applying the Level-2 codes 1a Definition and 1b Purpose to all text segments containing element definitions or stated theoretical roles. In total, 49 segments (20.9% of 234) were coded as Definition and 12 segments (5.1%) as Purpose. These data demonstrate that scholarly discussions most frequently define constructive elements in terms of solution-oriented framing and emphasize their function of engaging and empowering audiences, thereby delineating the theoretical boundaries of constructive journalism.

3.1.1 Scholars' Understanding of Constructive Elements

The solution-oriented approach is considered the cornerstone of constructive journalism, focusing on reporting not only problems but also possible solutions (McIntyre & Gyldensted, 2018). This element, applicable across various news topics from social issues to environmental and economic challenges, enhances news positivity by showcasing successful cases and effective strategies. However, scholars differ in their specific applications of this element. Some emphasize the detailed presentation of concrete solutions in reporting (Hermans & Gyldensted, 2019), while others focus on how the solution-oriented approach transforms the entire news framing (Mast et al., 2019; van Antwerpen et al., 2022). This divergence also reflects different academic backgrounds: scholars from practical news operations tend to focus on specific applications (Labiano et al., 2023), whereas those from theoretical research examine its position in journalism theory (Ariestyani, 2023).

Future orientation, characterized by the keyword "forward-thinking." It involves adding "what's next?" to reporting, shifting focus from current events to their future impact and development direction. This element, often combined with positive psychology, aims to stimulate audience thinking and inspire hope and motivation for action. However, scholars interpret this element differently. Some emphasize incorporating concrete future action plans and visions into reports (Hermans & Gyldensted, 2019), while others focus on guiding readers to contemplate future possibilities through questioning (Mast et al., 2019; van Antwerpen et al., 2022). Research on its effectiveness also shows mixed results: while some studies highlight its positive impact on audience psychology and behavior (Labiano et al., 2023), others caution that it may create unrealistic expectations in certain contexts (Ariestyani, 2023).

Inclusiveness and diversity, represented by the keywords "diverse voices." It emphasizes incorporating diverse voices and perspectives to reduce polarization and construct more comprehensive, fair news narratives (van Antwerpen et al., 2022). By introducing different viewpoints and backgrounds, this approach counteracts media polarization and promotes social understanding. Scholars differ in operational methods: some advocate actively seeking marginalized groups' voices (Hermans & Gyldensted, 2019; Mast et al., 2019; Labiano et al., 2023), while others focus on diversifying news sources and interviewees (Ariestyani, 2023). Application also varies by topic—some scholars concentrate on controversial issues like race and gender (Labiano et al., 2023), while others apply it more broadly across social news (Ariestyani, 2023; Labiano et al., 2023).

Regarding empowering people, the keywords are "psychological support." It aims to make victims and experts feel empowered through different questions and angles, enhancing news constructiveness by stimulating the potential and capabilities of both audiences and reported individuals. Often combined with positive psychology, it focuses on enhancing positive emotional and behavioral responses. Scholars diverge on implementation techniques. Some emphasize achieving empowerment through specific question design and resource reporting (Hermans & Gyldensted, 2019), while others focus on its overall impact on audience emotions and behaviors (Mast et al., 2019; van Antwerpen et al., 2022). Effect evaluation also varies: some studies show empowerment significantly enhances audience engagement and positivity (Labiano et al., 2023), while others note effects may differ by background and audience group (Ariestyani, 2023).

For context and explanation, the keywords are "organizing information." It extends news reporting beyond events themselves by providing background information and detailed explanations, enhancing news depth and understanding (van Antwerpen et al., 2022). Many scholars emphasize using data and infographics to provide explanations and improve visual presentation (Mast et al., 2019; Labiano et al., 2023). Scholars differ in focus: some emphasize visual data presentation and infographics (Hermans & Gyldensted, 2019), while others concentrate on how explanatory reporting enhances news depth (Ariestyani, 2023). Research on effectiveness shows mixed results—while some studies find this element significantly enhances audience understanding and engagement (Labiano et al., 2023), others suggest effects vary by news type and context (Ariestyani, 2023).

Co-creation, signified by the keywords "public participation." It involves collaborating with the public to create news content, making reporting more interactive and participatory while enhancing public empowerment and news constructiveness (Labiano et al., 2023). This typically involves public interviews, co-writing, and content sharing.

Scholars differ on implementation: some emphasize direct public collaboration during reporting (Hermans & Gyldensted, 2019; Labiano et al., 2023), while others focus on how participation enhances overall news quality and impact (Ariestyani, 2023). Studies on empowerment effects show varied results—while some find co-creation significantly enhances public empowerment and participation (Mast et al., 2019; van Antwerpen et al., 2022), others note effects depend on collaboration methods and context (Ariestyani, 2023).

3.1.2 Elements as a Means to Define Constructive Journalism

Scholars widely use specific elements to define constructive journalism, enabling it to evolve from a positive psychology concept into a distinct journalism theory. Dagan Wood emphasizes that constructive journalism introduces positive elements into traditional reporting while maintaining accuracy and critical approach, making news more engaging and empowering audiences (McIntyre, 2015; McIntyre & Gyldensted, 2017; Dagoula, 2018; McIntyre et al., 2018). McIntyre and Gyldensted (2017) define it as journalism that applies positive psychology techniques to create more effective reporting while maintaining core news functions. Key elements like solution-oriented reporting and audience empowerment form its positive psychology foundation (McIntyre, 2015; Kleemans et al., 2017; Aitamurto & Varma, 2018; McIntyre, 2020). Gyldensted (2015a) describes it as complementing traditional journalism by focusing on progress and cooperation rather than just tragedies and conflicts. The main distinction lies in applying positive psychology elements to provide more comprehensive and constructive reporting (Hermans & Gyldensted, 2019; McIntyre, 2020; Bro, 2023).

3.2 *Interrelationships and Emerging Elements*

Section 3.2 responds to RQ2 by employing codes 2a Interrelate and 2b Emergence to identify clusters of co-occurring core elements and proposals of novel elements. A total of 9 segments (3.8%) were tagged as Interrelate and 12 segments (5.1%) as Emergence. This breakdown reveals a linked cluster of solutions, future orientation, and contextualization in existing frameworks, alongside growing scholarly interest in visual reporting and other supplementary elements to extend the constructive journalism model.

3.2.1 The Understanding of the Interrelationships among Constructive Elements

Through the explanations provided by scholars, it becomes evident that these six elements—providing solutions in news texts, asking future-oriented questions during interviews, presenting multiple perspectives in news content, empowering interviewees to think and offer solutions through questioning, offering more context and explanation in news texts, and involving the audience in the creation of news content—can be divided into two distinct groups. The first five elements are closely related to the production and creation of news content in journalists' work, while the last element, Co-creation, stands apart as it focuses on the construction of media platforms and audience participation. This distinction between Co-creation and the other five elements has also been reflected in the research of other scholars (Tshabangu & Salawu, 2021; Ariestyani, 2023; Labiano et al., 2023).

Among the first five elements, a further logical classification can be made based on their definitions and functions. They can be categorized into principle-based elements (Empowering People, Inclusiveness and Diversity) and practice-based elements (Solutions, Future Orientation, Context and Explanation).

Principle-based elements refer to the fundamental principles or values that guide journalists' work in constructive news reporting. The first set of elements addresses the question of "what to do" in news reporting. These elements reflect the desired outcomes or ideals that constructive journalism aims to achieve. They provide journalists with a normative framework for making editorial decisions and evaluating the quality of their reporting (van Antwerpen & Fielding, 2023). They set clear goals and directions for news coverage, namely promoting social inclusivity, empowering disadvantaged groups, and reducing confrontation and division.

The second set of elements tackles the question of "how to do it" in journalistic practice. They provide journalists with specific methods and strategies for framing and narrating news stories. These elements guide reporters on how to implement constructive principles at various stages of news production, such as topic selection, interviewing, writing, and editing (Grijalva, 2018). They instruct journalists on presenting news facts from diverse perspectives, organizing and telling compelling stories, and offering necessary context and explanations to facilitate audience understanding and engagement (Tshabangu & Salawu, 2021). For instance, when choosing and framing topics, journalists would emphasize solution-oriented and future-focused angles. When presenting information, they would provide background and explanations to help the audience gain a comprehensive understanding of the news event. These are the concrete actions that journalists need to take in their actual practice, which contribute to shaping the overall style and tone of news coverage and ensure the constructiveness of the news content.

Indeed, the principle-practice classification has been widely applied in various academic fields. In the field of education, researchers have investigated the "principle-practice gap" to understand the discrepancies between educational

principles and actual teaching practices (Biggs & Tang, 2011). Meanwhile, this classification method also appears in nursing, law, organizational management, and social work areas (Daci, 2010; Jansson, 2013; Blais & Hayes, 2015; Sewpaul & Henrickson, 2019).

Applying the principle-practice classification to the elements of constructive journalism can facilitate a deeper understanding of the relationships between these elements and their respective roles in journalistic work. By categorizing the elements into principle-based and practice-based types, it is more clearly identify which elements represent the guiding values and desired outcomes of constructive news reporting, and which elements describe the concrete methods or strategies employed to realize these principles in practice. This classification not only highlights the logical connections among the elements but also provides a framework for evaluating the alignment between journalistic principles and practices in constructive reporting.

3.2.2 The Possible New Constructive Elements

Beyond the six core elements, scholars identify emerging constructive elements. Visual recovery narratives capture stories of restoration and resilience rather than just tragedies, providing hope and enhancing constructive effects (Dahmen, 2016; McIntyre & Gyldensted, 2018). Positive emotional elements like hope and inspiration improve audience emotional responses and promote positive social behaviors (Kleemans et al., 2017; Hermans & Prins, 2022). New elements also emerge from different media platforms, such as narrative journalism in podcasts (Lindgren & Jorgensen, 2023), and cultural contexts. Chinese earthquake reporting, for example, identified "national spirit" as a constructive element emphasizing collective identity (Li et al., 2022). Indeed, elements are adapted to local needs—research shows their application varies between countries like the Netherlands and Denmark due to cultural backgrounds, social structures, and news practices (Grijalva, 2018; Li et al., 2022; Lindgren & Jorgensen, 2023).

3.3 Operationalization in Practice

Section 3.3 examines RQ3 through codes 3a Application, 3b Impact, and 3c Challenge, capturing how elements are enacted, what positive outcomes emerge, and what obstacles arise. Of the 234 coded segments, 91 (38.9%) describe Application, 26 (11.1%) report Impact, and 31 (13.2%) note Challenge. These figures indicate that constructive elements are operationalized across study designs and news formats, yielding documented benefits such as increased audience engagement while also facing barriers—most notably in extending elements beyond disaster reporting.

3.3.1 The Diverse Application of Constructive Elements

First, elements as research design components. Studies typically use controlled experiments, randomly assigning participants to read news with or without constructive elements (van Antwerpen et al., 2022; McIntyre & Lough, 2023). Some manipulate specific aspects like emotional tone or solution orientation to identify key elements promoting positive responses (Hermans & Prins, 2022; Kleemans et al., 2017; Kleemans et al., 2017b). Mixed-methods approaches combining quantitative and qualitative data provide deeper insights, while real-world experiments on news websites enhance external validity.

Second, experimental results confirming element effects. News with constructive elements significantly enhances positive emotions compared to traditional conflict-focused reporting (Baden et al., 2019; Hermans & Prins, 2022). Solution-oriented and positive news evokes hope and optimism (Kleemans et al., 2017; Hermans & Gyldensted, 2019) while strengthening prosocial behavioral intentions like volunteering and donating (Kleemans et al., 2017b). Different groups respond variably to constructive elements. Older audiences value constructive elements more, while younger ones prefer interactive elements (Kleemans et al., 2017; Hermans & Gyldensted, 2019; Mast et al., 2019). Highly educated audiences favor diversity and depth, while others prioritize solutions and positive emotions. Gender and news interest levels also influence responses (Hermans & Gyldensted, 2019).

Third, elements in different news types. Constructive news enhances comprehensiveness through diversity and inclusivity, particularly important for social controversies (Hermans & Gyldensted, 2019; Labiano et al., 2023). Empowerment and co-creation increase audience engagement, especially in community reporting (Kovacevic & Perisin, 2018; Ariestyani, 2023). Data visualization improves comprehension in science and health reporting (Tshabangu & Salawu, 2021), while positive framing reduces negative emotions during crisis coverage (Kleemans et al., 2017b; Hermans & Prins, 2022).

Fourth, theoretical implications. Elements help deconstruct constructive journalism's theoretical foundations—positive psychology, solutions journalism, and participatory journalism (Mast et al., 2019; Mäder & Rinsdorf, 2023). These elements constitute basic characteristics guiding news practices (Hermans & Drok, 2018; Baden et al., 2019; Hermans & Gyldensted, 2019; Zhao & Xiang, 2019; Muhammad Din et al., 2021; Hermans & Prins, 2022; Swijtink et al., 2022; Labiano et al., 2023; van Antwerpen et al., 2023).

3.3.2 The Contributions of Constructive Elements

First, they provide practical operational guidelines for journalists at various production stages—storytelling, information gathering, and production—helping them understand and apply constructive journalism principles (Gyldensted, 2015a; Hermans & Drok, 2018; Kovacevic & Perisin, 2018; McIntyre & Gyldensted, 2018).

Second, they offer innovative frameworks that transform news culture by changing news values, functions, and responsibilities. For example, introducing positive emotions can balance negative impacts on millennial audiences (Hermans & Gyldensted, 2019; Schäfer et al., 2022; Ariestyani, 2023).

Third, elements enhance news quality by improving comprehensiveness and depth. Solution-oriented reporting provides practical guidance beyond problem identification, while diversity and inclusivity elements incorporate multiple perspectives, enhancing fairness and comprehensiveness (Grijalva, 2018; Schäfer et al., 2022; van Antwerpen & Fielding, 2023).

3.3.3 The Discussion of Existing Problems

Research on constructive elements faces multiple challenges. Operationalization inconsistencies hinder cross-study comparisons—while Meier (2018) added positive language, Kleemans (2017) included both positive language and solutions, and Höhle (2023) incorporated future orientation (van Antwerpen et al., 2022; McIntyre & Lough, 2023). This methodological variation makes direct result comparison difficult.

The field lacks comprehensive research, particularly on long-term impacts and independent effects of specific elements. Most studies examine overall effects rather than isolating individual components like positive emotions or solution orientation, and research on diverse audience groups remains insufficient (Kleemans et al., 2017b; Hermans & Gyldensted, 2019; Hermans & Prins, 2022; Schäfer et al., 2022; Lough & McIntyre, 2023).

Audience responses prove unpredictable—constructive elements sometimes reduce perceived credibility, with readers viewing such articles as potential advertisements (Rusch et al., 2021). The Herald's COVID-19 coverage using constructive elements failed to evoke expected positive emotions (Tshabangu & Salawu, 2021).

Practical implementation faces newsroom challenges including cultural resistance, time constraints, and journalists' incomplete understanding of constructive elements (Ariestyani, 2023). Specific elements show limitations—diversity initiatives haven't significantly reduced polarization, and solution-oriented reporting struggles with urgent issues where maintaining truth while incorporating constructive elements proves difficult (Lindgren & Jorgensen, 2023).

Conceptual ambiguity persists as some scholars broadly reference "positive elements" without specifying the six constructive elements, potentially causing misapplication (Grijalva, 2018; Mäder & Rinsdorf, 2023).

4. Discussion

4.1 Shared Ideological Landscape of Constructive Elements

Whether in the "conceptualization" (formative stage), "dynamics and extension" (developmental stage), or "operationalization" (practical implementation stage), constructive elements are rooted in the same broader ideological landscape—that of public discourse and social responsibility. These macro forces provide constructive elements with a paradigm of meaning and value coordinates that guide their development and application.

4.1.1 Civic-democratic Ideology

Civic-democratic ideology, rooted in deliberative-democratic theory, holds that journalism should function as a public forum, empowering citizens through inclusive dialogue and shared decision-making (Hennen et al., 2020). It profoundly shapes how constructive elements are conceptualized and practiced, positioning them as tools for democratic renewal rather than merely journalistic techniques (Hermans & Drok, 2018). This ideological framework views the elements through the lens of citizenship facilitation and power redistribution within public discourse.

This perspective is particularly evident in solution-focused reporting. While on the surface, this element appears ideologically neutral, it frequently embeds democratic ideals that elevate collective action or individualistic approaches (Bro, 2023). Descriptions of co-creation as an element often present it as a democratizing force in journalism, using terminology that emphasizes citizen participation and collaborative content development processes (Ariestyani, 2023).

4.1.2 Social Responsibility

This ideology profoundly influences constructive elements across all developmental stages. It positions journalism as having fundamental obligations to society, emphasizing media's role in fostering democratic participation, providing accurate information, and contributing to social wellbeing (Ahva, 2022).

The solution-focused element powerfully embodies the social responsibility that reflects journalism's obligation to

move beyond merely identifying problems to helping societies address them (Ahva & Hautakangas, 2018). The inclusiveness and diversity element extends beyond mere representational diversity to emphasize the media's duty to facilitate meaningful dialogue across social divides, ensure marginalized voices are heard, and counter excessive polarization (van Antwerpen et al., 2022). Further, the empowerment element focuses on journalism's duty to give voice to those affected by problems, positioning them as agents of change rather than passive victims (McIntyre et al., 2018). Indeed, the context and explanation element similarly emphasizes journalism's obligation to provide citizens with sufficient context to understand complex issues, develop informed opinions, and participate meaningfully in democratic processes (Standaert et al., 2021).

The social responsibility provides constructive journalism with its foundational paradigm of meaning and value coordinates (Hautakangas & Ahva, 2018). While other ideological influences may vary in emphasis across different developmental stages, the notion that journalism bears responsibilities to society remains the consistent macro force guiding constructive journalism's evolution.

4.2 Constructive Journalism Amid Competing Media Ideologies: Adaptation and Innovation

The development of constructive journalism, built from various constructive elements, does not occur in an ideological vacuum but rather seeks its position within the intertwining dominant ideological forces of contemporary media production. Notably, constructive journalism is deeply influenced by civic-democratic ideology, emphasizing how news media should foster civic participation, cultivate rational discussion, and promote social cohesion, viewing journalism as essential infrastructure for healthy democratic societies—connecting it intrinsically with the progressive public journalism traditions of the early 20th century (Hermans & Drok, 2018; Bro, 2023; Khan et al., 2023). Simultaneously, it confronts powerful commercial market ideological pressures that dictate content decisions through metrics like click rates, engagement levels, and profit indicators (Kristensen & Bro, 2024). Additionally, constructive journalism must engage with liberal professional ideology (emphasizing objectivity, neutrality, and the separation of facts from opinions) and technological-deterministic ideology (algorithm-driven content distribution and user experience maximization). Further, within varying political systems, constructive journalism must also adapt to diverse state political ideological frameworks that define the boundaries and possibilities of journalism (Tshabangu & Salawu, 2021; Almahmoud & Córdoba, 2024). These mainstream ideological forces in today's mass media present both challenges and opportunities for constructive journalism's innovation and development (Ding & Zeng, 2019).

Facing this complex landscape, constructive journalism has implemented various adaptive and negotiation strategies. In terms of democratic discourse, it redefines journalism's role in democratic society by emphasizing responsibility for quality public dialogue, inclusion of diverse voices, and cultivation of public discussion spaces, thereby establishing a normative foundation for its practices (McIntyre & Sobel, 2018; Krüger et al., 2022; Bro, 2023). Furthermore, it negotiates with commercial logic by advocating for socially responsible, balanced reporting styles; transforms traditional professionalism by redefining professional practices (enriching source diversity and providing context beyond simplistic reporting while maintaining rigor); and leverages technological platforms' innovative potential (such as incorporating infographics and promoting citizen co-creation) to develop new narrative forms and distribution models (Hermans & Gyldensted, 2019; Grijalva, 2018).

These efforts have progressively manifested in diverse practical approaches across different regions: Nordic public service traditions provide institutional support for constructive journalism, with Denmark's Constructive Institute consistently dedicated to exploring this concept in practice (Haagerup, 2017; Constructive Institute, 2024). Conversely, Anglo-American media environments have encouraged more market-competitive models, with outlets like *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, and *HuffPost* experimenting with solution-focused reporting to attract readership and attention (McIntyre, 2015; Tang & Yin, 2019). Meanwhile, constructive journalism in Global South countries frequently aligns with specific social change objectives, experimentally proposing localized development characteristics (Guo, 2022; Kibarabara, 2023; Almahmoud, 2024). Through these differentiated adaptation strategies, constructive journalism continues finding its position in various contexts while creating a "permeation" effect on mainstream media practices, enriching overall media ecosystem diversity and offering new potential pathways for journalism facing trust crises, news avoidance, and commercial challenges (McIntyre & Gyldensted, 2017; Mayerhöffer & Heft, 2021).

5. Conclusion

This systematic review of research on constructive elements has revealed several key findings that contribute to a more nuanced understanding of this emerging field. By analyzing 71 academic publications, this study has synthesized scholars' interpretations of the six core elements' concepts, identified relationships among them and potential new elements, examined the diverse applications and effects of these elements in research and practice, summarized the main contributions and challenges, and proposed a classification scheme based on the elements' functions in journalistic principles and practices.

The findings suggest that while scholars generally agree on the definitions and key characteristics of the six core elements, there are variations in how these elements are operationalized and applied in different research contexts (Hermans & Gyldensted, 2019; McIntyre & Lough, 2023). The study also highlights the emergence of new elements, such as visual reporting and cultural-specific elements, which expand the scope of the constructive journalism framework (McIntyre & Gyldensted, 2018; Li et al., 2022). The analysis of the elements' applications reveals their significant impact on audience responses, news content, and journalistic practices, underlining the practical value of the constructive journalism approach (Labiano et al., 2023). Notably, while constructive elements are the primary operationalization tool for constructive journalism, they are not universally applied across all studies in the field. Furthermore, the proportion of studies employing these elements as an analytical method is not as high as might be expected, indicating a potential gap in the research landscape. Indeed, the review also identifies several challenges and limitations in current research, such as inconsistencies in operationalization, a lack of longitudinal and comparative studies, and difficulties in implementing constructive elements in certain news contexts (Lough & McIntyre, 2023). These challenges point to the need for more standardized research designs, diverse methodologies, and context-specific adaptations of the constructive journalism framework.

By proposing a classification of the elements into principle-based and practice-based categories, this study offers a new lens for understanding the interrelationships among the elements and their respective roles in guiding journalistic work. This classification highlights the importance of aligning journalistic principles with concrete practices to fully realize the potential of constructive journalism.

The analysis of the ideological dimensions of constructive journalism reveals how these elements both shape and are shaped by competing ideological forces in contemporary media production (Hassell et al., 2021). This ideological multiplicity explains both the adaptability of constructive journalism across different media systems and the tensions inherent in its implementation.

This systematic review, while extensive, has several limitations that suggest directions for future research. First, the analysis was limited to English-language publications, potentially overlooking valuable insights from non-Anglophone scholarship on constructive journalism. Second, the review focused primarily on academic publications, which may not fully capture innovations occurring in professional practice. Future research should expand to include multilingual sources and practitioner perspectives, while also addressing the identified research gaps: longitudinal studies tracking the evolution and effects of constructive elements over time; comparative analyses across different cultural, political, and media system contexts; experimental designs testing the individual and combined impact of specific elements; and critical examinations of how power dynamics and structural constraints influence the implementation of constructive journalism approaches. Additionally, researchers could explore the emerging intersection between constructive elements and technological innovations such as artificial intelligence, immersive media, and participatory digital platforms, which may transform how these elements function in tomorrow's news ecosystem.

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