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## THE POTENTIAL OF CONSTRUCTIVE JOURNALISM IDEAS IN A CROATIAN CONTEXT

### ABSTRACT

*This study examines the potential of constructive journalism ideas and their implementation in Croatia, a country with a different social, cultural and historical background than that of Denmark or other Western European countries where constructive journalism is practiced. Three Croatian linguists explain the potential hidden meanings of the word constructive for Croatians. Fifteen broadcast journalists and editors in Croatia have been interviewed in order to examine the potential opportunities and obstacles for the implementation of constructive journalism ideas in their newsrooms. Croatian journalists have a more active approach towards journalism and their overall impression of constructive journalism ideas is positive. Both linguists and journalists noticed potential ideological connotations of the word constructive, while journalists were careful about reporting on possible solutions and things that would work so as not to cross the line and be pulled into ideology. When it comes to implementation, most journalists point out differences in mind-set, political influences and newsroom routines as main obstacles. A development of a specific strategy for Croatian newsrooms that moves away from adhering to ideas only is recommended, while the word constructive may be used only if it is clearly defined.*

KEYWORDS: constructive journalism; constructive news; Croatian media; Croatian Radiotelevision; HRT; public service media; transitional journalism

## Introduction

Since the turn of the millennium, journalism as a profession and practice has been an object of constant transformation and the subject of intense reconsideration both within the profession and outside it. Journalism is said to be in a crisis, or as McChesney (2012, 686) puts it, “in freefall collapse”. At the same time, in various parts of the world, the efforts are made to introduce different concepts that would bring back professional news values and better journalism. One of the concepts that has been spreading across Western Europe with the aim to fight negativity and trivialism is constructive journalism. Meanwhile, the small ex-Yugoslav country Croatia, after 27 years of independence, is still reading the manual on democracy, while its journalism has been going through a crisis with no end in sight.

According to the observers for IREX Media Sustainability Index, the quality of journalism in Croatia is worse than a decade ago (IREX 2017). Professional journalism still exists but it is surrounded by low quality reporting so that the “trivialization of content is used as a deliberate editorial policy, in order to hold the audience’s attention and avoid confrontations” (IREX 2017, 42). The global crisis in journalism is reflected in the Croatian media. In Croatia, the profession faces many of the problems recognized by the promoters of constructive journalism, but the economic, social and political circumstances are not the same. According to the 2017 World Press Freedom Index, Croatia has dropped 11 places in comparison with the previous year and is now ranked number 74 on the list (Reporters Without Borders 2017). As the biggest problem, the report points out that government interference in the Croatian public broadcaster (HRT) “challenges media freedom and independence in the country” (Reporters Without Borders 2017). The European Media Accountability Index, which compares media self-regulation, codes of ethics, press councils and ombudspersons, shows that Scandinavian countries like Sweden, Norway and Finland are at the top of the list, while Croatia is almost at the bottom (Eberwein et al. 2018, 297). Although international media corporations have entered the Croatian media market, they have yet to bring the highest professional journalism standards which they nourish in some of the outlets in their home countries (Malović 2018, 31). In the mainstream media, there is a trend of avoiding relevant topics because they are not considered interesting or “commercial” enough for media consumers (IREX 2016) and in such circumstances, it is difficult for journalists to work according to professional standards (Malović 2018).

At the same time, journalism in Croatia is facing a profound credibility crisis. The most recent Reuters Digital News Report shows that 39 percent of Croatians trust the news, while only 15 percent feel that the media is free from political influence (2017, 61). This opens up space for a shift in the mind-sets of both the professional journalists and the public, allowing for the concept of constructive journalism to enter into the public sphere. Having in mind that constructive journalism is an attempt to move in the direction of quality journalism, the focus of this study is to explore the possibility of implementing constructive journalism ideas in Croatian newsrooms, especially at the public broadcaster; and ascertain the willingness to adopt the term “constructive” in relation to journalism.

## Literature review

### *Transitional journalism in Croatia*

"It remains the case that many underlying conditions of social structure and media system cast a long shadow on the conduct and performance of journalists and thus on the production of news." (McQuail 2013, 118) In the 1990s, democratization, changes in media regulation and new business models arrived to post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Problems in these countries no longer originate from political pressures but from new power centers, advertisers, multinational corporations and partnerships between financial institutions and politicians (Malović 2005, 13). A country in transition, Croatia is an ex-Yugoslav republic that already had a relatively developed media back in the socialist era (Malović 2005, 15). After the first parliamentary elections in Croatia in 1990, the national question overshadowed the process of democratization and the war that followed had the most tragic impact on Croatia and Bosnia Herzegovina between 1991 and 1995. "Nowhere in the region was the challenge of democratization harder than in the new states which emerged out of dying Socialist Federated Republic of Yugoslavia" (Ramet et al. 2017, 3). That is also a reason why Croatia started its path to democracy and free society in an atypical way, despite similarities with other post-communist countries (Melčić 2017, 192).

Andresen et al (2017) study transitional journalism in the Western Balkans and describe the transition as a "constant state of mind, where the relationships between the journalists and the state institutions are under constant renegotiation" (626). Examining the four states of Serbia, Albania, Kosovo and Croatia, the scholars take into account the troubled past of those countries, but instead of the term post-socialist or post-war journalism, they introduce the term transitional journalism. They find that journalists in these countries share the traditional cornerstones of journalistic professionalism with those in Western democracies, but they also perceive their journalistic role as more active: they feel more responsible to help the society transition after the conflict, and they strive to promote social change and educate the audience (Andresen et al. 2017, 625–6). However, Peruško argues against simplistic attempts to see all post-socialist media systems as the same and makes the case that the Croatian post-socialist media system is "a perfect fit" for the Mediterranean polarized pluralist model developed by Hallin and Mancini (Peruško 2013, 709). It is characterized by the late development of the mass press, weak professionalization of journalism, strong political parallelism, and the strong role of the state (Peruško 2013, 721). The Croatian political culture operates with no clear cut between public and private interests, with journalists who serve "their own" politicians and politicians who have journalists of their own (Peruško 2012, 438).

Political parallelism is also present in the model of public service media in Croatia (Croatian Radiotelevision, HRT), which has no history of corporate organization (Peruško 2013, 717). HRT stepped down from the JRT system<sup>1</sup> in 1990, one year before Croatia declared independence from Yugoslavia. During the 1990s, HRT operated as a state public television and in 2001 began the transition to an independent public service (Car 2006). The attempt to remove politics from the HRT at the beginning of the millennium was further shaken by the competition of two commercial TV stations (Car 2013). The first, Nova TV, started

broadcasting in 2000, and later RTL in 2004 (Mučalo 2004). At the time, HRT is losing the TV news ratings race. According to the Reuters Digital News Report, Nova TV has the highest weekly news reach in Croatia (64 percent), RTL comes second and the public broadcaster HRT has a weekly news reach of 44 percent (2017, 60–61).

### *The problem with public service journalism in Croatia*

The public service broadcasting law has been changed whenever the political elite wanted their own management at the top of the HRT (Perišin and Škaljac 2011, 20). Members of the Croatian HRT programme council come from the civil society sector, but they are appointed by the Parliament (Popović 2004). HRT started losing its audience the moment it started copying commercial television news (Mučalo 2004; Car 2007). Instead of relying on public interest, in-depth stories and contextualization, it unsuccessfully tried to beat the competition with stories built on conflict and live reports with no context, and by cutting budgets for its TV news magazines (Perišin, 2008). Content became trivial, while management issues further damaged the shaky HRT foundations (Car 2013, 37).

Perišin observes that news content lacks context and sound bites have become more important than the democratic debate (2017). According to the National Media Report (Ministry of Culture, 2015), apart from the pressure of business and political elites, Croatian journalists blame newsroom routines and editors for insufficient time and resources to prepare the story. They are not encouraged or have the conditions to specialize in certain areas and work longer hours for less money. In the newsrooms, the increased workload of journalists is driven by a 24/7 sense of immediacy and the competitive demands to find unique and fresh angles to more stories. “At the same time, there is little or no time left to verify whether a piece of information is true or false” (Kantola 2012, 612). At the HRT editorial meetings, key news editors and heads of the news departments decide which stories to cover, where to cover them and for which newscast (Perišin 2010, 179–201) detached from the rest of the reporters and the staff. These organizational routines “bias the news without necessarily intending to do so” (Bennett 2016, 131).

In the first decade of 2000s, there were attempts at the HRT to change newsroom workflow and introduce news formats with more quality journalism, along with the implementation of digital newsroom production (Brautović 2009). During that period and the years that followed, the HRT was considered as a role model in the region – both regarding implementation of new technology and digital production, and its efforts to stay impartial despite the political pressures (Car 2006). Between 2013 and 2015, under the supervision of ex-BBC and DR consultants and the HRT editorial staff, there was an attempt at the HRT to change newsroom workflow and the format of the main newscast in order to introduce more in-depth reporting and stories of public interest (Perišin 2013, 167; Alečković 2015; Brewer 2015). The political shift after the parliamentary elections at the end of 2015 has caused reassignments of the majority of newsroom editors and changed course of the HRT once again (SEEMO 2016).

### *Constructive journalism as a potential model for Croatia?*

Haagerup (2014, 2017) and Gyldensted (2015), who are pioneers of constructive journalism in Denmark, share common criticism of today's journalism. They are especially critical of the negativity bias in the news, however they differentiate constructive journalism from positive or good news stories. Haagerup criticizes mainstream news for being narrow-minded, too negative, un-engaging, sensationalist; and advocates for journalism which shows that "the world is also full of options, hope, joy and people who dare do new stuff, dreaming of a better tomorrow" (Haagerup 2014, 23). Gyldensted (2015) shares the criticisms, but recommends elements of positive psychology as a practical strategy to do constructive journalism. Both Haagerup and Gyldensted recommend focussing on possible solutions to social problems that would ultimately lead to a positive social impact, better audience engagement and increased perception of journalism credibility. In addition to the Danish Broadcasting Corporation (DR) where constructive journalism took off, some print and online media in Europe claim to have adopted the constructive journalism approach. The concept is also accepted by the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) and its training centre EBU Academy that regularly organizes constructive journalism workshops for the European public broadcasters.

In Croatia, this approach has not officially been promoted or practiced in any media outlet. It has been introduced to MA students at the journalism department at the Faculty of Political Science in Zagreb as part of the curriculum<sup>2</sup>. Not getting into the different discourses of constructive journalism promoters, the common ideas of this approach address much of the criticism of Croatian journalism. According to the mentioned research on the state of Croatian journalism, both journalists and the public are disappointed with the quality and content. The public blames journalists, journalists blame their editors and media owners, while media owners say they provide what the public needs (IREX 2017). In this blame game, the tenets of constructive journalism portend possible solutions. In a country of specific historical and social background, it is worth exploring both the use of the term "constructive" and also the concept of constructive journalism as a shift towards a better and more responsible journalism, whatever the term would be. The following is an examination of the potential opportunities and obstacles of implementation of the main constructive journalism ideas in Croatian newsrooms.

## **Methodology**

The aim of this research was to examine the main opportunities and obstacles for the implementation of constructive journalism ideas in the context of Croatian television newsrooms. This was done through a series of exploratory in-depth interviews with 15 Croatian journalists and news editors who all work or have been working for the public broadcaster HRT. Their names and organizations are anonymized in order for them to have the freedom of expression without concern for reputation damage or reprimands. A majority of the journalists were from public broadcasting. Three of them work now for a regional news channel and one of the 15 works for a newspaper. The gender breakdown is 9 females and 6 males. The interviewees were chosen to ensure a variety of ages and experience levels of working in the news programme.

Journalists who work or have experienced working for the public service, mostly in television, were chosen for several reasons. First, TV is still the main source of news for 79 percent of Croatians, according to the most recent Reuters Digital News Report (2017, 60–61). Second, public broadcaster HRT is still the biggest broadcasting company in Croatia. Third, constructive journalism ideas were first introduced and developed at the Danish public broadcaster and are now promoted at other European public broadcasters by the EBU Academy.

The journalism interviews consist of two parts. In the first part, the interviewees were asked to assess the current state of journalism in Croatia and in what way Croatia and the world are presented in news stories. Further, they were asked to talk about their work and the features of news selection and production in their daily routines. Finally, the interviewees gave their first impressions of the phrase *constructive journalism*. The aim here was to examine in what ways role perceptions of Croatian journalists and editors and their criticisms of journalism, news and news production processes are different or similar to constructive journalism ideas.

In the second part of the interview, journalists were introduced to the main ideas of constructive journalism that are shared both by Haagerup (2014; 2017) and Gyldensted (2015). Each interviewee was presented with the same information that the researcher read aloud (see Appendix 1). The interviewees were asked to provide feedback and comments on specific ideas. Finally, they were asked if and in what way the ideas of constructive journalism could be implemented in the newsrooms where they work.

The semi-structured interviews were chosen as a research method for the following reasons; first, interviews provide rich data, which is important in order to gain in-depth understanding of the complexities specific for the Croatian broadcast environment; second, as this was the interviewees' first encounter with the new term *constructive journalism*, the interviewer was able provide additional explanations to the subjects with regards to these fresh ideas; third, the interviewer can ask follow-up questions in order to obtain detailed explanations, especially in the second part of the interview. Other methods, such as newsroom observations, or surveys that would allow generalizable data, were considered. However, as the main scope of this research is to detect the possible opportunities and limitations for constructive journalism at the entry point to Croatian television newsrooms in-depth interviews outside the daily rush of the newsroom that would allow rich data and provide the possibility to ask follow-up questions were chosen as the most suitable method.<sup>3</sup>

### **"Constructive" in Croatian: Experts' perspective**

Before going into journalists' interpretations of word *constructive*, it is useful to stop for a moment to open up the meaning of the word from the linguists' point of view. According to the Oxford English dictionary (2017), the adjective *constructive* is defined as "having or intended to have a useful or beneficial purpose". According to a Dutch-Croatian linguist Nikola Rašić, it comes from the Classical Latin verb *struere* which means "to build" (personal communication, 2017). The modern meaning implies "contributing, adding certain value". However, in different countries the word "constructive" can have different meanings and ideological undertones. For example, in some authoritarian regimes it could be understood as *less critical*. In Croatia and other countries of ex-Yugoslavia, we can find some

analogies. During the socialist rule in Yugoslavia, a special term was coined: *constructive criticism*. It implied commenting and contributing within the frames of the same mind-set, the permitted space of communist ideology (Rašić, personal communication, 2017).

Croatian philosopher of language Bojan Marotti agrees that the term *constructive* was misused and had ideological connotations. “Behind it – there was a desire not to shake things up, not to question, not to pose critical questions. There were things which you could criticize, but, if someone would call into question the rule of the Yugoslav leader Tito, or the principles of the ruling communist party, he could then be criticized for not being constructive” (personal communication, 2017). Marotti himself questions whether someone from the Western culture could understand the subtlety of the use of and the misuse of language in this concrete example.

Rašić reminds us that the original meaning of *construere* implies a kind of social reciprocity and questions: “What is the idea towards which we are constructive, what is the concept we contribute to?” (Rašić, personal communication, 2017). Croatian sociolinguist Ivo Žanić thinks that meanings develop over time and we should not be burdened with what one term means in another context. “Living languages are always dynamic but the terminology has to be stable. Definitions should be precise so that we can enable fast, unequivocal and unmistakable communication. That is why medicine uses Latin because it is a dead language, which is why it remains stable.” To avoid potential misinterpretation in communication, a precise definition of constructive journalism that would clearly point out the main ideas of this approach is needed (Žanić, personal communication, 2017).

According to linguists, the problem does not lie in what the proponents of the term prefer. Just as in any field of knowledge, any term can be changed to become an instrument of manipulation. Having that in mind, introducing this type of journalism requires a high level of literacy and professionalism, both from journalists and the public.

## **Feedback of Croatian journalists to constructive journalism ideas**

### *About the concept “constructive” journalism*

Prior to being introduced to constructive journalism ideas, the journalists interviewed for this research were asked what it would mean to them if someone told them to do *constructive* journalism and what they associate with the word *constructive*. The interviewees predominantly perceived it as engaged reporting about complex issues or reporting that contributes to a better society. One of the HRT journalists said: “Journalism should be constructive because it is the main reason why I – and many others – started doing this job. It was to change the world for the better.” (Interviewee 1)

The editor at N1 news channel, described *constructive journalism* as more “serious journalism” and compared it to *The Guardian*. One HRT editor immediately referred to giving more space to the story in the prime time newscast: “(...) that would mean having three-minute to four-minute long stories in *Dnevnik* [the prime time newscast] or one or two pages for a story in the newspaper” (Interviewee 6).



However, one acknowledged Croatian investigative journalist detected this term as potentially dangerous and suggested that a better term would be *socially responsible journalism*:

Constructive means that even if it is critical, it is critical with the best intention, with the intention to improve matters, not to destroy someone, not to destroy the community. (...) But, this is one of the dangers in transitional countries. What does constructive mean? In relation to what? Does it refer to journalism in relation to the regime? Constructive in relation to current authority? In relation to which values? (Interviewee 15)

Overall, most of the journalists associated this concept with something positive and offered explanations inherent to the main ideas of constructive journalism. In this sense, they expressed an affinity towards the concept even while not being aware of it.

*What is new about constructive journalism?*

All interviewees, without exception, expressed an overall positive first impression about the concept of constructive journalism; however only a minority perceived it as something new or something they have never done before. One N1 journalist and editor with more than 20 years of experience succinctly expressed the impressions of the majority of the interviewees: "It's more like recycling journalism as it once was." (Interviewee 13)

One young HRT journalist said that all constructive journalism ideas are inherent to journalism as it should be and that all should strive towards it: "I see it more as a detailed tactic in the strategy of doing good journalism. The tactic is new, but the strategy has always been there." (Interviewee 1)

On the other hand, for one HRT editor with almost 30 years of experience in the news programme, constructive journalism ideas express what journalism should be like, but what has never been fulfilled in Croatia or anywhere else:

"Journalism was never really constructive in this sense because it never strived to report positive examples or solutions to problems. I think that is what makes constructive journalism completely new. I think it's something that should be done, under one condition that it isn't in someone's interest." (Interviewee 9)

One N1 editor also thought that constructive journalism offers a different approach: "I think constructive journalism adds an education component in storytelling. I don't think that you can change your audience's attitudes, but you can redefine the space where you have the possibility to hear different opinions." (Interviewee 14)

Interestingly, even though the ideas were rarely perceived as new, the interviewees predominantly connected them to normative journalistic ideals, but less to their practice.

## Opportunities for the implementation of constructive journalism

While the ideas of constructive journalism were introduced in the second part of the interview, in the first part many of the ideas and criticisms of journalism expressed by the interviewees were in line with those of constructive journalism proponents. For this reason, we marked them as *opportunities*. Specifically, the interviewees predominantly supported a more active and engaged journalistic role that involves a pursuit for solutions and explanations in news stories. However, they expressed caution when it comes to reporting about solutions. Further, the interviewees predominantly expressed their observation that the Croatian media portray the world worse than it really is.

#### *Opportunity 1: The need to help and engage the audience*

The interviewees perceive their journalistic roles as active and describe their purpose to pursue stories that would engage their audiences. This confirms the findings of Hanitzsch et al. (2011) and Andresen et al. (2017) who found that this was unique for journalists in transitional democracies. The interviewees hold their audience in high esteem and feel a special responsibility towards the Croatian society in general. When asked what it means to be a journalist for them today, all interviewees without exception first stated in some form that they work in the public interest. One interviewee who works both as a journalist and as an editor at the public television said: “I don’t feel that the HRT is my main employer. I am the employee of the audience and the audience is the first I answer to.” (Interviewee 3)

The interviewees at the public television expressed views that are in line with the interventionist, assertive and socially committed journalism. This is reflected in their predominant self-perception as fighters for justice who need to change society for the better. One journalist recalled a story early in their career that helped an older woman, who was unable to leave the house, to fix her balcony:

It was my favourite story I’ve ever done, because I helped a specific person. Now when I work in the news, it is more difficult to do that, but you can still do a story that can perhaps help a group of people, even if it’s about traffic. (Interviewee 11)

The interviewees shared the need of constructive journalism proponents to actively engage the audience, but there were differences. While constructive journalism aims to empower the audience to make their own decisions, the interviewees seem not to trust that the audience is able to do it without their help.

No matter how flawed journalism has been in the last twenty years, I still think that our society would be in even worse shape if it weren’t for us journalists. They can’t make it through without us. (Interviewee 4)

In summary, there is a sharp contrast between the views and ideals expressed by the interviewees with regards to journalists’ role in Croatia and what their daily news routines allows. The way they evaluate their profession and the environment in which they perform their roles depicts a work routine that sometimes appears hopeless and resistant to change.

#### *Opportunity 2: Criticisms of negativity bias in news reporting*

In the first part of the interviews, the respondents assessed the media representation of events in Croatia and the world as unrealistic. The prevalence of bad news and the chase for spectacular and exclusive stories that would win over the audience, were emphasized as the main features of the distorted picture of the world in the news. Three different arguments were detected when the interviewees were asked about the reasons for negativity bias in news reporting. First, the argument that journalism has always been like that. One experienced HRT journalist describes this as inherent to the journalistic profession:

When I was working in the crime section, a lot of people asked me why we reported so much about traffic accidents. It's not about feeling bad about it. It's enough that one driver hears on the radio about a terrible accident in which, for example, a child that was walking to school was killed, and that he decides to slow down. Then I've done a good job. (Interviewee 5)

The second argument is that audience is more drawn to negative news and content: "I don't think it's a realistic representation of Croatia, but I have a feeling that... When we had the government crisis, the ratings went up. When you have nudity, clicks go up. I think it's what the audience wants" (Interviewee 1).

Thirdly, many of the interviewees were critical of the news production routines. One HRT editor compared the news routines with the production assembly line and said: "It is not journalism. I don't know how to call it. It's a little bit of theatre, performance and the rest is gathering some fragments, which are – nothing, only gathered information about who said what." (Interviewee 2)

All of these arguments are shared by constructive journalism proponents, who point them out as the main criticisms of mainstream journalism they aim to transform. These responses also confirm Malović's (2018, 31) assessment of journalism in Croatia as a field of "unfulfilled expectations" where the opening of the media market to international corporations did not bring quality journalism.

### **Obstacles for the implementation of constructive journalism**

After they were introduced to the main ideas of constructive journalism, each interviewee, without exception, showed interest and strong approval of the ideas. Once they were asked to elaborate on the ideas and later on the potential implementation, the focus of the interviewees was predominantly on the potential obstacles. Change of the mind-set of journalists and editors, criticisms of newsroom routines, fear that reporting on solutions may be a trap that leads to a new ideology were the main obstacles pinpointed by the interviewees.

#### *Obstacle 1: When reality kicks in – "You'd have to change the Croatian mind-set first"*

In terms of implementation of constructive journalism ideas in their newsrooms, the predominant first argument of the interviewees can be summed up in the response of the youngest interviewee: "It sounds great, but I think that in Croatia it would be science fiction. We always report on what's not working, but it's not only that. We somehow never manage to turn things around. Journalism is similar to Croatia in this sense." (Interviewee 1)

This view was also shared and cynically expressed by the interviewee with has the longest journalistic experience: “I think you only need a little good will to make it work. First you need to change the editors. And then you slowly need to completely change our consciousness.” (Interviewee 7).

A complete change of the mind-set of Croatian journalists, in sharp contrast to that of the Danish, was pinpointed by the interviewees as the first main obstacle. In this sense, the interviewees with more than 20 years of experience, referred to Croatia’s complex political history. After Yugoslavia and communism, journalism culture in Croatia was impacted by the war in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (1991–1995), then controlled by the ruling party (Thompson, 1994). As Andresen et al. (2017, 616) point out, the mission of media after the war to become active stakeholders in arranging democracy was not easy: “Reshaping the role of the media from an extension (a promoter of the ruling party) to a mediator of public opinion was a difficult step to be carried out in the twinkling of an eye.” One editor at the HRT explained the difference in the mind-set:

I remember when I was in Finland a few years ago. For us, politics is always number one in the rundown. Their first news story in the rundown was that potato planting would start earlier because of warm weather. And I remember myself saying: “Will I ever live to see the time when this will be news on our television?” I don't think I will. Because what we have had so far is a history of single-mindedness until the 1990s and then a period of a very primitive pluralism. (Interviewee 9)

Another feature of the Croatian mind-set emphasized by the interviewees was that Croatians are inclined to look for everything that is wrong. This they connected to the mentioned experiences from the Croatian history. One editor from N1 regional TV network said Croatia and Denmark cannot be compared and added:

The thing is, whenever you try to look beneath the surface in Croatia, you find something that's wrong. Also, we don't have as many positive stories as the Danes do. (...) Our political system is divided and then, of course, we end up reporting on these two opposing sides or views. (Interviewee 13)

Another editor from the same channel connected the ideas of constructive journalism with previous work experience:

When RTL [the commercial TV broadcaster] was starting to broadcast, they tried to make a duplicate copy-paste of their news stories in Germany. But it simply didn't work. They tried talking about politics the least because RTL is from a country where there aren't as many problems as in Croatia. Of course they have problems, but on a completely different level. So I think that constructive journalism would be mission impossible. (Interviewee 15)

Therefore, interviewees predominantly linked the current Croatian mind-set to the specific historical, cultural and political heritage of the country, while constructive journalism ideas, according to respondents, would demand a complete shift of consciousness. That is something assessed by the interviewees as difficult and unlikely, mostly because they detect

a significant geopolitical and cultural gap between Croatia and countries such as Denmark, Finland or Germany.

*Obstacle 2: Yes to solutions, but beware of the ideology*

In the first set of qualitative interviews, the interviewees instinctively supported the idea of constructive journalism to report more on the things that work. Spontaneous distinctions were made between *offering* solutions and *reporting about* solutions: “If a solution exists and you report on it, I think it's only informing. Why wouldn't we talk about how, for example, Slovenia solved a similar problem that we're facing here?” (Interviewee 14)

However, in the second part of the interview, when the idea of reporting on positive examples and solutions was explicitly presented, it created an initial form of scepticism and fright among some interviewees. In this sense, we detect it as a potential obstacle. They felt that this approach might develop as a form of activism, have an ideological subtext or open the doors to promoting another ideology. One experienced journalist said:

I have nothing against positive examples, but there's a danger: who is the one who assesses what's positive? Here I automatically see a chance of subtly imposing a new ideology. (...) The only idea I support is showing people others who initiated something themselves – for example, who are out on the streets protesting against or for something. That is fine, but telling them what to protest for or against is not. (Interviewee 6)

Another journalist expressed scepticism about constructive journalism and building the so-called “virtual reality”:

It is true that there is an unnatural and exaggerated attitude in the newsroom that only bad news is good news. Nonetheless, I think that constructive journalism has the potential to distort reality in the other direction. It would only work if we provided context and said what's working, while at the same time explaining and not hiding what doesn't work. (Interviewee 3)

The most experienced of the HRT interviewees, on the other hand, made an analogy between constructive journalism and the way journalism was done in communism:

In communism, our news programme started with appraisals. I don't think that was a realistic presentation of the world, but it created a better mood and made us feel hopeful. I don't think this is a bad thing. Of course, I don't think that it means producing happy news. We should simply try to look at things with both eyes wide open, as constructive journalism proposes. We shouldn't lie or pretend that everything is better than it is, but when something is good, we shouldn't avoid reporting about it.” (Interviewee 7)

While the interviewees expressed a more active role with regards to their audience and spontaneously talked about solutions-focused stories as the point of doing journalism, an explicit presentation of these ideas made them more cautious.

*Obstacle 3: Newsroom routines – Lack of time, weak communication and planning*

Different daily processes and routines in the newsroom were stated by the interviewees as potential obstacles to constructive journalism implementation. The arguments include limited time for preparation and production of the story, weak communication and planning between editors and journalists and established news values. This is inherent to the criticisms of newsroom routines stated by Haagerup (2017).

First, the amount of time a journalist gets to prepare and then tell the story was pinpointed as the first obstacle in terms of newsroom routines. The interviewed editors were also conscious of this, but they talked about it as if it is irreparable:

When a journalist spends the whole day in the parliament and then gets one minute and a half to tell the story, he needs to take out four sound bites. It ends up being more of a short series of puns than an actual story. There is no time or space to get to the heart of an issue or to give a positive example that may function as a guidepost. I think this is almost impossible to do in a news programme. (Interviewee 3)

One experienced HRT interviewee stated that the prime-time newscast *Dnevnik* used to be 25 minutes long, and now it is 45 minutes, so there is space for a good story: "I think there is enough time. If it is a relevant story, I will throw out five stories which we've already seen online twenty times that day." (Interviewee 6)

Second, according to the journalists at the public media service, there is not enough planning and communication, while critical editorial decisions come from the top. The majority pointed out that the situation even deteriorated in the last couple of years. One journalist said: "I see in the rundown what my assignment is. The producer doesn't call me to tell me what he expects me to do, nor do I discuss it with my supervising editor. Before I would have discussed my story with the editors. This doesn't exist anymore." (Interviewee 8)

The HRT news programme has a planning desk that plans the coverage of events for the next day or next week. The habit of doing bad *ad hoc* planning was stated as another obstacle for bringing in constructive journalism:

If you have a planning meeting in the afternoon for the next day, then you can plan what to include in the prime-time newscast next evening. But, if you have a planning meeting at 2 pm and someone finds out that we have missed something and need to do a news story that runs in a few hours, then it's hard to do something good. (Interviewee 5)

Further, the established practice of news selection and their order in the rundown was also pointed out as an obstacle that constructive journalism would have a hard time cracking. Another HRT editor said:

The hierarchy of what news should look like prevents it. For example, I personally would like to see good news about successful scientists first in the rundown, but that's not possible. Our news programme first shows everything that the government is doing at the moment. This *high politics* is not in any way connected to real life and we don't even try to make the connection. (Interviewee 9)

The interviewees at the news channel N1 mentioned the exhausting newsroom routines, specific for a 24-hour news channel, as well as a small team of journalists and producers, as the main obstacles for the implementation of constructive journalism. The focus on hard news creates a workflow that does not allow more constructive elements.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

Constructive journalism in the Croatian context was worth exploring for three reasons. First, quality of journalism is deteriorating in Croatia or as Malović (2018, 31) says, the current media situation is “worse than ever”. Second, the same criticisms of today’s journalism and news production routines shared by the interviewees are the issues constructive journalism aims to tackle. Third, as constructive journalism is promoted by the European Broadcasting Union, the Croatian public broadcaster (HRT) as its member is a potential candidate for these trainings.

The concept *constructive journalism* is overall well accepted by the journalists and editors, but as linguists explain, in the Croatian language this name may have more than one interpretation. For some journalists, being constructive can also connote being uncritical and in support of a certain regime or ideology. Therefore, in case of implementation in Croatian newsrooms, it would need a very detailed explanation and definition that would leave no room for alternative interpretations. This seems highly unlikely in a dynamic, change driven world of TV news.

The main research aim was to detect the potential opportunities and obstacles for the implementation of constructive journalism. While the interviewees predominantly approved constructive journalism ideas, few assessed them as original or previously unknown. Taking into account the question of linguistic interpretation as well, the way these ideas would be communicated and taught to Croatian journalists and editors would have to be designed with clear precision and in-depth explanations about the originality or uniqueness of constructive journalism, compared to their existent ideas on good journalism. The active journalistic role conceptions and shared criticisms of news are detected as two main opportunities that are in line with the impulse that inspired constructive journalism ideas. However, the path of implementing these ideas seems to have serious obstacles. While reporting about solutions is approved by the interviewees, at the same time they are sceptical about it, as it may present a way to promote another ideology. Here interviewees refer to Croatia’s communist past, war and post-war historical background and the role journalism at the time had. In line with this, the most significant obstacle stated by the interviewees are the differences between Denmark and Croatia, concretely the difference in mind-set and social context. This asks for a cultural shift in the existing newsroom culture. While interviewees detected different newsroom routines as a potential setback for constructive journalism; it can also be seen as an opportunity. The shared dissatisfaction with news production processes can be seen as a fertile ground for the desired changes.

While the limitations of a research that is based solely on interviews is recognized, it is a valuable starting point for further research on constructive journalism ideas in Croatia and throughout the region with a similar media culture tradition. The ideas of constructive journalism resonate well with Croatian broadcast journalists, but the specific context in which

Croatian media work demands a unique and detailed strategy of implementation. Croatian journalists are additionally stranded by problems that constructive journalism promoters do not anticipate or have a plan on how to tackle them.

The promoters of constructive journalism should start exploring the potential of their ideas in every newsroom and start developing strategies that consider the individual newsroom cultures, specific both for the country and the region. Newsroom routines would have to undergo an in-depth transformation, from planning to the production of stories and the way news stories are placed in the rundown in each news programme. Above all and before everything else, the basic conditions of doing free, independent and responsible journalism should be met. For that, more than one strategy is needed. While the ideas of constructive journalism may warm up hearts, it remains to be seen in what way they will warm up newsrooms, editors and journalists.

## NOTES

1. Association of the Yugoslav radio and television stations
2. It is taught as part of the module called Television News in the Multimedia Environment. The curriculum can be obtained through this link:  
[https://www.fpzg.unizg.hr/images/50441746/syllabus TELEVISION%20NEWS%20IN%20THE%20MULTIMEDIA%20ENVIRONMENT Perisin Novo.pdf](https://www.fpzg.unizg.hr/images/50441746/syllabus_TELEVISION%20NEWS%20IN%20THE%20MULTIMEDIA%20ENVIRONMENT_Perisin_Novo.pdf)
3. The questions were additionally informed by experiences of newsroom routines at the public broadcaster by both authors, one as a former member of the top HRT news management team for more than 15 years, and the other one as a freelance journalist for the HRT news programme.

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#### **APPENDIX 1:** The presentation of constructive journalism ideas to the interviewees

*Constructive journalism is a new approach of news production developed by the Danish Broadcasting Corporation (DR) that started losing their audience and decided to do something about it. They took a look at the rundown of their main news programme and concluded it was full of conflict, negativity and bad news. The Corporation does not agree that the news today paint a realistic and balanced picture of the world, which is not as negative as the media portray it. They say that journalists should look at the world with both eyes – one that looks for what does not work and the other that looks for things that work in a society. Reporting should be critical, balanced, unbiased, based on facts and devoted to the core values of journalism. It should not give in to scandals and outrage, it should be future-oriented and talk about solutions and positive trends in a society. Solutions are not being advocated for, but reported on as an inspiration. Audience should feel empowered by the stories instead of switching the channel. Constructive journalism is not activism; it does not aim to promote specific agendas or solutions, nor is it happy news. It is a correction and a supplement to mainstream news. It should provide a more accurate portrayal of the world. The DR newsroom uses this approach in their daily routine and says it is a completely new way of thinking about the news selection and production. They look for constructive elements in negative stories and they do this by providing context and asking questions that are critical in a curious kind of way. Constructive journalism proponents aim to dissolve the way journalists are trained to think that a good story must be based on conflict, dramatic plot lines, villains and victims. For example, if there is a city with 20 high schools and 19 of them have a high rate of bullying, while one school managed to successfully deal with that issue, a constructive approach to this story would involve pointing out the problem and its extent, but also providing more context and including the example of the school that solved the issue.*

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