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Article

Neutral Observers or Advocates for Societal Transformation? Role Orientations of Constructive Journalists in Germany

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Abstract
Since the 2010s, a new type of journalism has emerged, especially in North America and Western Europe, called constructive journalism. Its basic idea is to complement classic problem-centered reporting by covering problem-solving approaches that could inspire the recipients. It has been harshly criticized, especially for its alleged proximity to advocacy or activism. To clarify the role orientations of the protagonists of this trend, a survey of all German journalists that call themselves constructive or solution-oriented was conducted (n = 79). The results show that constructive journalists are as diverse in age as the total of all journalists in Germany, but tend to be more women journalists, freelancers, formally higher educated, and politically leaning toward green and left-wing positions. Regarding role orientations, the field of constructive journalism not only represents a new facet of the entire journalistic field but also consists of several nuanced approaches itself: In factor analysis, we found eight role dimensions, of which the most important were the Social Integrator, the Transformation Agent, the Active Watchdog, the Emotional Storyteller, and the Innovation Reporter. In comparison to the average German journalist, the German constructive journalist shows stronger ambitions to control political and business elites, to motivate people to participate, and to contribute to social change. This can be explained as a countermovement not only to a possible negativity bias in the news but also to an increased attitude of detachment in German newsrooms.

Keywords
constructive journalism; Germany; professional role orientations; solutions journalism; value attitudes

Issue
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1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the 2010s, the approaches of constructive and solutions journalism have been the subject of much debate in both the media industry and academia. Its basic idea is the following: In order to avoid negative media effects on the audience such as apathy or cynicism, to increase commercial success and audience reach, and also to foster societal progress, a new type of journalism should complement classic problem-centered reporting by covering problem-solving approaches that could inspire recipients (Ahva & Hautakangas, 2018; Mast et al., 2019). With this philosophy, a large number of new magazines and online portals have been founded, as well as new sections in general interest news media, and organizations have been created to promote the idea: the Solutions Journalism Network in New York City (since 2013), the London-based Constructive Journalism Project (2014–2020), the Constructive Journalism Network (since 2017), and the Constructive Institute at Aarhus University in Denmark (since 2017).

Both terms—solutions and constructive journalism—did not originally come from academia but began as strategic terms of a reform movement coming from

journalism practitioners, the former being preferred in the US, the latter in Europe (Lough & McIntyre, 2021, p. 3). Scholarly research then worked to analyze and define these terms. Studies on solutions journalism often use the definition of the Solutions Journalism Network—"rigorous reporting on responses to social problems" (e.g., Walth et al., 2019, p. 180)—while constructive journalism was conceptualized in a more academic way as an umbrella term that includes solutions journalism and has a theoretical foundation in psychology: McIntyre and Gyldensted (2018, p. 663) define constructive journalism as "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."

There is a growing body of work from researchers on five continents on several aspects of the topic. In their systematic review of 73 peer-reviewed articles and 21 theses/dissertations on solutions and/or constructive journalism, Lough and McIntyre (2021, p. 9) found that half of the studies focused on the production and processes of such coverage, one third examined its effects on the audience, and some of the research was purely conceptual, connecting the approach "with positive psychology, framing, social responsibility and normative roles" (Lough & McIntyre, 2021, p. 14). Obviously, a reform movement calling for a more encouraging type of reporting and for recalibrating selection criteria or news factors would be accompanied by the creation of a reformed journalistic role. But thus far, this new role has been unclear and inconsistent.

For US proponents of the movement, Aitamurto and Varma (2018, p. 695) found that they often send "strategic rhetoric signals…to situate constructive journalism within the boundaries of a traditional monitorial role of journalism" and to present themselves as neutral, detached observers—apparently to avoid accusations of doing activism, advocacy, or PR (Beiler & Krüger, 2018). Among European protagonists, a plurality of role understandings seems to exist: The respective books of Ulrik Haagerup (founder of the Constructive Institute) and Cathrine Gyldensted (founder of the Constructive Journalism Network) were analyzed by Bro (2019) against the background of his "journalistic compass" model that differentiates forms of journalism on a continuum from activity to passivity, among other things. It is shown that Haagerup advocates a more passive and Gyldensted a more active role. Another distinction within the field was made by Krüger (2017, pp. 410–411) who identified two factions: a pro-objectivity and system-affirming "Ashoka faction," named after an organization that connects social entrepreneurs around the globe, and a pro-subjectivity and system-critical "Jungk faction," named after the German futurologist and publicist Robert Jungk who was a pioneer of constructive journalism with his *Good News Bulletin* in 1948 and later influenced the environmental, anti-nuclear, and peace movements in West Germany.

However, there is still a lack of empirical data on which role conceptions are present in the field and how widespread they are. The present study contributes to filling this gap: It examines the role orientations of constructive journalists in Germany and, moreover, attempts to understand which journalistic milieu has emerged here and how the proponents position themselves socio-demographically and politically.

2. Research on Role Orientation and Research Questions

In the social sciences, the concept of the role describes the sum of norms, ideals, privileges, and duties associated with a social position. For this study, we apply Hanitzsch and Vos' (2017, p. 116) conceptualization of journalistic roles "as discursive constructions of journalism's institutional identity, and as a struggle over discursive authority in conversations about the locus of journalism in society." The role gives meaning and legitimization to the journalists' work.

The scholarly discussion of different role perceptions in journalism essentially began with Cohen's (1963) distinction between a *neutral* and a *participant* understanding of the profession. Later, Johnstone et al. (1976) classified *objective* and *advocative* reporting. A series of studies on The American Journalist (first, Weaver & Wilhoit, 1986) and later The Global Journalist worked with four categories: Disseminator, Interpreter, Adversarial, and Populist Mobilizer. In the international Worlds of Journalism Study, Hanitzsch (2011, pp. 484–486) identified four journalistic milieus: Populist Disseminator, Detached Watchdog, Critical Change Agent, and Opportunist Facilitator. More recent work has increased the complexity and diversity of the construct: In the international project Journalistic Role Performance, the initial distinction between *neutral* and *participant* becomes a meta-role (the "journalistic voice," which can be present or absent) through which five other role dimensions (Watchdog, Loyal-Facilitator, Infotainment, Civic, and Service) can each be divided into 10 sub-dimensions. For example, the Watchdog role can be thought of as "detached" or from an "adversarial" stance (Mellado, 2021, pp. 38–39). Besides this, Hanitzsch and Vos (2018) presented a theoretical model of 18 journalistic roles in the domain of political life and seven in the domain of everyday life.

The wealth of theoretical and empirical work on the subject can hardly be represented here due to space constraints. But for this study another differentiation is important: Hanitzsch and Vos (2017, p. 118) have stressed that "journalists' roles may be studied with regard to normative ideas (what journalists *should do*), cognitive orientations (what they *want to do*), professional practice (what journalists *really do*), and narrated performance (what they *say they do*)." They summarize the first two aspects under "role orientations" and the last two aspects under "role performance." We focus on

cognitive orientations, that is "the communicative ideals journalists are embracing in their work" (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017, p. 123) and the goals they want to achieve.

To date, little empirical research about the role orientations of constructive and solutions journalists exists. For the US, McIntyre et al. (2016) investigated the compatibility of constructive journalism with the current role perception among newspaper journalists: especially younger and women journalists highly valued constructive and solutions journalism. Correlations were found between approval of these genres and approval of activist values such as setting the political agenda and pointing to possible solutions. Abdenour et al. (2018) conducted a similar survey among local TV journalists in the US, showing an even higher affinity for constructive reporting styles.

In Rwanda, the role model of journalists strongly leans toward constructive journalism (McIntyre & Sobel, 2018). In this African nation, where a genocide took place in 1994, guideline interviews revealed that while they strongly value traditional roles such as informing and educating the audience, they also regularly use constructive journalism techniques to promote peace and reconciliation in the country. Li's (2021) content analysis captured the role performance of solutions journalists in reporting the Covid-19 pandemic in 25 countries and regions, revealing predominantly interventionist, facilitator, and civic-oriented roles and a failure to implement service and watchdog roles in a crisis when the public needs advice and accountability.

In Germany, two studies have used semi-structured interviews with proponents of the genre to describe the concept of constructive journalism and the practice in different newsrooms (Heinrichs, 2021; Kramp & Weichert, 2020), but they did not do so explicitly against the backdrop of research on journalistic role orientations. Especially for Germany—home of the "founding father" Robert Jungk and of a lively scene of constructive media—we see a large research lacuna regarding role orientations and the general nature of the milieu of constructive and solutions journalists, also in terms of sociodemographic data and in contrast to the entire field of journalism in Germany. Therefore, we posed the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the dominant sociodemographic characteristics of constructive journalists in Germany?

RQ2: How long have German journalists been working constructively, by whom were they inspired, and with which organizations have they been networking?

RQ3: Which political and value attitudes do constructive journalists in Germany exhibit?

RQ4: Which role orientations can be found among constructive journalists?

RQs 1, 3, and 4 include a comparison with the total of all German journalists. For RQ2, there is no comparative data, hence, it solely aims to better understand the development and structure of the specific milieu.

3. Methodology

To answer these questions, a standardized online-based survey consisting of 16 multiple-choice questions and three open-ended questions was conducted. The understanding of the role was surveyed with 30 items, many of which were based on previous studies to allow comparisons. Twelve items were adopted from the German Worlds of Journalism questionnaire (Steindl et al., 2017), seven items from the earlier study Journalism in Germany (Weischenberg et al., 2006), three items from Journalistic Role Performance (Mellado et al., 2021), and one item from The American Journalist (Willnat et al., 2019). We newly developed seven items; six of them to capture a possible constructive role that the other studies had not explicitly asked about. We also developed items to test value attitudes, so that political orientation can be measured not only in terms of inclination toward a political party and one's own classification on a simple left-right axis. Pretests were conducted with a cohort of journalism students at Leipzig University and with a long-time constructive journalist. This helped to improve the questionnaire.

Our goal was to reach all people who consider themselves constructive- or solution-oriented journalists and work for news media based in Germany to give them the chance to complete the questionnaire. We attempted a full survey, where the population is unknown, and the criterion is self-selection. We applied a two-step sampling procedure: identifying key persons and news media dedicated to this genre followed by snowball sampling with participants. First, we captured all German media outlets that presented themselves as constructive- or solution-oriented in their self-description or had special sections or programs dedicated to this genre (e.g., *Enorm*, *Perspective Daily*, *Mut—Magazin für Lösungen*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Quarterly*, NDR Info *Perspektiven*, and ZDF *Plan B*) and individuals who have been known to work as constructive journalists who we identified at literature and journalism conferences. We contacted these media (via editors-in-chief or editorial managers) and people by e-mailing 113 individuals working for a total of 39 media or as freelancers. We asked them to complete the questionnaire and to share the invitation with other potential subjects within their own editorial team or professional networks.

Additionally, we contacted six journalistic associations, mailing lists, and freelancer communities to forward our invitation to all their members to include even more constructive journalists: Netzwerk Weitblick—Verband Journalismus & Nachhaltigkeit (Network Thinking Ahead—Association for Journalism & Sustainability), Netzwerk Klimajournalismus Deutschland

(Network Climate Journalism Germany), Degrowth-Journalismus, Freischreiber (Freelance Writers), Zeitenspiegel Reportagen (Time Mirror Reports), and Bach Rauf! (Up the Drain!).

The survey ran from September 14 to December 10, 2021. Some media participated enthusiastically, with editors-in-chief answering the mail and forwarding it to all editorial members (and others); in other cases, we received no answer and do not know what happened with our request. Some addressees regretted not having time for it, and one medium had internal instructions for the employees not to participate in surveys in order to invest their time solely in journalistic content.

It is unclear if we achieved our goal of giving all constructive journalists in Germany the chance to participate. Some journalists may work for media which are not known for using a constructive approach and might not be connected with like-minded colleagues or organizations. Also, some journalists work constructively without accepting the term as a self-description or even knowing the term. This may have discouraged some journalists from completing the questionnaire. On the other hand, four subjects completed it but afterwards added in a comment section that we provided that they would like to distance themselves from the term or said that they only had a vague idea of what the term means (e.g., one participant wrote: "I don't see myself as a 'constructive' journalist. Actually, all good journalism is constructive"). Nevertheless, we are certain to have reached at least the core of the milieu: 101 people accessed the questionnaire and felt addressed; and 79 fully completed the questionnaire, which were the ones that we used for analysis.

4. Findings

4.1. Demographics

Working constructively is by no means just a concern of the younger generations: Respondents were between 22 and 73 years old and the mean age was 46 years (n = 79). In terms of age structure, the sample corresponds exactly to the totality of all German journalists as presented in the last representative survey in 2015 (mean of 46, range from 22 to 71 years; Steindl et al., 2017, p. 414). This is different for gender and formal education. Our sample included more women: 54% of the respondents self-identified as women, 46% as men (n = 78), whereas among all German journalists in 2015 only 40% identified as women. Additionally, our sample is more highly formally educated (see Table 1) which indicates that the reform movement at stake is driven by well-informed individuals.

Seventy-five percent of the respondents worked full-time and 25% part-time (n = 79). Regarding employment relationships, 48% were permanently employed, 46% were freelancers, and 17% were permanent freelancers for particular news media (*Feste Freie*; multiple answers possible). The average German journalist is much more likely to work in a permanent position (82%; all kinds of freelancers: 18%; Steindl et al., 2017, p. 417).

When respondents were asked what type of media their constructive pieces have been published in, the ranking of the genres was as follows: online media (67%), magazines (43%), social media (34%), newspapers (25%), radio (19%), television (19%), news agencies (3%), and others, which included books, motion picture/documentary film, podcast, and customer magazines/brochures (5%; n = 79; multiple answers possible). A question about the forms of ownership of the media revealed that 56% worked for privately-owned media, 35% for public broadcasting, and 18% for cooperatively organized media; 11% indicated "other" which included, for instance, university media, an association, book publishers, or self-governed media (n = 79; multiple answers possible). A question about the status of constructive journalism in the media for which respondents worked, showed that 48% worked for media practicing constructive journalism more so as an add-on. Only 25% worked for media specializing in it, and another 25% said they were working for both types of media (n = 78; multiple answers possible).

4.2. Duration, Inspirers, and Networking Organizations of Constructive Work

The field of constructive journalism in Germany is quite new: When asked which year they started reporting constructively, over half cited the decade of the 2010s (see Table 2). The years between 2014 and 2020 saw the highest number of journalists joining, with four to 10 each year (the peak was 2017); 91% of the respondents have practiced the approach since 2000 or later. This is in line with previous literature, as the founding of most media or sections specializing in constructive journalism falls into this period (Heinrichs, 2021; Kramp & Weichert, 2020; Krüger, 2021; Meier, 2018), and the

Table 1. The educational level of German constructive journalists in comparison to all German journalists.

Highest educational qualification	%	% in Steindl et al. (2017)
PhD	10	4
University degree	77	72
High school diploma	10	22
Graduation below high school diploma	3	2

Notes: n = 78; question—"What is your highest educational qualification?"

Table 2. Starting year of constructive reporting in the own professional biography.

Period	Number	Percentage
1980–1989	3	4
1990–1999	4	5
2000–2009	17	22
2010–2019	44	58
2020–2021	8	11

Notes: n = 76; question—"First, we would like to know when you actually started reporting constructively. In which year (approximately) did you get the idea?"

book *Constructive News* by Ulrik Haagerup—triggering a debate in the industry—was published in German in 2015. Interestingly, some of the respondents seem to have practiced the genre long before there was any discussion about it and before the term even existed.

When asked if there was anyone who inspired them to do constructive journalism, 59 respondents gave a wide range of answers: from a "no" to "zeitgeist at the time" to naming media organizations or people. Forty-four respondents named a total of 61 people, between one and eight persons per respondent. Eight individuals were named more than once (see Table 3). The wide variance of responses and the low degree of concentration indicate that the field has grown organically and egalitarian and has not been shaped primarily by a few individual masterminds only.

Interestingly, the US-based Solutions Journalism Network was named most often (11 mentions) when German journalists were asked: "If you are a member of an organization or network for constructive journalism, or use one for exchange (e.g., via mailing list, newsletter, or conferences), which are they?" (n = 37, multiple answers possible). A total of 21 institutions were named. The Netzwerk Klimajournalismus Deutschland (Network of Climate Journalism Germany) ranked second, with five mentions and the Netzwerk Weitblick (Network Thinking Ahead) ranked third, with four mentions. The Constructive Institute in Denmark, the Culture Counts Foundation, and the newsletter *Good News* were named three times each and the mailing list Degrowth-Journalismus, the Peace Counts Project, and the journalism platform Bach Rauf! two times each. Consequently, these entities can be seen as the central network nodes of the milieu in 2021.

4.3. Political and Value Attitudes

The political worldview was assessed with the help of several questions. The subjects were asked to rank themselves on a left-right axis from 1 (*left*) to 11 (*right*), with a midpoint of 6. The results show a clear positioning to the left of center: The mean is 3.6; the standard deviation is 1.3 (n = 62). Thus, constructive journalists in our sample tend to be more progressive than the totality of German journalists, for whom Steindl et al. (2017, p. 414) determined a mean of 4 with a standard deviation of 1.3 (on a scale of 10 points). When asked which party they felt closest to, 57% said the Green Party, 13% the Social Democratic Party (SPD), 4% the Left Party, and 1% the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP); 15% said they did not lean toward any party (n = 74). It is striking that the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU), which

Table 3. The most influential inspirers of German constructive journalists.

Mentions	Name	Function
11	Ulrik Haagerup	Founder and director of the Constructive Institute at Aarhus University (Denmark)
5	Maren Urner	Co-founder of *Perspective Daily* and professor of media psychology (Germany)
5	Michael Gleich	Publisher of *Mut—Magazin für Lösungen* and director of the Culture Counts Foundation (Germany)
3	Ute Scheub	Co-founder of the newspaper *taz* and of Netzwerk Klimajournalismus Deutschland, freelance journalist (Germany)
3	Tina Rosenberg	Co-founder and vice president for Innovation of the Solutions Journalism Network (US)
2	Amanda Ripley	Journalist and conflict mediation trainer associated with the Solutions Journalism Network (US)
2	Tilman Wörtz	Editor-in-chief of *Mut—Magazin für Lösungen* (Germany)
2	Thomas Friemel	Co-founder of the alternative business magazine *enorm* (Germany)

Notes: n = 59; question—"Are there people you consider role models, or who have inspired or influenced you, who perhaps gave you the idea to report constructively in the first place? Please name them."

set the political tone from 2005 to 2021 and provided the German chancellor, was not mentioned by anyone. Unfortunately, there is no current comparative data for all German journalists in Steindl et al. (2017); the latest available data dates to 2005 (Weischenberg et al., 2006, p. 71).

The party inclinations were also reflected in a closer look at the subjects' fundamental values. In order to record these more precisely, we presented a battery of 11 items containing values or guiding principles for societies. Respondents indicated that ecology and climate protection were most important to them, followed by equality of all people, democracy, and peace (Table 4). Clearly below the center of the scale were a free market economy, national sovereignty, and the preservation of German national culture (we used "*Deutsche Leitkultur*," a term from the migration debate in Germany with conservative connotations).

These findings also correspond to the answers in the open-ended question section regarding which social problems currently appear to be the most important. The climate and environmental crises lead by a wide margin, followed by social inequality and the division of society (Table 5). Concerns that one would expect to find more in liberal or conservative circles were expressed very rarely, such as "migration" (two mentions) or "lack of innovation" (one mention).

We asked respondents what their basic attitude was toward the need for change in society and confronted them with two opposing statements and a scale from 1 (*I do not agree at all*) to 5 (*I fully agree*). With the item "our society is largely fit for the future and only needs to be improved in certain areas," only 3% fully agreed, while a further 14% tended to agree (M = 2.4 and SD = 1). By contrast, 30% fully agreed with the opposite statement, "our society must be fundamentally restructured

Table 4. Fundamental values of German constructive journalists.

Item	M (SD)
Ecological sustainability and environmental and climate protection	4.7 (0.7)
Equality of all people, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, origin, religion, or disability	4.7 (0.7)
Democracy as equal political freedom and co-determination for all	4.6 (0.7)
Peace and international understanding	4.5 (0.9)
Solidarity and commitment to the well-being of others	4.3 (0.9)
Social justice through redistribution by the state	3.6 (1.1)
Individual freedom and autonomy	3.6 (0.9)
Securing prosperity through economic growth	2.3 (1.1)
Free market economy without state intervention	1.8 (0.9)
Strengthening national sovereignty	1.8 (0.9)
Preservation of the German national culture ("*Leitkultur*")	1.6 (0.9)

Notes: n = 78–79; question—"Generally speaking, there is a whole series of possible fundamental values and guiding principles for society. Please indicate how important each of these is to you"; scale from 1 (*not at all important*) to 5 (*very important*).

Table 5. The most pressing societal problems in the eyes of German constructive journalists (number of mentions).

Problem	Rank 1	Rank 2	Rank 3	Total
Climate and environmental crises (climate change, global warming, species extinction, soil degradation, etc.)	53	26	10	89
Social inequality (injustice, income inequality, poverty, exploitation)	10	16	16	42
Division of society (polarization, discourse crisis, democracy crisis)	3	13	12	28
Lack of education and science rejection	3	4	9	16
Racism, right-wing populism, and right-wing extremism	1	4	7	12
Wars, violence, and conflicts	1	3	2	6
Lack of gender equity	1	2	3	6
Fake news and hate speech	0	4	1	5
Digitalization	0	1	3	4
Restructuring of the economy	1	0	3	4

Notes: n = 234 answers from 79 respondents; question—"In your opinion, what are the most pressing problems or challenges facing our society? Please note up to three in order of urgency."

in order to be fit for the future," and a further 37% tended to agree (*M* = 3.7 and *SD* = 1.3; n = 79). Thus, a great openness to fundamental societal transformation was evident.

4.4. Role Orientations

As we have seen, our sample is politically quite clearly oriented toward far-reaching societal changes under the primacy of ecology and social issues. Consequently, a question arises: Are these political aspirations reflected in the understanding of the profession, in the sense that one wants to work actively toward such changes with journalistic means? Or do they state that neutral information and impartial observation are the most important goals for them, as it was the trend among all German journalists in 2015 (and is the self-description of leading constructive journalists, as described above)? The results (Table 6) show that constructive journalists are much less likely to agree with those items that indicate a neutral, detached, mirror-like depiction of reality ("inform as neutrally and precisely as possible," "depict reality exactly as it is"). Instead, they claim to a greater extent to want to criticize and control the powerful ("control political elites," "control business elites") and, in turn logically, to "motivate people to participate in political activity" and to "provide information people need to make political decisions." The most impressive differences between the constructive journalists and the representative sample of all German journalists are found in the items of an interventionalist role model that emphasizes social engagement and influencing the political discourse ("contribute to social change," "influence public opinion," "influence the political agenda and set issues"). Amazingly, our newly developed item "contribute to a fundamental transformation of society," meant as an increase of the classic item "contribute to social change," received more approval than the latter one.

What was not surprising, however, was that such items received high approval ratings with which we specifically wanted to query a constructive role described in the literature ("present new ideas and approaches to solutions," "encourage people and show them possibilities for action," "accompanying topics and developments over the long term instead of just highlighting current events," "counteract the disenchantment with journalistic reporting"). Only the items "report positive things to cheer people up" and "present new products and technical developments" got a significantly lower agreement, maybe because they point to a less political and more consumer-centric understanding of the profession.

A principal component factor analysis was performed in order to discover dimensions of professional role orientations among the respondents (KMO = 0.700). The results showed that constructive journalism not only represents a new facet of the entire journalistic field but is also composed of nuanced approaches in itself. Although nine factors would have to be extracted according to the eigenvalue criterion, a solution with eight dimensions was chosen because it was more feasible to interpret. Nevertheless, the total explained variance is still high at 69.7%; the scree plot supports the procedure. Despite very few cross-loadings, the rotated component matrix of the 30 items had a simple structure that allows for a plausible interpretation (Table 7). The first role dimension can be labeled Active Watchdog (explained variance of 11.1%): The items "control political elites," "control business elites," and "criticize grievances" load strongly, but the label also includes the ambition to "influence the political agenda and set issues," that speaks for an active ("adversarial") instead of a "detached" watchdog (Mellado, 2021, p. 39). With the same explained variance comes the second role dimension which we call Innovation Reporter. This role contains a business-friendly and technology-centered understanding of the profession ("support business enterprises when they promote growth and innovation" and "present new products and technical developments") as well as the willingness to entertain and cheer up the audience. Next, role dimension three, which we label Transformation Agent (explained variance of 11%), is characterized by the goal to "contribute to a fundamental transformation of society" and to "social change," to "influence public opinion," and to "show people possibilities for action;" a rejection of the fast news business is visible (the item "convey information as quickly as possible" loads strongly negative).

A fourth dimension emerged which we call the Social Integrator (explained variance of 9.2%): For this role, it is most important to "counteract a polarization of society" under the auspices of cultural diversity, tolerance, and democratic participation. Factor five is the Emotional Storyteller role (explained variance of 8.3%) which contains the goals "tell the world in stories" and "depict the emotions of people," but also "communicate commonly shared values and norms." With less variance explanation come the last three factors: The Populist Disseminator role aims to publish for a wide audience and to give ordinary people the chance to articulate themselves; the Everyday Life Helper role is concerned with advising people and giving orientation for the individual daily life, with a long-term time horizon; and, finally, a role which we call Neutral Observer shows the attitude of a classic objective news reporter.

We calculated mean values based on the items which had their primary loadings on each of the respective factors. The factor means show the importance of the eight dimensions of role orientations on the underlying five-point scale. The most important dimensions among the interrogated journalists are the Everyday Life Helper (*M* = 4.3), the Social Integrator (*M* = 4), the Neutral Observer (*M* = 4), and the Transformation Agent (*M* = 4). Somewhat less pronounced are the Populist Disseminator (*M* = 3.8), the Active Watchdog (*M* = 3.6), and the Emotional Storyteller (*M* = 3.4). Clearly, the least important is the Innovation Reporter role (*M* = 2.8).

Table 6. Role orientations of German constructive journalists in comparison to all German journalists.

Item	*M* (*SD*)	%	*M* (*SD*) in Steindl et al. (2017)	% in Steindl et al. (2017)
Present new ideas and approaches to solutions	4.5 (0.9)	89.9		
Encourage people and show them possibilities for action	4.5 (0.8)	91.1		
Accompany topics and developments over the long term instead of just highlighting current events	4.5 (0.7)	96.2		
Provide information people need to make political decisions	4.4 (0.9)	87.4	3.4 (1.5)	56.2
Indicate how events, decisions, or actions might influence the daily lives of people	4.2 (0.9)	78.5		
Promote tolerance and cultural diversity	4.1 (1)	79.7	3.8 (1.2)	66.7
Depict reality exactly as it is	4.1 (1)	75.9	4.6 (0.7)	90.7
Contribute to a fundamental transformation of society	4.1 (1.2)	74.7		
Counteract the disenchantment with journalistic reporting	4 (1.2)	72.2		
Counteract a polarization of society	4 (1.1)	74.7		
Motivate people to participate in political activity	4 (1)	79.7	3.1 (1.4)	44.9
Inform as neutrally and precisely as possible	4 (1.1)	62	4.3 (1)	82.5
Provide advice, orientation, and direction for daily life	3.9 (1)	72.1	3.8 (1.1)	66.1
Criticize grievances	3.9 (1.1)	67		
Contribute to social change	3.9 (1.2)	67.1	2.8 (1.2)	29.5
Focus on topics that are interesting for many people	3.8 (1.1)	63.3	4 (1)	73.5
Give people the opportunity to articulate their views on important issues	3.7 (1)	63.3	3.3 (1.2)	46.9
Tell the world in stories	3.7 (1.2)	58.2	3.6 (1.2)	57.3
Communicate commonly shared values and norms	3.5 (1.2)	49.3		
Influence public opinion	3.4 (1.3)	45.6	2.7 (1.1)	22.7
Influence the political agenda and set issues	3.3 (1.2)	50.6	2.1 (1.1)	9.8
Control political elites	3.2 (1.3)	44.3	2.8 (1.5)	36.3
Report positive things to cheer people up	3.2 (1.2)	45.5		
Control business elites	3.1 (1.4)	40.5	2.8 (1.4)	34.2
Depict emotions of people	3 (1.1)	27.9		
Present new products and technical developments	3 (1.3)	36.7		
Convey information as quickly as possible	2.7 (1.4)	29.1		
Provide entertainment and relaxation	2.4 (1)	14	3.5 (1.1)	51.4
Support government policies when they contribute to prosperity and progress	2.2 (1.1)	11.4		
Support business enterprises when they promote growth and innovation	2 (1.1)	12.7		

Notes: n = 78–79; question—"On this and the next page, we are interested in what goals you personally would like to achieve with your professional work. For the following statements, please indicate how important each goal is to you"; scale from 1 (*not at all important*) to 5 (*very important*); the column "%" indicates the proportion of respondents who indicated 4 or 5; the last two columns indicate the proportion of respondents in the last survey of all German journalists (Hanitzsch & Lauerer, 2019, pp. 141–142; Steindl et al., 2017, p. 420) who indicated 4 or 5 for the same or similar items (the item "depict reality exactly as it is" then was "report things as they are," and the item "inform as neutrally and precisely as possible" was "be an impartial observer").

Table 7. Dimensions of professional role orientations of constructive journalists in Germany: Principal component analysis (factor loadings of the rotated component matrix).

Item	1. Active Watchdog	2. Innovation Reporter	3. Transformation Agent	4. Social Integrator	5. Emotional Storyteller	6. Populist Disseminator	7. Everyday Life Helper	8. Neutral Observer
Control political elites	0.874							
Control business elites	0.858							
Criticize grievances	0.767							
Influence the political agenda and set issues	0.466							
Provide information people need to make political decisions	0.464			0.415				
Support business enterprises when they promote growth and innovation		0.825						
Present new products and technical developments		0.766						
Support government policies when they contribute to prosperity and progress		0.641						
Provide entertainment and relaxation		0.631						
Report positive things to cheer people up		0.524			0.448			
Provide advice, orientation, and direction for daily life		0.522					0.466	
Contribute to a fundamental transformation of society			0.777					
Encourage people and show them possibilities for action			0.761					
Contribute to social change			0.728					
Influence public opinion			0.553					
Convey information as quickly as possible		0.472	–0.522					
Present new ideas and approaches to solutions			0.486	0.443				
Counteract a polarization of society				0.815				
Motivate people to participate in political activity				0.667				
Promote tolerance and cultural diversity				0.588				
Counteract the disenchantment with journalistic reporting				0.575				

Table 7. (Cont.) Dimensions of professional role orientations of constructive journalists in Germany: Principal component analysis (factor loadings of the rotated component matrix).

Item	1. Active Watchdog	2. Innovation Reporter	3. Transformation Agent	4. Social Integrator	5. Emotional Storyteller	6. Populist Disseminator	7. Everyday Life Helper	8. Neutral Observer
Tell the world in stories					0.786			
Communicate commonly shared values and norms					0.692			
Depict emotions of people					0.681			
Focus on topics that are interesting for many people						0.742		
Give people the opportunity to articulate their views on important issues						0.696		
Indicate how events, decisions, or actions might influence the daily lives of people							0.840	
Accompany topics and developments over the long term instead of just highlighting current events			0.440				0.618	
Depict reality exactly as it is								0.763
Inform as neutrally and precisely as possible								0.677
Explained variance in %	11.1	11.1	11	9.2	8.3	6.4	6.3	6.2
Factor means (*SD*)	3.6 (0.9)	2.8 (0.8)	4 (0.7)	4 (0.8)	3.4 (1)	3.8 (0.9)	4.3 (0.7)	4 (0.9)

Notes: n = 77; scale for all items and factor means from 1 (*not at all important*) to 5 (*very important*); varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization; factor loadings < |0.4| not shown; total variance explained—69.7%; KMO = 0.700, Bartlett = 0.000.

We checked the internal consistency of the mean indices formed using Cronbach's alpha. This yielded acceptable or good values for factors 1 to 5 (ranging from 0.737 to 0.804), but poor or questionable values for the factors 6 to 8 (ranging from 0.377 to 0.635). This should be taken into account when interpreting the mean values: Factors 1 through 5 are much more stable, they contain more items that also fit together well, and they have a higher explained variance. Therefore, if factors 6 to 8 are not taken into account any further, the Transformation Agent and Social Integrator dimensions have the highest mean values. As a result, these can be considered the most characteristic of the journalists we surveyed.

5. Summary and Limitations

This survey presents a small and relatively new milieu within the journalistic field in Germany which is as diverse in age as the entire field but is characterized by containing more women, formally higher educated journalists, freelancers, and journalists who are leaning toward green and left political perspectives. Regarding role orientations, we found lower agreement with a neutral-objective and detached understanding of the journalistic role than in the whole field. The constructive journalists clearly show stronger ambitions than the average German journalist to act as a watchdog of political and business elites, motivate people to participate, and contribute not only to social change but to a fundamental transformation of society. Factor analysis showed that the understanding of the constructive role has a number of facets. We found not only the pro-business "Ashoka faction" (here, the role dimension Innovation Reporter) and the system-critical "Jungk faction" (here, the role dimension Transformation Agent) that Krüger (2017) suspected—eight factors were needed to explain two-thirds of the variance in the responses. Among them, the dimensions Social Integrator and Active Watchdog are also of great importance, as the number of included items, the explained variance, the factor means, and the internal consistency of the mean indices show.

This study has a number of limitations. Some of them are explained in the methodology and results sections. The population ("all German journalists that call themselves constructive or solution-oriented") is unknown, and although we tried hard to reach all relevant persons directly or via snowballing, the sample did not cover the entire population of such journalists. In the factor analysis, the last three of the extracted eight factors were plausibly interpretable, but not stable. Besides that, this study is limited to the analysis of cognitive role orientations (what journalists *want to do*). It is neither about what they *do in practice* nor what they *say they do in practice*, neither did we observe their work nor did we ask them whether they are achieving their goals. Thus, scholarly work on the role performance of our participants remains a desideratum.

6. Discussion

Any reform movement within journalism can be interpreted as a reaction to perceived undesirable developments or states in mainstream journalism: Investigative journalism emerged more than 100 years ago to supplement the "objective" reporting on established institutions with revelations about corruption and abuses of power. Since the 1970s, precision journalism, and later data journalism, have made media discourse more exact and evidence-based with independently collected, analyzed, or visualized social science statistics (Beiler et al., 2020). In the 1990s, civic or public journalism competed to counter journalists' fixation on elites; it addressed "people as citizens, potential participants in public affairs, rather than victims or spectators" (Rosen, 1999, as cited in Bro, 2019, p. 510). Constructive journalism, then, has made its own critical point: Countering the preponderance of negative news factors such as conflict, damage, or aggression, its proponents call for a different weighting of news factors in journalistic selection decisions in favor of societal progress, problem-solving, and future-orientation.

This survey shows that, at least in Germany, journalists who describe themselves as constructive are not only solution- and future-oriented, but at the same time are consciously working normatively, politicized, and attached to certain issues and goals instead of striving for detached and neutral observation. Here, the role of the interventionist change agent shines through, which research has found to be more common among representatives of "development journalism" in the Global South. At the same time, there seems to be no danger of taking on the role of the opportunist facilitator from development journalism "which provides support to political leadership and government policy" (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018, p. 148)—German constructive journalists also want to be watchdogs of political and business elites in a Western tradition. This may show a combination of solutions and investigative reporting approaches by which "journalism can create greater impact by putting pressure on leaders to solve problems and by showing readers that problems are not intractable" (Walth et al., 2019, p. 178).

From our point of view, the formation of this cognitive role orientation can be explained by two factors, one factor within the professional field and one factor outside. Constructive journalists, at least in Germany, seem to respond not only to a possible negativity bias in the news but also to a trend of increasing detachment in the newsrooms. According to three representative surveys conducted in 1993, 2005, and 2015, German journalists have understood their role increasingly to lay in the neutral dissemination of information and in impartial observation and, in turn, decreasingly in a sense of criticism, social commitment, intervention, political articulation, and participation (Hanitzsch & Lauerer, 2019). Thus, constructive journalists might counter the charge

of "activism" with the countercharge of "passivism" in the general journalistic profession.

This is where the other factor comes in: Journalistic role orientations and the relationship between journalism and society are always renegotiated whenever social realities change (Hanitzsch & Lauerer, 2019, p. 138); and the recent years have been marked by an intensification of multiple crises and a greater societal awareness specifically of the ecological crisis which has been undermining the natural foundations of human life. This is exactly the most pressing societal problem in the eyes of German constructive journalists, and when they see a necessity to fundamentally restructure society in order to be fit for the future, they do so in agreement with respectable research groups that combine findings of earth system research with political consequences and the demand for a "great transformation" toward sustainability (e.g., German Advisory Council on Global Change, 2011). According to Brüggemann et al. (2020), today's "post-normal situation" with the urgency for rapid action is already leading parts of science journalism and academia to increasingly behave as advocates for public goods and reject the role of the detached observer. It is plausible to assume that constructive journalism is also emerging for exactly the same reason—and in this context might be better understood by the term "transformative journalism" (Brüggemann et al., 2021; Krüger, 2022) because it ultimately aims to fundamentally change socio-economic structures. This study might thus be seen as a snapshot of boundary work within a process of renegotiating journalism's identity and place in a society facing an existential crisis.

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Conflict of Interests

The corresponding author Uwe Krüger is a member of the above-mentioned association Netzwerk Weitblick—Verband Journalismus & Nachhaltigkeit (Network Thinking Ahead—Association for Journalism & Sustainability). One of the eight founders of Netzwerk Klimajournalismus Deutschland (Network Climate Journalism Germany), Lorenz Matzat, is guest professor at the MSc in Journalism program at Leipzig University which is headed by co-author Markus Beiler.

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