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proponents, precedents and principles
Bro Petersen, Peter

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CONSTRUCTIVE JOURNALISM

- Proponents, precedents and principles

Constructive journalism has become a popular term in recent years, and has been the basis of a number of seminars, conferences, courses at journalism schools, fellowship programs and research projects. This article traces the origins of constructive journalism by describing and discussing the proponents, precedents and principles of the movement. The article shows that constructive journalism is no new term and that its inherent principles share similarities with other well-known movements in the history of journalism. These include action journalism that was popular on both sides of the Atlantic at the turn of last century, and public journalism that flourished at the turn of this century. Common for most of these movement are, however, their lack of conceptual clarity. The differences and similarities between constructive journalism, past movements and more classical conceptions of journalism are analyzed through the framework of the Journalistic Compass that delineates four classical roles within journalism. The article concludes by describing the opportunities - and difficulties – that this recent movement faces as still more persons and organizations lay claim to practicing constructive journalism, and it discusses how the proponents might learn from former movements that have gained popularity for a period, but whose importance has since diminished.

Key words: action journalism, constructive journalism, journalism history, news values, public journalism

“I believe that the journalism which succeeds best … is … constructive,” Walter Williams wrote in his world-famous Journalist’s Creed (1914). The creed first appeared in writing in the course syllable for the first American journalism school at University of Missouri that Walter Williams founded, directed and taught at for many years. A few years later, it was reprinted in a textbook, The Practice of Journalism (Williams and Martin, 1922/11), that Williams co-wrote with a colleague; and the creed has since been translated and reprinted numerous times in works by researchers, lecturers and practitioners. But Williams’ call for a constructive journalism was buried in the final paragraph of his creed alongside a number of other principles that Williams considered important – including his belief that journalists should be “stoutly independent”, “self-controlled patient” and “indignant of injustice” – and most researchers, lecturers and practitioners, who have referred to the creed, have paid more attention to the opening lines of the creed, where Williams concerns himself with, whom journalists should serve and service. Here, Williams solemnly states, “I believe in the profession of journalism. I believe that the public journal is a public trust; that all connected with it are, to the full measure of their responsibility, trustees for the public; that acceptance of a lesser service than the public service is betrayal of this trust.”

Walter Williams’ creed echoed the words and the work of another seminal figure around the turn of last century, Joseph Pulitzer. Writing a decade before Williams, the Hungarian-born owner of one of the world’s best-selling newspapers, Pulitzer, proclaimed that he would start a new movement that would raise the standards of journalism. One of the means in doing so was to start a journalism school, and in an essay titled The School of Journalism in Columbia University (1904), he noted that “It will be the object of the college to make better journalists, who will make better newspapers, which will better serve the public” (1904: 46). Eventually, Pulitzer and the university at the upper-west side of Manhattan, which he endowed with sufficient funds to establish a school of journalism, was overtaken by the University of Missouri. The journalism school at Columbia University did not enroll its first students until 1912, while Williams welcomed his first students in
1908. But Pulitzer did more to institute the importance of providing a public service than educate future generations of journalism. He also established a set of prizes, The Pulitzer Prizes, where referrals to “public service” was an integral part of each of the initial four categories that Pulitzer made provisions for in his will.

Upon his death, Joseph Pulitzer was prided for not only having been a constructive factor in society by way of his newspapers in New York City and St. Louis, but also for having himself “possessed a peculiar constructiveness that was his own, and which had an influence on journalism throughout the country” (1911). From classrooms to newsroom, Williams and Pulitzer both sought to be constructive influences on journalists, and by way of present and future journalists they also sought to ensure that journalism itself could become a constructive force by providing a public service. But while the concept of the “public” in time has become so familiar to people inside and outside newsrooms, so that some might forget to contemplate its meaning, many researchers, lecturers and practitioners have forgotten that Williams, Pulitzer and other of the seminal figures among the first generations of journalists, editors and owners of news organizations believed that a public service should be based on such a constructive approach. Their wording might have changed over time. But while Williams, who made his way into journalism by way of the printing room from where he later worked his way up to the editor’s office and a part-ownership of a regional newspaper in Missouri, advocated for a “constructive” journalism in his creed, his classes and in the later textbook he authored, The Practice of Journalism (1922/1912), Pulitzer instead described this constructiveness by way of proclamation that journalism should provide a “public welfare” and actively ensure “the public good.”

While the importance of providing public service – for private money or by state-financed media companies – is acknowledged by most today, few remember that it originally was associated with being constructive. But the concept has now, in the very recent years, become re-introduced by a growing number of practitioners, lecturers and researchers. None of these present proponents of a constructive journalism have pointed to the former use of the concept by Williams, Pulitzer and other seminal figures writing at the turn of last century. And that might not be important for people without a historical interest were it not for the important fact that history of journalism has had its share of movements that have come and gone, because of lack of conceptual clarity. While the constructive journalism of the 21st century has become a popular movement in many parts of the world that within a few years has resulted in many publications, conferences and has given names to courses at journalism schools, fellowship programs and research projects, critics have now also begun to voice concern over a lack of conceptual clarity. This article therefore describes and discusses the proponents, precedents and principles of constructive journalism in the hope that it can help explicate similarities and differences between this movement and other types of journalism and perhaps also point to some restorative value of what constructive means.

Proponents of constructive journalism

Around a century after Walter Williams had first introduced the notion of a constructive journalism, the term appeared in a column in a Danish newspaper by the then head of the news division of the national broadcasting company, Ulrik Haagerup. The op-ed was titled “Constructive News,” and in the 2,400-word column, Haagerup advocated that journalists in the future should supplement the traditional news values with a constructive news criterion, so stories about death, destruction and societal misery could be balanced with news stories about solutions, inspiration and other stories with constructive ramifications. Haagerup exemplified the problems of the traditional news criteria by retelling what had happened to one of his own journalists, who had come across a statistic about unemployment among immigrant women. One of the municipalities stood out in the statistic, since apparently all the female immigrants had found jobs. The journalists therefore called to ask if there
was a mistake with the numbers. There was not, and the journalists were informed that it had to do with what was termed the “Lene effect.” It turned out that one of the caseworkers in the municipality, with the first name Lene, had managed to help every single immigrant by taking them to see local business owners one-by-one. The journalists asked his editors to produce a story about the “Lene effect, “but he was informed by his editors that he should find another story to work on, since there were simply no conflict in the story he had uncovered. The op-ed piece contained other such examples, and the column ended with the proclamation: “We should dare supplement our traditional news criteria with a new one: Constructive news” (Haagerup, 2008).

The suggestion became highly debated within and outside journalism, and Ulrik Haagerup was himself instrumental in setting up several conferences about constructive news in the following years, and in 2012, he himself arranged for, edited and wrote several chapters in an anthology in Danish entitled A Constructive News Story (2012a). The authors included journalists, editors, owners of news organizations, but also researchers, heads of journalism schools, members of parliament, media consultants and others, who in various ways concerned themselves with the potentials and problems of contemporary journalism. One contributor was the journalist Cathrine Gyldensted, who had formerly worked for the national broadcasting company herself, but by Gyldensted’s own admission she left the profession in dissatisfaction with the way journalism was practiced (2012: 186). Instead, Gyldensted had studied positive psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, and in her chapter in A Constructive News Story, she recounts the results of a study where she tested reactions to different versions of the same news story. Her results showed that the classical version that focused on the negative aspects of the story tended to depress the respondents (2012: 191). Instead, Gyldensted called for – in line with what she had learnt by way of her studies – that journalists should focus more on “positive, inspirational and solution-based news” (2012: 196), and she ended her chapter by stating: “This is only the beginning.” That turned out to be correct in more ways than one; both for Gyldensted, herself, and the concept of constructive news. For that year, Cathrine Gyldensted herself published a book about what she termed “Constructive Journalism.”

Co-written with a lecturer in journalism, Malene Bjerre from one of the Danish journalism schools, the book A manual in Constructive Journalism (2014), focused more on the practical tools, technics and methods that journalists – both the future ones still in classrooms and the present ones who were already residing in the news rooms – could employ. This book was also written in Danish – and in those years, there were also other books in Danish that specifically dealt with the concept of “constructive news” and “constructive journalism” (see e.g. Haslebo and Haslebo, 2010). These were publications where a limited number of the same people, like Cathrine Gyldensted and Ulrik Haagerup, appeared together, literally side by side and chapter by chapter. But it was not only in Denmark that discussions about the problems of journalism – and the potentials of other approaches – had begun to spread in newsrooms and classrooms, and when both Ulrik Haagerup and Cathrine Gyldensted published books about the potentials of a more constructive approach in the preceding years, their works contained many references to persons and organizations in other countries, where the ideas were also taking hold. Ulrik Haagerup published Constructive News in late 2014, and for readers of his previous books, conference presentations and the original op-ed piece from 2008, there might have been few new perspectives relating to the principal aspects of what he believed to be constructive news. The same could rightfully be written with respect to Cathrine Gyldensted, who published a book in English, From Mirrors to Movers (2014), that same year. But both books helped relate to a much wider international audience.
Since the concept of “constructive” journalism re-entered the world of journalism in 2008 – albeit it should be remembered that Walter Williams had simply used it as an adjective, while describing different traits of his preferred principles for journalism – it has taken less than a decade for constructive journalism to become a popular approach in many parts of the western world. Not only have there been an increasing number of research studies and subsequent publications about constructive journalism – including a PhD dissertation about the subject (McIntyre, 2015) - it has also become the basis of many conferences in itself among both practitioners and researchers. The latest, and so far most successful conference in terms of the number of participants was arranged in 2017 by the recently formed Constructive Institute, and it was attended by close to 500 reporters, editors, media executives, scientists, students and politicians from more than 25 countries. The Constructive Institute is headed by Ulrik Haagerup, has a small staff and an annual set of fellows, who are each given a stipend for a yearlong stay at the Institute of the Danish University of Aarhus. Other universities and journalism schools now offers study programs in constructive journalism and while researchers is still working to catch up with the recent development Windesheim University in Holland hired a “professor in constructive journalism” in 2016.

But the apparent popularity of constructive journalism comes with an inherent conceptual weakness that might help explain some of the interest the concept have garnered – and also some of the criticism that has flourished in different countries. Recent years have thus shown that persons and organizations with very different approaches to the problems and potentials of journalism have been able to rally around this movement even though it at times can seem unclear how proponents relate to one another, what the identity of constructive journalism actually is and who the authority for deciding what the concept entails is somewhat unclear. This conceptual elusiveness surely has a positive side to it, since openness can help generate new approaches to what it means to be constructive, and this is a conceptual openness that is supported by the original proponents. “[I]t is not a static domain, but will evolve as the research, underpinning methods and applications evolve,” Cathrine Gyldensted has written (2014: 174). But the elusiveness might, on the other hand – and in the long run – 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 or even decades, only to wither away thereafter. These examples also include movements that share several similarities with constructive journalism.

**Historical precedents of a constructive journalism**

“[J]ournalism was shown to have a role in improving society,” Cathrine Gyldensted recounts in the prologue to her book *From Mirrors to movers: Five elements of positive psychology in constructive journalism* (2015: 6). Gyldensted refers specifically to the work of another Dane, who crossed the Atlantic in order to start a new career, the journalist and reformer Jakob A. Riis, but she also refers more generally to the fact that many journalists, editors and owners of newspapers at the turn of last century strove to improve society. While Gyldensted’s reference to the antecedent roots of such a constructive approach fills less than one page, others have given the issue an attention that amounts to whole chapters and even book-length studies (Schudson, 1978; Campbell, 2002; Bro, 2004). Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst are surely the best-known proponents of what was then called “journalism of action”, “journalism that acts” or just simply “action-journalism,” and in the course of the 20th century, many journalism students – and tourists for that matter - have been told the story of how Joseph Pulitzer’s newspaper *The World* ensured a pedestal for the Statue of Liberty. “We must raise the money,” Pulitzer wrote in *The World* on March 16, 1885, where he started what effectively became one of the country’s most successful campaigns for public donations in history, and when the campaign ended, more than 125,000 people had contributed and
many if not most of the donators were ordinary citizens who could only afford a single or a few pennies for the pedestal.

This activation of the public appears in many historical accounts of the action journalism of the late 19th and early 20th century (see e.g. Schudson, 1978), and observers have rightly pointed to the fact that Pulitzer, Hearst and other proponents of this movement attempted to bridge idealism with commercialism. By including citizens in solving societal problems they were believed to be more prone to buy the newspapers, and it is perhaps in this light that Joseph Pulitzer’s decision to publish all the names of the people who had given pennies to the pedestal, should be seen. But the action journalism at the turn of last century did also focus on more acute and concrete societal problems than the construction of a landmark in the port of the city where the paper was published. Jakob A. Riis, who was in The making of an American, as the title of his later autobiography read, concerned himself mostly with the problems that the most troubled of his new countrymen met in life, and on account of all of his accomplishments when it came to ensuring help, he was later called “the most useful citizen in New York” by Theodore Roosevelt (Ware, 1938: 78). He, his colleagues, competitors and their editors and owners attempted themselves to solve crimes, famine and all other kinds of social problems, and they did so by supplementing the municipal agencies and charities (Campbell, 2001: 180) by helping with the collection, coordination and distribution of material, manpower and economical support. This type of journalism also found its way to other parts of the world. In England, the prominent editor William T. Stead also practiced and advocated journalism in his newspapers, and on the European continent, several newspapers around the turn of last century considered action journalism the most important of all journalistic approaches (Campbell, 2001).

In the very newspapers, where Ulrik Haagerup published his original call for a constructive journalism, action journalism had a century earlier been described as the very type of journalism on which the future of newspapers would depend (Cavling, 1909). These were words that resembled those of William Randolph Hearst’s own newspaper, The Journal, which had gone so far as to claim “the journalism of action” represented “the final stage in the evolution of the modern journalism” (Campbell, 2001: 180). The coincident wording on both sides of the Atlantic might not have been a coincidence. During a several month-long tour around the US, the then editor and part-owner of the Danish Newspaper, Henrik Cavling, visited the newsroom at The Journal, as Cavling recounts in his travel book “From America” (1897), and in 1909, on the 25th anniversary of his daily, the Danish editor, who has been described as one of the most inspirational journalists and editors in the Nordic countries, proclaimed that “journalism has placed its banner on both poles of the globe, and one might think that there was now no new land for it to win. But action-journalism opens new and unlimited territories. A modern newspaper, which might rightfully say that no aspect of humanity is foreign to it, can find new assignments everywhere,” and to this Cavling added: ”and it is on this journalism, still in it’s beginning, that the development of papers for a large part will depend” (Cavling, 1909: 3 - translation by author).

Another of the seminal figures in the re-articulation of a more constructive journalism is also well aware that it compares to other historical movements. While Gyldensted points to the turn of last century, Ulrik Haagerup connects constructive journalism to another movement that gained traction among practitioners, researchers and lecturers at the turn of this century. Haagerup writes with reference to this earlier movement: “The experiments had names like public journalism, civic journalism, solutions journalism, citizens’ journalism, and many other terms – all with the intention to promote more problem-solving reporting” (2014: 67). Public journalism – and the other names it became associated with over time – originally developed out of dissatisfaction with the tripartite relationship between the public, the press and politics. Critics noted that journalists had moved too close to politics, while at the same time distancing themselves from the very people they claimed to
be working for. Criticism resulted in collaboration between American researchers and practitioners, who started advocating for a new set of journalism principles and an adjacent set of practices. In the words of one of the founding fathers, Jay Rosen, public journalists should now include and address “people as citizens, potential participants in public affairs, rather than victims or spectators,” and journalists should also help society “act upon, rather than just learn about, its problems” (Rosen, 1999: 22). The Idea of Public Journalism, as one of the books about the public journalism movement was termed, caught on many places, and Michael Schudson came to describe it as “the best organized social movement in the history of the American Press” (1999: 118). It also found its way to many other countries, where, incidentally, Denmark turned out to be one of the other places where this movement gained the strongest foothold (Haas, 2007).

But while Public Journalism initially found a receptive audience in many countries, and the speed with which it spread resembles that of constructive journalism, the concept began to entail so many meanings that some started coming up with other names, while others gave up on it entirely. In this, the founding fathers were in part to blame themselves. One of them, the editor Davis "Buzz" Merritt explained that he believed it was an “arrogant exercise, a limiting one to codify a set of public journalism rules,” (1995: 124) while another of the original proponents, Jay Rosen, well into the 1990s, wrote that the “most important thing anyone can say about public journalism, I will say right now: We’re still inventing it. And because we’re inventing it, we don’t really know what ‘it’ is” (1994: 388). One supporter and early chronicler of the movement even went so far as to write, “[j]ournalism’s proper role in support of democracy is a case-by-case question, determined by circumstances and taste” (1995: 14). In the words of Theodore Glasser, the results were a shift in responsibility “for precision and specificity from the author to the reader” (1999: 5), and even if the lexical elasticity might have eased the initial positive perceptions of the movement, because the lack of conceptual clarification could subsume many different journalistic principles, the ultimate result was that “… devising a single public journalism definition … would be as impractical as trying to create a single definition of investigative journalism,” as one researcher put it (Bare, 1998: 84-85).

The reluctance to come up with concrete definitions meant that there was ample room for many different conceptualizations of what public journalism was, and while some supporters simply started coming up with other names, some of the critics of the movement started associating public journalism with whatever they considered wrong with journalism. When some news organizations, for instance, decided to publish a threatening letter from the so-called Unabomber, critics perceived it to be a case of public journalism. The same problems came to characterize the action journalism from the turn of the last century. With a lack of definitions and clear-cut ramifications in terms of what it meant to prompt action in order to help society solve its problem, the movement in time developed in new directions and became known by some under other derogative names, such as yellow journalism (Campbell, 2001). Yellow journalism was a type of sensationalist journalism that Joseph Pulitzer attempted to distance himself from later in life, and his attempts at distancing himself from the more sensational aspects of the active journalism was widely acknowledged. In his obituary in 1911 in New York Times, whose editor and owner had originally been an opponent of action journalism, and whose masthead slogan – “all the news that is fit to print” according to some was meant to separate the New York Times from The World and The Journal – prided Pulitzer for distancing himself from yellow journalism and for the new “constructiveness” Pulitzer himself had exhibited in his final years.

**Principles of constructive journalism**

There have been other movements in the history of journalism that resemble one or more of the principles associated with constructive journalism of the 21st century. These include the popularity of what has been labeled peace journalism. "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,” as one of the proponents of this movement, the Norwegian peace researcher Johan Galtung has described it (2003: 179). Incidentally, Johan Galtung, together with another Norwegian colleague, were among the first researchers to note the importance of news values, and in a seminal study – published under the title *The structure of foreign news* (1965) - they recorded twelve news factors that could help explain what events made the news. These news values were: “Frequency, threshold, unambiguity, meaningfulness, consonance, unexpectedness, continuity, composition, reference to elite nations, reference to elite people, reference to persons and reference to something negative” (1965: 70–71). Over time, other researchers, lecturers and practitioners have come up with other news values (see e.g. Harcup and O’Neill, 2001), and when constructive journalism reappeared as a concept in 2008 in an op-ed piece, it was meant to introduce a new news value to assist with the selection of news stories.

Other movements that resemble constructive journalism include solutions journalism (see e.g. Benesch, 1998). Like action journalism, peace journalism and public journalism the concept of solutions journalism preceded constructive journalism, and solutions journalism originated in America where the Solutions Journalism Network now promotes it. This is an organization with a small staff and a board that host seminars and provide training for news organizations and at journalism schools. Common for most of the older movements with which constructive journalism might be partly associated is, however, that they over time have lost their popularity and have been most remembered by researchers rather than the practitioners themselves. So, while constructive journalism might come to rival former movements in terms of its international reach and relevance, it also runs the risk of meeting the same fate as movements of the past, if its original proponents – or the practitioners, lectures and researchers, who have become inspired by it – do not offer stronger definitions and define the borders that separate it from other types of journalism. This process of conceptual clarification does, however, not need to start from the very beginning. In time, several attempts at modeling roles of journalists have been developed in order to describe different norms for journalism (see e.g. Cohen, 1963; Donsbach, 1995; Weaver and Wilhoit, 1996; Donsbach and Patterson, 2004; Skovsgaard et al., 2015; Mellado, Hellmueller and Donsbach, 2017).

One of them, the Journalistic Compass (Bro, 2004, 2008), was originally developed to delineate differences and similarities between traditional journalism and the public journalism that gained popularity around the turn of the century. This model incorporates two sets of journalistic principles. The first refers to the purpose of journalism, and while some journalists, editors, owners and others associated with the practice of journalism will be passive in the sense that they do not concern themselves with what follows from their work, other journalists will attempt to prompt action in order to ensure that the problems they have uncovered are solved. In this connection, it is important to note that “active” does not imply that journalists are promoting particular political, commercial or other viewpoints from persons or organizations with special interests. Supporters of this more active type of journalism stress the need for what they have termed “pro-active neutrality”. Here, journalism is “neutral” because it, in the words of one of the original proponents of public journalism, “prescribes no chosen solution and favors no particular party of interest,” but it is also “proactive in its belief that journalism can in certain cases intervene in the service of broad public values without compromising its integrity” (Rosen, 1996: 13). Another of the original advocates for a more public journalism, David Buzz Merritt, has in a similar vein advocated that journalists should be “fair-minded participants” who are “neutral on specifics” but move “far enough beyond detachment to care about whether resolution occurs” (1995: 116). These are both descriptions that are also fitting for what many of the action journalists at the turn of last century attempted to accomplish.
The second set of principles in the Compass refers to the perspective of journalism, and here, one can distinguish between a deliberative approach and a representative approach. The latter is when journalists focus on persons, organizations and others who represent the public or parts thereof, whereas a deliberative perspective entails that journalists focus on private citizens rather than authoritative decision-makers. When this particular attempt at modeling the roles of journalism has been labeled “a compass”, it has do with the fact that this model can be used by journalists to navigate normatively. Whenever they are about to produce a news story, the compass is a reminder to journalists that they can steer towards different corners of the journalistic world. While users of the original magnetically based compass can navigate towards North or South, East or West – or anywhere in between – users of the journalistic compass can navigate normatively towards a deliberative or representative, and an active or a passive approach – or anywhere in between. In this connection it is important to note that while the compass itself describe normative orientations it is not in itself a normative model. The compass does not imply that one type of journalism is more important than others. The model simply attempts to develop four ideal types of the ways in which journalists can service the public by either passively relaying information or actively attempting to ensure action by others, and by focusing on actions and attitudes among the public or the people, who represent the public. In this sense the compass is a descriptive model that can help journalists, editors and others to think about how to cover any news story.

But the Journalistic Compass cannot only be used by practitioners to help decide how to navigate normatively when doing journalism. The Compass can also be used in a more analytical way by researchers to account for some of the similarities and differences between the primary principles of journalism. To take an example: while proponents of public journalism believed that journalists in general should have a more deliberative approach, some believed that the inclusion of citizens in the news media was an end in itself. This is equivalent of the passive-deliberative journalism, where a journalist will work to include citizens in public deliberations. Other supporters of the public journalism movement believed that public deliberation was more of a means to other ends: To them, public journalism was about ensuring public participation in solving societal problems. Here, the compass can help differentiate between different approaches within the same movement, while at the same time pointing to the way they resemble and depart from other more classical norms of journalism. Similar the compass can help locate and differentiate other types of journalism, like solution journalism, citizen journalism and participatory journalism (Singer et al., 2011), where journalism values some of the norms inherent in the Compass over others. In e.g. solution journalism the main interest centers on the horizontal dimension, since solutions journalists are actively orientated, while proponents of a more participatory journalism focuses more on the vertical dimension, since their interest is mainly the inclusion of members of the public in various ways.

Figure 1. The journalistic compass - normative dichotomies in news reporting
While the journalistic compass originally was constructed to account for a particular movement in time, the public journalism movement, this movement also had historical roots of its own, and the “parallels are not difficult to detect,” as W. Joseph Campbell (2006: xix) has written with an explicit reference to what took place at the turn of last century and the turn of this. Within the particular framework of the Compass, the active journalism from the turn of last century is perhaps best located in the active side of the compass. In some instances, the work of individual journalists like Jakob A. Riis and editors and owners like Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst attempted to prompt the actions among private citizens. In such instances, readers could be asked to contribute with everything from various types of material to monetary funds and man-hours, where they helped distribute food, rebuild broken tenements and contribute to other time-consuming jobs. In other instances, journalists and the newspapers they worked for would approach more authoritative decision-makers in political parties, companies, charity organizations or other types of organized interests that might have a greater capacity for solving societal problems. As such, the compass can be used as an analytical framework when comparing similarities and differences between different norms of journalism, and it can also be helpful when it comes to describing and discussing how the constructive journalism of the 21st century compares to these past movements and other, perhaps more classical forms of journalism.

Modeling constructive journalism

Studying the principles and the concrete examples of practice that the proponents of constructive journalism have presented in various types of publications and situating them within the framework of the journalistic compass, one might at first be prone to place constructive journalism in the right-hand side of the model. There are certainly also many statements in articles, chapters, books and other types of publications about constructive journalism that provide reminders of the period around the turn of last century, where seminal figures within journalism, like Jakob A. Riis, Joseph Pulitzer and Williams Randolph Hearst attempted to prompt action among both private citizens and more authoritative decision-makers. This active purpose of journalism is, however, mostly evident in the works by Cathrine Gyldensted. The sub-title of From Mirrors to Movers (2014) is termed “Five elements of positive psychology in constructive journalism” and the fifth element to which she devotes the final part of the book is “Move the World.” Gyldensted’s views on the active purpose of journalism are evident also from the beginning of this book. In the prologue Gyldensted distinguishes between two ways in which journalists can move the world forward: by way of sticks or carrots. Her point is that journalism through history has “shown to have a role in improving society by exposing the negative sides of life” (2014: 6), and thereby prompting action by making it impossible for those in power to stand idly by.

“But, what if we added more carrot while we kept the stick,” she asks rhetorically on the first pages of the book (2014: 6), and ends the prologue by stating that constructive journalism is more akin to a carrot in the sense that it “investigates opportunities, looks at dilemmas from all sides, and indicates remedies. It does not ignore the problems and it does not trivialize them; instead it focuses on how these problems can be solved” (2014: 7). Ulrik Haagerup, in his various works on constructive journalism, makes a similar point about the need for a focus on potentials rather that the problems of society. While Gyldensted refers to a number of seemingly opposed forces in nature - like male and female, night and day, hot and cold, summer and winter – to make the point clear that we need journalism that focuses on problems and potentials, Haagerup makes a similar point by including a number of other opposites. In the introduction to Constructive News, he argues that “good reporting is seeing the world with both eyes” (2014: 4), and more than a hundred pages later he proceeds to explain “[c]onstructive news criticizes traditional news journalism where you only see the world with one eye. It does not argue that it is better to just see it with the other eye. Instead,
good journalism is seeing the world with both eyes” (2014: 111). Throughout their individual works – both in their native Danish language and in English – these two proponents of constructive journalism make repeated references to the fact that constructive journalism is not meant to substitute, but rather to supplement more traditional norms and forms of journalism.

But there is an important difference between ends and means that one is reminded of when studying constructive journalism through the framework of the Journalistic Compass. While the action journalist at the turn of last century – and some of the public journalists at the turn of this century – believed that journalists at times should be pro-active neutrals (Rosen, 1996), where they should be “neutral on specifics”, as David Buzz Merritt described it, but move far enough beyond detachment to care about whether resolution occurs” (1995: 116), particularly Ulrik Haagerup has a more passive approach. Haagerup does write about a future orientation in journalism, and in the anthology he edited in 2012, he himself opens the book in the very first chapter by stating that constructive journalists should “focus on the future by asking openly: how can we do better the next time? And thereby they contribute to the public debate being oriented towards solutions and the future” (2012b: 44). But it is characteristic of his works that he writes about offering inspiration, presenting solutions and giving suggestions, while some of the proponents of previous movements worked to ensure concrete action. Cathrine Gyldensted on the other hand writes more about the need for such proactive attempts at “moving the world” and “improving society” by way of journalism. In this sense the constructive aspect of journalism seems to have two meanings. One focuses on what precedes the journalistic publication, and it is aimed at finding other news stories that the ones associated with traditional journalism, while the other type of constructive journalism focuses on what succeeds journalism, and how journalism can help bring about change in society.

This important difference can account for one of the prevailing differences between the two proponents of constructive journalism. While Cathrine Gyldensted in general uses the term “constructive journalism” in the titles, subtitles and texts of the books, she has authored and co-authored, Ulrik Haagerup consistently uses the concept of “constructive news.” Both of them do on occasion in the actual body of text in their works use the other concept, but the terms do express a difference of focus between a concrete product and a particular practice. Here, Haagerup seems mostly focused on the ways in which constructive journalism can affect journalism itself through the selection and presentation of news stories, and throughout all of his works, he concerns himself with how the constructive aspect can become either a new “news criterion” or a new framing device, that can affect the “angles” of journalism, as he puts it. Gyldensted is not opposing this meaning of constructiveness. She also points to the need for telling other types of stories. But her “constructive journalism” is also aimed at what effects journalism can have, and how it can be used to move people in a number of ways. This might stem from her own studies and personal background within the realm of positive psychology, and while Gyldensted as such is more prone to focus on the effects of journalism in her works, Haagerup focuses more on, what affects journalists themselves.

Analyzed through the framework of the journalistic compass Haagerups conception of what it means to be constructive seems more situated on the passive side, and he specifically warns against “turning journalism into activism” (2014: 111). Haagerups conception of constructive news does however differ from the traditional journalism that is normally associated with the passive side of journalism, since he believes the approach should include a focus on the potentials rather than the problems that are usually the starting point for watchdog-journalism. Cathrine Gyldensted does not take issue with this passive focus – supplemented with a focus on different potentials – but her conception of “constructive journalism” also includes support for more active approaches in line with past movements. What binds them together is, however, that they include both a deliberative and a representative focus as part of their conceptions of what constructive means. Haagerup points
to several examples of journalistic productions and projects from his time as head of the national broadcasting company in Denmark, where journalists at times focused on, what might be potentials for private citizens and at other times assisted politicians, company leaders and other decision-makers in coming up with solutions to their problems. Likewise, Gyldensted offer examples of what she perceives to be constructive journalism that is both oriented towards citizens and decision-makers, and as such they relate constructive journalism to both a deliberative and a representative approach when analyzed through the framework of the journalistic compass.

Constructive practitioners – and researchers

The main proponents of constructive journalism, Ulrik Haagerup and Cathrine Gyldensted, agree about much, but in particular about what constructive journalism is not. Haagerup has devoted a section to the issue under the headline “Mind your step: the traps of constructive journalism” (2014: 111), while Gyldensted sums up similar points, while writing that “some of central criticisms towards constructive journalism are myths” (2014: 46). For instance, both of them take issue with criticism that constructive journalism is “happy news,” as Haagerup puts it (2014: 112), or that it is “uncritical” as Gyldensted writes (2014: 46). “Critical reporting is still important,” Haagerup adds, and when refuting criticism the two are in almost total agreement. But for the future of constructive journalism it might also be important that the two original proponents – and others, who believe in the potentials of constructive journalism – come to an agreement about not only what constructive journalism is not, but also about what it is. For here disagreement seems to be greater. As this article has shown by way of the framework of the Journalistic Compass there seems to be more differences than simply the wording, where one prefers to write about “constructive news,” while the other favors “constructive journalism.” While Haagerup seems more concerned about the ways in which constructive journalism should affect journalism itself Gyldensted also has an interest in how this type of journalism could be constructive for those outside the newsrooms. These and other differences can, however, be difficult to determine for neither of the two have attempted to make the differences between their respective approaches clear.

Not engaging with the work of each other in order to offer an authoritative account of what constructive journalism should be is one thing. But things are not made easier by the fact that both proponents continue, at least in part, to leave the concept open for interpretation. Constructive journalism is “not a static domain, but will evolve as the research, underpinning method and application evolve,” Cathrine Gyldensted wrote in From mirrors to movers (2014: 174), and this is a position she has maintained. Writing as late as 2016 in a newsletter from Windesheim University in Holland, where she was hired to develop a study program in constructive journalism, Gyldensted noted that she and her colleagues continue to see constructive journalism as “an organic domain, that will need to be revised, matured and progressed as we go along.” Similarly Haagerup has made several references to the need for continued experimentation. “Experiment with new ideas, new questions, new angles and new ways. Find out what works, and what needs to be corrected,” he has written in Constructive News (2014: 113). The Constructive Institute that Haagerup started after leaving the national broadcasting company in Denmark, is committed to ensuring such continual experiments through the fellowships the Institute offers to both national and international journalists and editors. These are all statements that resemble those of the founding fathers of the public journalism movement, who were reluctant to offer any authoritative definitions of what public journalism was about out of fear that it might hinder continued experimentation.

Experimentation is naturally important. But as the history of journalism has shown attempts to keep definitions open run the risk of making enemies out of both critics and supporters. Critics can find room to associate the principles with unintended – and unwarranted – practices. Leaving definitions open can also alienate supporters, who might develop their own concepts to
more adequately describe the particular aspects of a movement that they consider most important. This also happened with public journalism that in time became known under other names, and this is now also gradually happening with constructive journalism, where other terms, some new and some old, such as problem-solving journalism and solutions journalism, are now increasingly becoming popular. It might therefore be high time that one of those professions that developed when Joseph Pulitzer, Williams Randolph Hearst and other seminal figures within journalism history started some of the world’s first schools, namely researchers, step in and take action. This was also a call made by James Carey, when he wrote about the public journalism movement at the turn of the century. We need to ensure that “these experiments sustain rather than fail us,” Carey, who joined the faculty at Columbia University in 1998, has written (1997: 331). His point was that it might not only be the job of journalists to be constructive. This could also be the job for scholars themselves, who can help with constructive descriptions and discussions of how different types of journalism are related to another. Like this article has attempted to do.

Notes
In order to ensure full transparency journalists, editors and others working for the news media will at times include statements about the way in which their personal circumstances could infringe with their coverage. Such a full disclosure might also be in place here, since I have been a sympathetic, although critical participant over the years in some of the conferences, chapters in books and other types of presentations and publication about constructive journalism (see e.g. Haagerup, 2012a). While I do not myself think that this past commitment interferes negatively with the analysis in this article, it should certainly be known to readers, so they can make their own judgments.

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