

Constructive journalism and its effects on environmental discourses

Lekshmi Priya Sanal*, I. Arul Aram

Department of Media Sciences, Anna University, Chennai 600025, India

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Abstract

Concerning the existence of all living beings, environmental issues take a crucial standpoint in the area of constructive journalism. Through positive psychology and solution-based approaches, it moves from the rigid ethical tenets of objectivity and impartiality, and employs practices based on reflexivity and advocacy for social concerns including pressing environmental issues. Can this change of journalistic narrative be considered significant? If so, does it imply any shifts in existing media culture that embodies a new set of ethics? This paper studies the ethics emerging out of constructive journalism based on environmental discourses and reviews 25 global environmental stories with constructive attributes through content analysis. With non-alarmist headlines, solutions-based and restorative approaches, and comprehensive narratives, it was found that these articles did not flout any ethical principles besides environmental advocacy. A shift in ethical code is recommended to entirely accommodate reflexive and transformative narratives in the field of journalism.

Keywords: Constructive journalism; environmental journalism; ethics; media; solutions

1. Introduction

Originating from the Greek word *ethos* (character) and the Latin word *mores* (custom), ethics fundamentally outlines a code of moral conduct that is beneficial on an individual as well as social basis and “establishes the nature of duties that people owe themselves and one another” (LII, 2022). In the recent literature, it is defined as “non-mandatory principles and guidelines that a person or group may decide to follow as engines that direct decisions; generally related to behavior affecting other persons or groups” (Barney, 2003). Like most professions, the field of journalism has also evolved over an edifice of professional ethics since its commencement.

In India, journalistic code of ethics is underlined in the Press Council of India-issued Norms of Journalistic Conduct, which identifies 45 areas of interest of national significance vis-à-vis media functioning. The code highlights serving the citizens with fair, accurate, impartial and decent news as the principal tenet of journalism and expects the Press to upkeep its conduct adhering to universally accepted norms of professionalism. “The norms, when applied with due discernment and adaptation to the varying circumstance of each case, will help the journalist to self-regulate his or her conduct” (Press Council of India, 2020).

So, what does it mean to be ethical as a journalist or a media organization in the present media scape that is heavily interspersed with sensationalism, polarization, jingoism, negativity bias, and paparazzi culture; not forgoing the fact of

life-threatening risks often imbued with the journalism profession?

It is without any doubt that journalism is a service to the society. The role of news in the day-to-day lives of citizens and the impact it has on one and all paved way towards founding the principles and purpose of journalism (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021). However, the once objectivity, responsibility and fairness tenets of journalism seem to have made a way to excessive sensationalism laced with seemingly negative and polarizing narratives in the newsrooms worldwide. Furthermore, the corporate takeovers of media houses have led to the propagation of ‘breaking-news’ and ‘exclusives’ culture to generate revenue and increase viewership; often at the cost of blurring the journalistic code of ethics for greater TRPs.

To counter the exponential growth of yellow journalism, and negative and polarizing views being thrown out as objective truth in mainstream media over the last few decades, various movements such as action journalism peace journalism, service journalism, civic journalism, or citizen journalism have made rounds (Bro, 2018). Building on these precedents, a constructive approach is being embraced by alternative news platforms and some mainstream organizations around the world that transcends beyond the peripheries of traditional and limiting structures of journalism to one aimed to be constructive to the society while offering solutions to real-time social issues plaguing it.

Defined as “an emerging form of journalism that involves applying positive psychology techniques to news processes and production in an effort to create productive and engaging coverage, while holding true to journalism’s core functions” (McIntyre & Gyldensted, 2017), constructive journalism has

* Corresponding author.

Email: lekshmis92@gmail.com

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been referred to as the next megatrend in the field of journalism by Haagerup (2017).

An area that finds great prominence and wide coverage amidst news platforms that practice constructive journalism is environment. Largely ignored by mainstream media, the relevant and informational coverage of environmental issues and measures to mitigate these by such platforms are rather crucial as we currently are increasingly witnessing the repercussions of climate change and global warming.

Ginsberg (2022) observed a rapidly growing prominence of solutions journalism (an ancillary of constructive journalism), more so in regions that have been most severely affected by climate change in recent years. He added that this manner of reporting could finally break free from the usual alarmist tone of climate reporting observed in the mainstream media and reach out to the readers more successfully.

1.1. Review of literature

1.1.1. Journalistic ethics

The first set of ethical principles titled *Canons of Journalism* was adopted by the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) in 1923 that included nine areas of professional and ethical considerations: responsibility; freedom of the press; independence; sincerity; truthfulness and accuracy; impartiality; fair play; and decency. These principles were put together “by responsible journalists in revulsion against the sensational journalism in the 1920s” (Saalberg, 1973). These ethical codes have been since universally adopted and adapted by practitioners and professionals of journalism around the world.

Nearly a century later, the Code of Ethics laid down by the Society of Professional Journalists (2011) does not stray too far from these and includes four principles: seeking truth and report it; ¹minimizing harm; acting independently; and being accountable and transparent.

1.1.2. Constructive journalism

The term constructive was first associated with journalism by Walter Williams (1914), the founder of the Missouri School of Journalism, over 100 years ago and today the field is slowly cementing its foundation with various journalists and organizations employing constructive approaches in their news narratives. The Netherlands-based Constructive Institute calls this approach a counter to the rampantly negative and sensationalized way of news coverage in the mainstream, which does not exaggerate or fixate on the negative but “aims to provide audiences with a fair, accurate and contextualized picture of the world” (Constructive Institute, 2022).

Gyldensted (2015) introduced “five key elements of positive psychology in constructive journalism: expanding the mind, storming the brain, changing the question, tell it right and move the world”. Instead of a structured definition, she implied how the extra yet necessary efforts of journalists can entirely change the narrative surrounding negatively framed and sensationalised stories in the recent years.

The field may not be confused with positive journalism, which only focuses on happy stories while completely

overlooking the wrongdoings or problems in the society. The goal of constructive journalism is to move beyond highlighting just the positive aspects of a society but to research and seek solutions to its persistent issues and comprehensively present it to the people. One cannot stop negative incidents from happening, as most often these portray the reality of the world we all live in.

However, how these are presented can most certainly be reconsidered and redefined. McIntyre & Gibson (2016) stated that news need not only to capture the positive events, but also to focus on narratives that showcase positive aspects emerging from a negative event, or a “silver-lining story”. The authors felt that this approach may allow media organizations to not give up on covering negative events entirely, but continue doing so in a rational manner that seeks a positive angle in adversity.

With its positive psychology, restorative narrative, and solutions-based approaches as the foundation, this genre moves from the traditional code of journalistic ethics of objectivity and impartiality, and employs journalistic practices based on reflexivity and advocacy for social concerns with the ultimate goal of ushering in real-time changes in society.

Constructive journalism challenges the role of the mainstream media as a mute spectator that observes and only informs. It relies on the reflexive delivery of news on the part of the journalist, and is socially useful for its audiences. Can such a change of journalistic narrative be considered significant in the way media functions? If so, does this imply any shift in the existing media culture that embodies a new set of ethics?

1.1.3. Environmental discourse

Environment continues to remain an area that is rather flagrantly overlooked by mainstream media, despite being established as a beat since the late 1960s (Sachsman, 2002). Unless and until something terribly catastrophic or in the media parlance, a ‘breaking’ newsworthy incident occurs, environmental stories mostly always take a backseat with many major mainstream media organizations not even having a dedicated environmental section (Friedman, 2015). Mishra (2020) also pointed to the development versus environmental conservation stance that the mainstream media more frequently projects, as and when clashes occur with the administration and activists; the former almost always takes precedence and is a matter of concern observed globally.

On the other hand, it is the alternative and independent media platforms along with non-profit organizations that have risen to the occasion to fearlessly report on various environmental issues including the one on climate change, thanks to the internet and social media.

But with great responsibility, also comes great threats to life and more often than not, environmental journalists have been bearing the brunt for raising grave environmental issues, often at the fatal cost. Roughly about 30 environmental journalists have been murdered since 2009, according to the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), claiming that the number did not include a number of activists that might be close to a thousand (Char, 2021).

1.1.4. Changing trends in environmental news coverage

In India, alternative media platforms like *The Better India* and *Mongabay India* have been at the forefront of covering environmental issues by deploying constructive narratives in recent times. Other environmental news platforms and blogs are also attempting discursive and restorative narratives alongside solutions-based manner of news presenting, instead of the usual alarmist narrative often synonymous with environmental journalism with an aim to draw more attention to environmental concerns amidst the common people as well as to invite civic participation.

As Ginsberg (2022) mentioned, a cultural shift is indeed being observed in the way environmental news is dealt with. Various factors including a concern for the environment and future, inequitable distribution of resources and its remorseless overexploitation, as well as better awareness could be attributed to this shift.

One could argue that constructive journalism with its reflexive and transformative paradigms, stands exactly against the objective and impartial principles of normative journalistic ethics. However, “the highest and primary obligation of ethical journalism is to serve the public” (Society of Professional Journalists, 2011), which also happens to be the primary goal of constructive journalism. It is still an organic domain that requires research, revision, maturation as well as progress (Bro, 2018).

2. Methodology

The study included the content analysis of 25 recent environmental news stories from around the world that have deployed constructive attributes in their narratives. These platforms were chosen based upon a list by the Solutions Journalism Network (2019) and further verified by their own claim of practicing constructive journalism. Purposive sampling was employed to choose one recent environmental story from each of these platforms between 2019 and 2022. This time frame was considered for the study to include most recent environmental stories under the constructive journalism framework as illustrated in Table 1.

Articles were categorized into five groups including stories from generic environment platforms; exclusive solutions centric environment/ climate change platforms; news platforms with environment exclusive solution series; solutions/regular platforms with an environment section to solutions/regular news portals with only environment tags.

3. Results and Discussion

Around the world, publications employing a constructive approach in news stories, even more so when it comes to environmental coverage, so far are found rare. Nevertheless, this number has been now slowly increasing with mainstream media organizations like BBC, the Washington Post, or the Guardian foraying into this genre. It was observed in the study that more alternative news platforms were quicker to adapt to this emerging approach to news sharing.

As illustrated in Figure 1, 8 of 25 (32%) stories were from the platforms (The Better India, Things That Work Uganda, or

the Mercury News) that have dedicated environment sections, while 9 (36%) were stories from regular/solutions news portals (Politico Magazine, the Guardian, or Shareable) that had the environment tag.

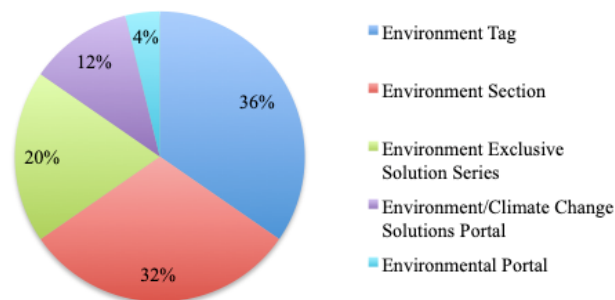


Fig. 1. Categorization of environmental stories as per media portals

About 3 (12%) portals (Ensia, Fix Solutions Lab and Hothouse) included only solutions-based environment- or climate change-centric stories and 5 (20%) stories were from the platforms (BBC, The Washington Post, or Vox) featuring exclusive solutions-based series on the environment. Mongabay was the sole environmental platform, which also had a separate solutions-based series (hence, it was included in both groups). All the 25 articles were solutions-focused, had a conversational tone and were fairly comprehensive in nature, despite addressing serious environmental concerns in the backdrop.

Most of the articles not only highlighted the positives of the solutions found, but also addressed the negative situation in depth that had originally led to the need for those solutions. Articles dealing with scientific jargon vis-à-vis environment and climate change were broken down and explained clearly with expert opinions.

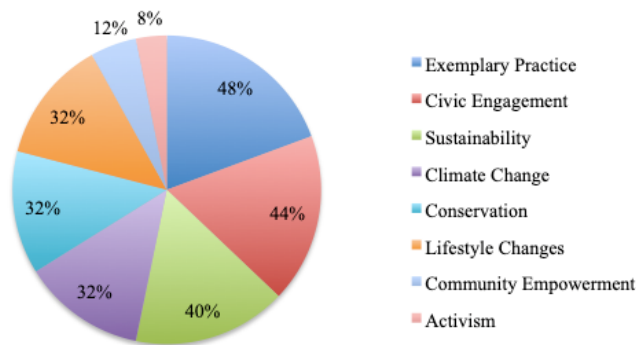


Fig. 2. Prominent themes emerging in the stories

Most prominently emerging themes as illustrated in Figure 2 included exemplary practices (48%), civic engagement (44%), sustainability (40%), climate change (32%), conservation (32%), lifestyle changes (32%), community empowerment (12%), and activism (8%).

A majority of stories (56%) included statements, opinions and inferences from experts and stakeholders (scientists, policymakers, and community members) that added value and credibility to the issues covered. Two articles dealt with gender inclusivity (8%), while five articles (20%) implied call-to-action for its audiences with adequate resources to infer from.

A large number of these platforms operated out of the US and mostly covered the regional stories (Politico Magazine,

Fast Company, High Country News, and New Hampshire Union Leader.). Additionally, there were international mainstream platforms such as the BBC, the Washington Post, and the Guardian that cover constructive environmental stories from around the world. Few platforms were based in countries like India (The Better India), Uganda (Things That Work Uganda), or Costa Rica (The Voice of Guanacaste).

Far from the alarmist tone taken by mainstream media while

covering environmental crises, almost all the reviewed articles had a restorative narrative. As seen from Table 1, the headlines of all the 25 articles were not sensational or click-bait inducing, but positive and reflexive in nature. Compared to the usual mainstream articles, these articles did not flout any ethical principles besides advocating for the environmental cause that may appear in conflict with the objectivity and impartiality principles.

Title of the article	News Platform
Language barriers in conservation research could be hurting biodiversity efforts. What can be done about it?	Ensia (ENvironmental Solutions In Action)
Explainer: Two people hunted an olive ridley turtle in Ostional, a community dedicated to sea turtle conservation	The Voice of Guanacaste
In Vietnam, farmers show a willingness to work with the elephant in the room	Mongabay (Solutions)
The country trailblazing the fight against disasters	BBC (Future Planet)
How Behavioral Science Solved Chicago's Plastic Bag Problem	Politico Magazine (What Works)
The perilous 1,000-mile journey to save Africa's endangered black rhinos	The Washington Post (Climate Solutions)
Black Soldier Fly As Solution Organic Waste Management In Gulu	Things that work Uganda
Our Solar Powered Future is already China's Reality	Reasons to Be Cheerful
Cities are planting trees. Why not make them fruit trees?	Grist (Fix Solutions Lab)
Rebuilding Nepal, sustainably	Inkline
To protect eagles, hunters and conservationists rebuild old alliances	High Country News
The Saguaro Solution: Can a massive effort to replant cacti in the Sonoran Desert restore an ecosystem ravaged by fire?	bioGraphic (Solutions)
Solutions blueprint: How to talk to your kids about climate	Hothouse
No Thanksgiving crab: California officials delay start of 2022 Dungeness season	The Mercury News
How Three Friends Prevented 7.5 Lakh Plastic Milk Packets From Entering Landfills	The Better India
'It's radical': the Ugandan city built on solar, shea butter and people power	The Guardian
How to free the soil by depaving	Shareable
The shrinking ozone hole shows that the world can actually solve an environmental crisis	Vox (Future Perfect)
Six lifestyle changes that could help avert the climate crisis	Positive.News
How Indigenous Knowledge Reconnects Us All to Fire	YES! Magazine
A street lit by rotten onions? An Indian market embraces biogas.	Christian Science Monitor (Monitor Solutions)
How to accelerate the socially just energy transition	Apolitical
Green burial becoming more popular in NH	New Hampshire Union Leader
Butterfly gardening could help protect endangered monarchs	Richland Source (Solutions)
These apartments will soon get their heat from wastewater	Fast Company (Impact)

Table 1 Constructive Environmental stories and their media organizations

In addition to these observations, it is important to discuss how ethics, constructive journalism and aforementioned findings of the study can be strung together. As stated in the Norms of Journalistic Conduct, the foremost tenet of journalistic ethics is to provide fair, accurate, impartial and decent news to citizens. This correlates with Constructive Institute's directive for journalists to provide audiences with a fair, accurate and contextualized picture of the world.

Furthermore, the ethical code provides a moral guideline for journalists that aids in conducting themselves professionally, and requires one to be adaptive, receptive and self-regulating in varying circumstances. Constructive journalism framework only furthers these principles by incorporating positive psychology and solutions approach to news coverage. These aspects are evident in the articles analyzed with respect to fair and impartial coverage through constructive journalism that helps the audience with both information about various environmental issues around them and realistic, productive and factually backed solutions.

Objectivity and impartiality become essential in news

reporting but more often than not, human-interest nuances get lost when journalists stick to just reporting. Also, exceedingly high negativity bias and sensationalism observed in newsrooms around the world in recent times further undermines the original norms of journalism and ethics. Growing polarization and forging of facts in the media scape has further pushed audiences towards news avoidance, or even take it seriously. Coming to the environmental beat, a certain antagonism already exists towards environment and climate reporting worldwide, which is further made worse through alarmist and apocalyptic narratives. This then makes constructive narratives observed in the analyzed articles even more relevant with respect connecting with audiences and giving them a hope for a better future with solutions they can implement in their own lives.

A reflexive approach may aid journalists to be more conscious and receptive towards environmental issues that will further help them to take these stories to audience through the inspirational and transformative narratives. The affective nature of such approaches does not undermine the foundation

of journalism or ethical norms but instead strengthens it. Thus, a shift in journalistic ethical code is required to accommodate reflexive and transformative narratives in the field of journalism.

4. Conclusion

A constructive approach is surely welcome in the field of journalism as an evolving change. One could argue advocacy for the environment may not be objective or even fair to a certain extent. However, the evolution of environmental journalism requires reflexivity as well as subjectivity that need not compromise accuracy or forge facts—a trend increasingly being observed in mainstream journalism.

More and more news platforms are embracing constructive journalism and are gaining public attention as well as engagement. This may be attributed to their positive psychology and solutions-centered way of approaching serious environmental concerns. Hence, a shift in the ethical code is recommended to entirely accommodate reflexive as well as transformative narratives in the field of journalism.

A limitation of this research is that it does not include the audience perception of constructive news coverage of environmental issues in comparison to mainstream coverage. This could help in further gauging the impact of constructive manner of coverage of environmental issues on its actual stakeholders, i.e. the audience. Another limitation is that the study only included the analysis of constructive environmental news stories. An in-depth comparative analysis between mainstream and constructive news platforms could further add value to the research. Such studies can actually prove valuable to not just the academia but also encourage the industry to approach environmental news coverage more frequently through constructive and solutions-based narratives.

An extended study to include these aspects may contribute significantly to the fields of environmental communication and research. It may also allow for a better understanding towards constructive journalism and is recommended for further research.

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