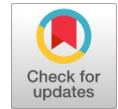# A Study on the Role of Constructive Journalism During Covid-19 Pandemic

Lekshmi Priya Sanal, I. Arul Aram

Abstract: An expansive proliferation of misinformation and fake news followed with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, a devastating event with lasting scars that changed the world forever. While social media may have originally helped in connecting people and sharing information, it may have also triggered a heightened accessibility in spreading misinformation and fake reports during the pandemic. The Covid-19 outbreak cannot be held as the sole reason for the mounting scepticism among people over the mainstream news reporting or the rising news avoidance observed in recent years. The role of news media organisations during pandemic situations towards disseminating scientific and verified information is indispensable. However, a shift from the normative role of mass media as a mere informant and mute spectator to one that reflexively gathers and presents socially useful news for its audience could have quelled the misinformation-induced hysteria to a certain extent during the peak of the pandemic—a constructive approach. This study critically analyses the various discourses surrounding constructive journalism and its role during the Covid-19 pandemic. It was found that most discourses vouched for the inclusion of constructive approaches in news sharing during crises and in future. However, regional, geopolitical and socioeconomic differences may allude to different understandings and contextual applications of constructive journalism that would require greater academic research.

Keywords: Constructive Journalism, Covid-19, Fake News, social media, Pandemic.

I. INTRODUCTION

On March 11, 2020, the novel coronavirus (Covid-19) outbreak was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organisation, following the '13-fold increase' of cases around the world (WHO, 2020, [1]). Feinleib (2001, [2]) defines a pandemic as an epidemic occurring all around the world, or spread across very large expanses of land, sometimes surpassing international boundaries and affecting large populations; holding perfectly true for Covid-19 and its devastating effects worldwide. Whole countries had excruciatingly strict lockdowns and social restrictions imposed to break the spread of viral transmission and to contain the exponentially rising rate of infections and mortality.

The attack mechanism of the virus was still unknown and baffled scientists and the medical community worldwide before any treatment or vaccine could be discovered.

It was during this time that the requirement of mass media to disseminate pandemic-relevant and verified information while steering clear of misinformation and fake news was imperatively felt. While social media may have originally helped in connecting people and sharing information, it may have also triggered heightened accessibility in spreading fake and dubious information during the pandemic, a situation that Tagliabue et al. (2020, [3]) identified as 'the pandemic of disinformation'.

Ever since the first verified announcement about the Covid-19 outbreak, a barrage of misinformation including unscientific cures and preventions, unverified facts about the disease, along vitriolic and polarising opinions targeting specific religious minorities, began steadily and militantly infiltrating our media diet (Aram & Gupta, 2022, [4]). While social media is unregulated and operates beyond the reins of traditional media gatekeeping, the onus of mainstream media in dispelling fake news and dangerous misinformation is not only crucial but also critical towards safeguarding the well-being of citizens—especially when a global public health hazard is at large. A rather harrowing example of fake news that was being circulated not just on social media but also on primetime news during the first phase of the pandemic was that of cats and dogs being potential carriers of the virus, leading to the abandonment of numerous pet animals (Sharma, 2020, [5]).

One cannot pinpoint the Covid-19 outbreak as the sole reason for the mounting doubt and scepticism among people over the mainstream media style of news reporting or the rising news avoidance that has been observed in recent years.

Figure 1: A Pandemic of Fake News and Disinformation During the Covid-19 Period. Sources: rawpixel.

A Study on the Role of Constructive Journalism During Covid-19 Pandemic

Szabo and Hopkinson (2007, [6]) discuss how negative bias is rather pronounced in the majority of news, which alone cannot be declared as the yardstick for representation of the real world that includes positive milestones, achievements and celebratory events as well. Many researches and investigations (De Hoog & Verboon, 2020, [7]; Potts & Sanchez, 1994, [8]; Johnson & Davey, 1997, [9]) have validated the detrimental effects of repeated and long-term exposure to negative news content leading to depressive mental states including anxiety, hopelessness and despair. Benton (2020, [10]), however, argues that the blame cannot be entirely centred over audiences' personal news preferences, which materialise based on the type of news accessible to them for regular consumption. Quite sensibly, it is the audience's belief system that ultimately deems the news as lacking or dishonest.

This paper critically analyses various discourses on constructive journalism, with particular focus on its impact and implications during the Covid-19 pandemic and intends to contribute and expand the existing literature on the genre through the findings.

II. DISCOURSES ON THE PANDEMIC

From television-era research (George Gerbner's Cultivation Theory (1976, [11]); Potts & Sanchez, 1994, [8]; and Johnson & Davey, 1997, [9]) to the more recent internet-based news studies (Szabo & Hopkinson, 2007, [6]; De Hoog & Verboon, 2020, [7]; and Benton, 2020, [10]), the focus has remained upon the affective nature of negative news.

These research studies have been critical of news values, and objectively cross-examine the underlying reasons behind the popularity of such media content and specifically, their effects on mental health. On one hand, the cross-national study by Soroka et al. (2019, [12]) across six continents, illuminates the bias for negative news in the audience itself, which is precisely why media generators deliberately lean towards creating and propagating content teeming with negative premises.

Then again, Benton's (2020, [10]) argument tries to reason by holding media houses culpable for creating demand by putting out the only type of content for consumption, instead of blaming personal preferences alone. Many experimental studies (Johnson & Davey, 1997, [9]; Szabo & Hopkinson, 2007, [6]; McIntyre & Gibson, 2016, [13]; De Hoog & Verboon, 2020, [7]; Benton, 2020, [10]) have directly related negative news exposure with negative emotional states such as anxiety, depression, stress, irrationality, and sadness. In a pre-Covid-19 world, news avoidance was indeed on the rise and Benton (2020, [10]) assertively claims long-term exposure to negative and sensational news has debilitating effects on mental health being the primary reason. However, the emergence of a never-before-seen pandemic situation in this digitally dependent and media-fuelled age may have perhaps reversed this situation. Being socially cut off and overwhelmed with increasingly upsetting news, people ravenously pursued any form of information that could subdue the rising panic and anxiety amongst the masses. This is where mass media should have stepped up and actively worked towards becoming the information handle that the common public could trust and rely on.

Despite the distressing graveness of the situation, the usual trope of breaking news and scoops was continually followed by prominent news organisations worldwide, concerning sharing information on Covid-19 symptoms, treatment, guidelines, etc. Such 'exclusive' pieces of information were often released before being verified at administrative levels, leading to the further spread of incomplete and speculative news.

Furthermore, pandemic restrictions like lockdowns and subsequent social distancing were found to trigger post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) causing distressing mental states such as anxiety, restlessness, depressive episodes, mood swings, boredom, hopelessness and lack of sleep (Tagliabue et al., 2020, [3]) in an increasing number of people, particularly those in the high-risk areas (Forte et al., 2020, [14][28][29][30][31][32]). Tagliabue et al. (2020, [3]) further highlighted the spread of fake news majorly contributing to the onset of PTSD and 'headline stress disorder' (Dong & Zheng, 2020, [15]) cases.

Figure 2 Role of Media during the Covid-19 Pandemic. Source: Skyline International for Human Rights

While negative incidents cannot be stalled from happening and most often portray the reality of the status quo, how it is reported certainly can be reconsidered and redefined. McIntyre and Gibson (2016, [13]) emphasise the silver-lining concept wherein reporters need not just capture positive happenings, but also determinedly look out for hopeful or resilient narratives emerging out of negative scenarios. The authors assert that this approach not only allows media organisations to carry out their normative duty of reporting negative incidents but also offers a chance to present a glimmer of hope to the audience through silver-line stories highlighting even the tiniest of positive outcomes in any given negative situation.

It need not be explicitly mentioned how indispensable the role of news media organisations is during pandemic situations towards disseminating scientific and verified information. However, a shift from the normative role of mass media as a mere informant and mute spectator to one that reflexively gathers and presents news that is socially useful for its audience could have quelled the misinformation-induced hysteria to a certain extent during the peak of the pandemic—a *constructive* approach.

van Antwerpen et al. (2022, [16]) point out how the affective nature of negative news on mental health along with the onslaught of misinformation and fake news during the Covid-19 period led to the point of contention over the role of news media that should disseminate indispensable public health information and not become a source of distress. The authors recommend the adoption of constructive approaches in news production during such unfortunate situations to remain credible while also alleviating public distress.

Various organisations have been practising constructive journalism, even before the Covid-19 period. Propelled by a positive psychology approach, this form of journalism is different from positive news that may sugarcoat or paint a rosy picture of what is happening around us, while refusing to feature negative or tragic events.

Constructive journalism is defined as an emerging form of journalism that focuses on solving real-time social issues through the application of positive psychology techniques in news coverage that is productive and engaging for the audience (McIntyre & Gyldensted, 2017, [17]).

Touted as the next megatrend in journalism (Haagerup, 2017, [18]), it is a relatively new practice that is being hailed by many media organisations and workplaces around the world as a counter to negativity and sensationalism in news, while also initiating social change in the news media landscape as one of its primary goals. Drawing inspiration from the field of positive psychology, Gyldensted put forth five elements that can be adopted by practitioners of constructive journalism, namely, "*Expand the Mind, Storm the Brain, Change the Question, Tell it Right and Move the World*" (2015, p. 14, [19]). She further indicates the involvement and contribution of journalists are key in changing the news mediascape that has been infiltrated with negative, polarising and sensational stories in recent decades.

The Constructive Institute recognises the genre as an alternative way of news creation that believes in providing an accurate and contextualised image of the world fairly to its audiences, without just focusing on the negative or wrongdoings alone and calls it "a response to increasing tabloidization, sensationalism and negativity bias of the news media today" (2022, [20]).

While a certain adherence to the normative journalistic aspects of objectivity and accuracy still exists (Aitamurto & Varma, 2018, [21]), what sets this field apart is its positive approach towards analysing and resolving issues persistent in society. Through a public-oriented perspective, more diversity and inclusiveness of opinions, Hermans and Gyldensted (2018, [22]) explain that practitioners of constructive journalism aim to add value to their coverage of current affairs and news through solution-based, call-to-action and future-oriented standpoints. They also illuminate how the field and its approaches demand a sense of responsibility in journalists towards society as a whole through the impact of news.

Additionally, other major proponents of this field include Ulrik Haagerup and Karen McIntyre, who, along with many others, have been relentlessly working in the last few years towards projecting the future that constructive journalism holds for society. This is envisioned through the active engagement of journalists in seeking solutions to pressing issues rather than just leaving it to 'informing.'

In 2016, six classifying elements of constructive journalism were developed by the Journalism Department of the Windesheim University of Applied Sciences (2022, [23]) in the Netherlands, namely, 'solution-oriented framing of news', 'future orientation', 'inclusiveness and diversity', 'empowerment of people', 'explaining contexts rather than only incidents', and 'co-creation'. These were conceptualised to foster education, research practices, industrial application and international cooperation in tandem with the field.

However, in 2020, everything changed in the face of the pandemic. Lockdown and social distancing now proved an impediment to newsgathering and journalism as a whole. With misinformation, fake news and foul elements at play, the defining elements of constructive journalism would now require additional engagement towards discerning real and verified information from the barrage of misinformation that was a click away. Constructive journalism fundamentally aims at social empowerment and community well-being, and given the mental state of people worldwide during the Covid-19 pandemic, the need for fact-checked, verified and morale-boosting news became even more pronounced. Constructive news organisations employed fact-checking measures and also shared exemplary stories of unsung heroes and community uplift that may offer anxiety-ridden and overwhelmed citizens a ray of hope amid despair and loss during the pandemic.

As for the impact assessment of constructive news during the pandemic period, Overgaard's (2021, [24]) study is rather insightful. The study focused on Covid-19 roused concerns about anxiety, racial bias, and pushback against public health recommendations emerging during this period that were further amplified by the news and social media in the US. Subjects in the study were randomly exposed to simulated social media news updates with different headlines and images and it was found that the respondents felt less angry and anxious towards positive and constructive headlines than negative headlines. A deliberate absence of graphic imagery that was prominent in the original pandemic news coverage was found to bring down not just anger and anxiety along with risk perceptions but also the anti-Chinese sentiment among the audience. The study suggests the usefulness of constructive journalism during crises like Covid-19 pandemic, where appropriate content sharing is key to keeping public morale up amidst negative and sensationalised news as well as misinformation.

An online experiment by Schäfer et al. (2022, [25]) was another study conducted to gauge the impact of restorative narratives in news stories on readers during the pandemic period, concerning their emotional, cognitive, evaluative and behavioural reactions. Highlighting how people overcome adversities, the restorative narrative in news stories has been hailed by researchers as a constructive approach to sharing negative news without emotionally overwhelming audiences (Fitzgerald et al., 2020, [26]).

Though the sample of the study may have been limited, the authors found that the results corroborated the findings of many prior studies that asserted how news projecting considerably positive outlooks were found to elevate the moods of people and thereby, pointing towards constructive news paving the way for better collective mental health in society in the longer run.

In the research conducted by van Antwerpen et al. (2022, [16]), the perspectives of journalists interested in constructive approaches from four continents were qualitatively investigated to underline the benefits and applications of constructive news reporting during Covid-19. They discovered that the practitioners found these approaches to aid their work not just as journalists but also as educators while providing hopeful narratives in place of inciting unwarranted panic through alarmist narratives. The authors suggest that constructive approaches in news reporting can bring a certain balance in providing authentic information without negatively affecting general mental health in dire situations such as the pandemic.

However, these observations do not carry over homogenously across the world. A study conducted in Zimbabwe draws attention to how constructive journalism under state apparatus can eventually prove futile if used to mask administrative inefficiencies during the critical pandemic period. Observations in Tshabangu & Salawu's (2022, [27]) study countered the general idea of constructive news eliciting positive emotions. In most instances, the researchers found that the readers in the country were infuriated by such news and felt these were propagandistic and only served the interests of those in power.

The underlying differences among these studies on the deployment of constructive journalism during the pandemic could be attributed to the variance in regional, socioeconomic, demographic and geopolitical factors. Beyond the scope of this study, an expansive exploration of what constructive journalism means and its implications over different social and political structures across the world would help expand the existing literature, while shedding light on what works and what does not, in different contexts that could be put into real-time action.

III. CONCLUSION

While the emerging form of constructive journalism may still have many miles to conquer before ascertaining its stance into the mainstream mediascape, its deployment during the catastrophically life-changing event of Covid-19 pandemic in different countries through different formats and approaches, has much to be inferred from. While this study focused more on the positive psychology approach of constructive journalism, its solutions-based approach has a greater scope of analysis that need not be limited to just the periphery of crises like the Covid-19 pandemic. The above discourses do emphasise that constructive approaches have great potential towards the future of journalism by redefining its traditionally rigid stances, dispelling misinformation and focusing on uplifting solutions amid adversity. Much more academic research is required to validate these factors.

DECLARATION STATEMENT

Funding	No, we did not receive.
Conflicts of Interest	No conflicts of interest to the best of our knowledge.
Ethical Approval and Consent to Participate	No, the article does not require ethical approval and consent to participate with evidence.
Availability of Data and Material	Not relevant.
Authors Contributions	All authors having equal contribution for this article.

REFERENCES

1. *WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 - 11 March 2020*. (2020, March 11). https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-Covid-19---11-march-2020
2. Feinleib, M. (2001). A Dictionary of Epidemiology, Fourth Edition - Edited by John M. Last, Robert A. Spasoff, and Susan S. Harris. *American Journal of Epidemiology*, *154*(1), 93–94. https://doi.org/10.1093/aje/154.1.93-a
3. Tagliabue, F., Galassi, L., & Mariani, P. (2020). The "pandemic" of disinformation in COVID-19. *SN Comprehensive Clinical Medicine*, *2*(9), 1287–1289. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42399-020-00439-1
4. Aram, I. A., & Gupta, P. (2022). Fake news: Scenario, initiatives, perceptions and challenges [Print]. In *Social Media in India: Regulatory Needs, Issues and Challenges* (1st ed., pp. 217–239). SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd.
5. Sharma, N. (2020, April 2). Locked out Indians are abandoning their pets on the streets—helpless, scared, and hungry. *Quartz India*. https://qz.com/india/1826006/coronavirus-scares-indians-into-abandoning-pet-dogs-cats/
6. Szabo, A., & Hopkinson, K. L. (2007). Negative psychological effects of watching the news in the television: Relaxation or another intervention may be needed to buffer them! *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine, 14*, 57–62. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03004169
7. De Hoog, N., & Verboon, P. (2020). Is the news making us unhappy? The influence of daily news exposure on emotional states. *British Journal of Psychology*, *111*(2), 157–173. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.12389
8. Potts, R., & Sanchez, D. (1994). Television viewing and depression: No news is good news. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 38*(1), 79–90. https://doi.org/10.1080/08838159409364247
9. Johnson, W. M., & Davey, G. C. L. (1997). The psychological impact of negative TV news bulletins: The catastrophizing of personal worries. *British Journal of Psychology*, *88*(Pt 1), 85–91. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8295.1997.tb02622.x
10. Benton, J. (2020, July 14). What makes people avoid the news? Trust, age, political leanings — but also whether their country's press is free. *Nieman Lab*. Retrieved October 27, 2022, from https://www.niemanlab.org/2020/07/what-makes-people-avoid-the-news-trust-age-political-leanings-but-also-whether-their-countrys-press-is-free/
11. Gerbner, G., & Gross, L. (1976). Living with Television: The Violence Profile. *Journal of Communication*, *26*(2), 172–199. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1976.tb01397.x
12. Soroka, S., Fournier, P., & Nir, L. (2019). Cross-national evidence of a negativity bias in psychophysiological reactions to news. *PNAS*, *116*(38), 18888–18892. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1908369116
13. McIntyre, K. E., & Gibson, R. (2016). Positive news makes readers feel good: A "silver-lining" approach to negative news can attract audiences. *Southern Communication Journal*, *81*(5), 304–315. https://doi.org/10.1080/1041794X.2016.1171892
14. Forte, G., Favieri, F., Tambelli, R., & Casagrande, M. (2020). COVID-19 Pandemic in the italian population: validation of a post-traumatic stress disorder questionnaire and prevalence of ptsd symptomatology. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *17*(11), 4151. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17114151
15. Dong, M., & Zheng, J. (2020). Letter to the editor: Headline stress disorder caused by Netnews during the outbreak of COVID-19. *Health Expectations*, *23*(2), 259–260. https://doi.org/10.1111/hex.13055

16. van Antwerpen, N., Turnbull, D., & Searston, R. A. (2022). What's positive in a pandemic? Journalism professionals' perspectives on constructive approaches to covid-19 news reporting. *Journalism Studies*, *23*(4), 506–524. https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2022.2032804

17. McIntyre, K., & Gyldensted, C. (2017). Constructive journalism: An introduction and practical guide for applying positive psychology techniques to news production. *The Journal of Media Innovations*, *4*(2), 20–34. https://doi.org/10.5617/jomi.v4i2.2403

18. Haagerup, U. (2017). *Constructive News: How to save the media and democracy with journalism of tomorrow* (2nd ed.). Aarhus University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv62hhq4

19. Gyldensted, C. (2015). *FROM MIRRORS TO MOVERS: Five Elements of Constructive Journalism* (1st ed.). GGroup Publishers.

20. *What is Constructive Journalism - Definition - Models - Meaning*. (2022, June 14). Constructive Institute. https://constructiveinstitute.org/what/

21. Aitamurto, T., & Varma, A. (2018). The constructive role of journalism. *Journalism Practice*, *12*(6), 695–713. https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2018.1473041

22. Hermans, L., & Gyldensted, C. (2018). Elements of constructive journalism: Characteristics, practical application and audience valuation. *Journalism*, *20*(4), 535–551. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884918770537

23. *Windesheim's School of Journalism includes Constructive Journalism | European Journalism Training Association*. (n.d.). Retrieved October 27, 2022, from https://www.ejta.eu/news/windesheim-s-school-journalism-includes-constructive-journalism

24. Overgaard, C. S. B. (2021). Constructive journalism in the face of a crisis: The effects of social media news updates about COVID-19. *Journalism Studies*, *22*(14), 1875–1893. https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2021.1971107

25. Schäfer, S., Greber, H., Sülflow, M., & Lecheler, S. (2022). A matter of perspective: An experimental study on potentials of constructive journalism for communicating a crisis. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 107769902210957. https://doi.org/10.1177/10776990221095751

26. Fitzgerald, K., Green, M. C., & Paravati, E. (2020). Restorative narratives. *The Journal of Public Interest Communications*, *4*(2), 51. https://doi.org/10.32473/jpic.v4.i2.p51

27. Tshabangu, T., & Salawu, A. (2022). Constructive journalism and covid-19 safe nation narratives in the herald newspaper: Implications for journalism ethics in zimbabwe. *Health Crises and Media Discourses in Sub-Saharan Africa*, 95–108. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-95100-9_6

28. Rohman, F. Y. (2022). Usage of Facebook by Student Leaders in Creating Awareness Regarding Covid-19 in Guwahati. In Indian Journal of Mass Communication and Journalism (Vol. 1, Issue 3, pp. 1–4). https://doi.org/10.54105/ijmcj.b1008.031322

29. Dash, Dr. S. (2022). Women of Real and Virtual World: Exploring the Opportunities and Challenges During COVID 19. In Indian Journal of Social Science and Literature (Vol. 1, Issue 3, pp. 1–4). https://doi.org/10.54105/ijssl.c1010.031322

30. Singh, D. (2020). COVID-19: Its Implications with a Focus on the Aviation Industry and How CRM and BI Can Play A Role. In International Journal of Management and Humanities (Vol. 5, Issue 2, pp. 52–56). https://doi.org/10.35940/ijmh.b1155.105220

31. Joshi, D. A. (2021). COVID 19 Infodemic: Analysis of the Spread and Reach of Misinformation. In International Journal of Recent Technology and Engineering (IJRTE) (Vol. 9, Issue 5, pp. 195–201). https://doi.org/10.35940/ijrte.e5260.019521

32. S, Dr. V., & S N, Dr. T. (2021). Machine Learning Approach using CNN for COVID-19 Pandemic Detection. In International Journal of Engineering and Advanced Technology (Vol. 11, Issue 2, pp. 63–67). https://doi.org/10.35940/ijeat.b3302.1211221

AUTHORS PROFILE

Lekshmi Priya Sanal is a UGC Senior Research Fellow in the Department of Media Sciences, Anna University, Chennai. Daughter of an Indian Air Force veteran, she has lived all over the country and has studied in different schools. She has worked as a Journalist at the alternative media platform, The Better India and has published more than 1,000 articles in areas including environment, agriculture, sustainable energy, education, culture and travel. After a brief stint in the industry, she decided to pursue academic research. Her areas of interest in research include constructive journalism, new media and environmental communication.

Dr. I. Arul Aram is Professor, Department of Media Sciences, Anna University, Chennai. He is also the Station Director of Anna Community Radio. He was formerly the Chief Sub-Editor with The Hindu, in Chennai and New Delhi. He was a post-doctoral fellow at the London School of Economics. He was Director of UGC's Educational Multimedia Research Centre (EMMRC) during 2010-2011. He has published several research papers in national and international publications, and has many book chapters and book publications to his credit. His areas of specialisation include environmental communication, peace journalism, science communication, and climate change communication.