

Publishing the Positive

**Exploring the motivations for and the consequences of
reading solutions-focused journalism**

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Autumn 2016

*Disclaimer: this research was conducted independently by Jodie Jackson, with no
interference from Positive News Ltd (www.positive.news) or the Constructive
Journalism Project (www.constructivejournalism.org), other than to provide open
access to its networks of readers and journalists.*

Abstract

This aim of this qualitative study is to as gain insight into the experience of consuming and producing Positive News, a solutions focused news publication. Through the use of semi-structured interviews with nine readers and five authors of Positive News, the study explored the meaning that these participants assigned to the term Positive News, as well as their motivations to engage with the publication, and some of the psychological outcomes that they experienced. The existing body of research tends to focus on the detrimental effects of negative news on both the individual and society. However, there is limited research into the conceptualization of and impact of positive news. This paper aims to address this scholarly gap. Its main findings suggest that positive news can promote optimism, hope, self-efficacy, active coping, increased engagement and social cohesion.

Key Words: Audience Engagement, News Psychology, Negativity Bias, Positive News, Constructive Journalism

Introduction

This aim of this study is to explore the experience of consuming and producing Positive News (a solutions focused news publication). The existing body of research on the psychological effects of news consumption tends to focus on the detrimental effects of negative news on both the individual and society. However, there is a dearth of research into the psychological impact of positive news. This paper aims to address this scholarly gap through a qualitative exploratory study into the experience of participants who read Positive News or write it. The study explored the meaning that these participants assigned to the term Positive News, as well as their motivations to engage with the publication, and some of the psychological outcomes that they experienced.

The role of the news

There is no precise definition of the news, however there seems to be a common offering among the available descriptions; news is considered to be the publishing of new and notable information through public broadcasts with the purpose of engaging and informing citizens (Lewis, 2012) in a way that empowers them to be able to act on the information presented (Lippmann, 1922). The American Press Institute embraces this by defining the ultimate role of the news to “empower the informed”.

The power of the news

The news provides an information-based account of reality, which has a powerful influence on both the individual and society. The process of influence is largely explained by 1st level and 2nd level agenda-setting, which suggests the

media not only tell us *what* to think about but *how* to think about it (McCombs, 2004; Wanta, Golan & Lee, 2004; Otieno et al., 2013).

On an individual level, the news informs and educates us on events that we are unable to experience first hand, “we, therefore, rely on the media to explore the world around us and to construct our “reality”” (Lippman, 1992, p.9). Research has shown that information processing is unable to distinguish between media and non-media inputs (Scheufele, 1999), therefore, a public narrative can become our personal experience, contributing to “our memories, knowledge and beliefs, just as do the other experiences in our lives” (Johnson, 2007, p.1).

On a societal level, the news enables us to evaluate our wider environment (Eveland, 2001) through educating people on public affairs and facilitating personal and public debate (Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001). Subsequently, the news plays a significant role in democracy in its ability to encourage (or discourage) civic participation (Beaudoin, 2007) as well as set the agenda of the national narrative (McCombs, 2004).

Conceptualization of positive and negative news

Negative news content is broadly associated with undesirability and is “generally considered to be unpleasant or harmful” (Haskins, 1981). Harcup (2004) defines “bad news” as “stories with negative overtones” (p.37), which typically comprise of war, famine, violence, corruption, recession, tragedy and scandal. Positive news lacks an academic conceptual definition but is broadly linked to desirability, which typically include stories of innovation, initiative, peace

building, progress, solutions, achievements and positive aspects of society. Despite the distinctive differences between them in terms of contents, it has been argued that positive and negative news do not exist at polar ends of a spectrum as their names would suggest. Rather, they can coexist (Leung & Lee, 2015).

Negativity bias

For nearly decades researchers have provided evidence to show that there is strong negativity bias in news media (Combs & Slovic, 1979), as negative news stories are chosen for publication over positive ones, despite being equal in all other news values and criteria (Bohle, 1986; Peterson, 1979). In an early study of news consumption, Bohle (1986) wrote a positive and negative version of ten stories and found that industry professionals chose the negative stories in terms of importance and publication preference. It is not only the selection that is biased, but also the display; negative news stories get preferential display treatment over positive news stories (Gieber, 1955). Although the research is not current, it suggests that the ethos behind the decision about what is newsworthy has remained the same even if the medium may have modernized (Johnson & Davy, 1997). This is evidenced by more recent research identifying that the news items most commonly considered newsworthy frequently focus on war, corruption, scandal, murder, famine, and natural disasters (Montgomery, 2007; Ridout, Grosse & Appleton, 2008). This choice is more colloquially referred to as “if it bleeds it leads” (Miller & Albert, 2014). That this conclusion is shared by both modern and 60-year-old research, shows how established and entrenched the focus on negative news is within the industry.

Effects of negativity bias

Haskins (1981) suggests that, “prolonged exposure to bad news over long periods can have detrimental effects on moods, attitudes, perceptions and emotional health” (p.11). Supporting research shows that this skewed truth created by the negativity bias can lead to a misperception of risk (Slovic et al., 1982), anxiety (Oteino et al., 2013), lower mood levels (Johnson & Davey, 1997), learned helplessness (Seligman, 1998), contempt and hostility towards others (Unz, Schwab & Winterhoff-Spurk, 2008), desensitization (Sharrar, 2008). In some cases, the negativity bias can lead to complete avoidance of the news (Edgerly, 2015). It is important to highlight that the concern of negative news is not its presence, but its *excess*. When talking about the excess negativity in the news, this is more thematic than episodic; it is the collective overrepresentation that poses a problem, rather than its individual presence.

The overrepresentation of negative news can lead the reader to have a distorted sense of risk that often exceeds the reality (Slovic et al., 1982) leading the public to believe the world is “more violent than it actually is” (Horvit, 2003: p.33). Oteino et al. (2013) conducted a controlled experiment where they presented their participants with the same story framed differently and found that the stories framed negatively, using dramatic vocabulary, led to the misrepresentation of risk and an imbalanced understanding of the issue among participants. The consequence of this overestimation of risk can lead them to feel fearful, anxious, depressed, isolated and paranoid (Oteino et al. 2013).

The anxiety created by reading a negative news story (Oteino et al., 2013) could be further exacerbated by the changes in media technology (Slovic, 1987), which have increased the frequency and availability of news as well as increasing its “negative, sensational and graphic nature” (McNaughton-Cassill, 2000: p. 193; Coleman, 1993). The consistency of negative news stories has the potential to transform momentary anxiety into the more stable trait anxiety due to the repetition of the experience (Payne, 1983). Research has also shown that people with high trait anxiety tend to seek out more threatening materials (Mogg, et al., 1992). Without a varied news valance, there is little opportunity to break the cycle.

One reason offered for this feeling of anxiety is the result of feeling that the world is facing imminent threats, and feeling helpless to effect change. Maier & Seligman (1976) identified helplessness to be the result of the process where one experiences a lack of control to a negative stimulus, which leads to a lower sense of self-efficacy, making them passive and unresponsive as they do not believe their actions will change anything. Levine (1977) found 71.4% of all news stories broadcast on television to demonstrate helplessness. DeVillis, DeVillis & McCauley (1978) furthered this research to show that helplessness can be acquired through witnessing others who experience a lack of control. Therefore, one can potentially acquire a sense of learned helplessness from watching the news. This outcome directly contradicts the intention of the news to “empower the informed” (American Press Institute, 2016). On an individual level, helplessness is linked to depression and pessimism (Seligman, 1974). On a

societal level, the implications of this sense of helplessness can lead to a decrease in our contributive and helpful behavior (Veitch et al, 1977).

Unz et al. (2008) offered an alternative explanation for the decrease in contributive and helpful behaviors. In this controlled study, participants were given a 15-minute television clip of violent news in order to measure their subjective feelings and identify their resultant emotions using the Differential Affect Scale (Merten & Krause, 1993). A limitation of this study is that participants were required to pick an emotion from a list, which limited their subjective response to the stimulus. However, the authors identified the three prevalent emotions associated with violence in the news to be anger, fear and contempt. This suggests that the lack of civic engagement or motivation to act pro-socially may not be due to low levels of self-efficacy or helplessness but could instead be fuelled by contempt or resentment for others that motivate the individual *not* to participate. This is supported by research that suggests contempt can lower tolerance and increased hostility towards others (Izard, 1977).

One of the most significant consequences of the excess of negativity is disengagement, resulting in lower levels of social, economic and political knowledge and civic participation (Edgerly, 2015). This has been identified to occur for two different reasons. The first is conscious disengagement; those who find the news “too depressing” opt out altogether. Research has shown that this disengagement has been more prevalent among women than men since women’s avoidance response to negative stimulus is greater than men (Ahmed & Bigelow,

1993; Canli et al. 2002), although this is not directly studied in relation to news media. More recently, Grabe & Kamwahi (2006) connected this theory to the news, by using the same story, framed with a different valence (positive, negative and neutral) to test the cognitive processing of a news story against gender difference. They found that when a news story is of moderate intensity, “positive framing benefits women, negative framing benefits men” (p.363) in terms of interest, memory recall and understanding of an issue (Grabe & Kamhawi, 2006; Hendriks et al., 1996). This highlights the gender divide in both news production and consumption brought about by the negativity bias. It also indicates that the patriarchal control of the mainstream media (i.e. the owners and decision makers are still overwhelmingly male) is in part to blame for its persistent negativity bias (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014).

The second reason for disengagement is less conscious but comes as a result of becoming desensitized. This is supported by a study conducted by Scharrer, (2008) who found that, due to repeated exposure, the news could lead us to become desensitized to violence, leading to a lack of concern or sympathy about the issue. This helps explain the reason for the news becoming increasingly sensationalized in an effort to overcome this consumer fatigue and attract readers (Shenk 1997). However, due to adaptation (Helson, 1964) the response of the reader will continue to worsen with this unvaried strategy. The danger of this is that we could be immobilized through apathy when an issue arises that needs attention. If the purpose of the news is to engage and inform citizens (Lewis, 2012), the inherent negative tone of news stands as a potential barrier to achieving this

A fundamental reason for the focus on negative news is attributed to the watchdog role that the media plays in society (Shoemaker, 1996) which serves an important function of holding power to account and shining a light on many of the world ills that need addressing, forcing them onto the public agenda (McCombs, 2004). This serves to fulfill our evolutionary human survival instinct to monitor our environment for potential threats or dangers, which require immediate attention (Baumeister et al. 2001). Grabe & Kamhawi (2006) have linked this theory to the news by reasoning that humans are “hard-wired” to pay more attention (voluntarily or involuntarily) to bad news than good news. However, research suggests readers are even more engaged with socially responsible “constructive approach to bad news” (Haskins, 1981), with readers finding it to be “more interesting than straight bad news” (p.63). This involves the “pro-social treatments of bad news and proposed solutions to problems” (Haskins, 1980). A reason offered for this is because although human beings are biologically predisposed to survey their environment for potential threats and dangers (negative stimuli) they are also predisposed to investigate opportunities (positive stimuli) (Knoblock-Westerwick et al., 2005). In an earlier research titled “the introduction of more legitimate, less fluffy good news” (Galicain & Vestre, 1987) the authors issued a call to address this imbalance.

Effects of positive news

The research on positive news is less explored but has been linked to positive affect (Gyldensted, 2011), positive action (Peterson, 2006), charitable behavior (Berkovitz and Connor, 1966) and hope in moments of despair (Leung & Lee,

2015). Reading positive news was shown to increase positive affect through a controlled study conducted by Gyldensted (2011) where participants' mood was measured pre and post reading news stories to determine their affect. Each positive news story was framed differently using the key principles of positive psychology. The author reported that positive news can reduce negative affect and increase positive affect, resulting in higher levels of subjective wellbeing (Diener, 2000).

Positive Affectivity is the term given to describe the extent to which individuals experience positive emotions like joy, interest, and happiness (Frederickson, 2009) and is linked to Subjective Wellbeing (Diener, 2000). Those who exhibit high positive affect are generally shown to be more socially active (Peterson, 2006). In addition, motivation to take positive action significantly increased with higher levels of positive affect (Berkovitz and Connor, 1966; Cunningham, 1979) such as donate to charity, participate and become more environmentally friendly. This could mitigate the less desirable nature of reduced contributive and helpful behaviour (Veitch et al, 1977) from reading negative news in excess.

The current lack of research positive news has left it without a conceptual definition and open to interpretation and in many cases it is misinterpreted in terms of content and function. Research has shown that commercially, positive news stories currently tend to be ones, which are the light-hearted, soft stories with a human-interest focus (Thussu, 2007). The problem with this commercialization of only this type of positive news, is that it creates an association between good news and inconsequential news.

A further misunderstanding is evidenced by Bennett's (1988) claim that "an upbeat story... sends people off to bed reassured that, despite its problems, the world is still a safe and positive place" (p.5). However, the purpose of positive news is not to reassure the public everyone that everything is fine, but instead to see what is possible. By becoming aware of ways in which individuals and communities are progressing to overcome problems and flourish, it provides a sense of hope and potential (Preston et al. 2011); "It can be helpful to give status or visibility to certain persons or acts that deserve emulation" (Schramm, 1964 p.136), although not directly linked to the news.

This paper seeks to address the lack of theoretical formulation in the domain of positive news by conducting interviews with those who read or produce the print publication "Positive News". This exploratory, ground up approach, hopes to generate a conceptual definition of positive news as well as generate a theory that can then be tested in a more controlled setting to establish causal links. The specific questions this paper aims to address are: 1) What are the experiences of people that consume positive news? 2) What are the motivations for consuming positive news? 3) How do people who consume or produce positive news interpret the term?

Method

Participants

The participants consisted of nine subscribers to Positive News; a UK based solutions-focused online news platform and quarterly news magazine. The readers who participated in the study consisted of four men and five women. The sample also contained five interviewees who write for Positive News. These included one editor (male) and four freelance journalists (one male and three female). The participants had an average age of 38.25 years (range 31-61). The study purposefully included “participants with differing experiences of the phenomenon so as to explore multiple dimensions of the social processes under study” (Starks & Trinidad, 2007); their common interest was that they all have an active engagement with Positive News. The sample size met the criteria proposed by Guest (2006).

Data collection

This research followed Grounded Theory guidelines (Charmaz, 2006), whereby data collection and analysis are conducted in an iterative process.

Interviews: The first author conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants using open-ended questions. Each interview took approximately 45 minutes (range 28-64 minutes) and participants were invited to include any additional thoughts they had on the subject that the questions did not offer.

The interview questions for the writers were focused around their understanding of the term positive news. Hence they were asked to describe

what meaning they assigned to the term, what is the purpose of positive news, what is your experience of producing positive news, why they chose to write these news items, and what are the challenges associated with producing positive news. In later interview cycles the questions evolved to address the reported difference between content and approach.

The interview protocol for the readers focused on their understanding of the term positive news as well as their motivations for and consequences of reading it. For example, how they interpret the term positive news, what is their pattern of news consumption, what is their motivation for reading positive news, and what is their experience of reading it, in terms of response.

Memo writing was also used to document the process of data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2006).

Data analysis

Several cycles of data collection followed by analysis were carried out. Initially, the transcripts were analyzed on a line-by-line basis using open coding (Charmaz, 2006) to determine themes and categories. Open coding enabled emergent categories to be identified, and these categories became the basis for the refined questions in the subsequent interviews (Duffy, Ferguson & Watson, 2004).

The data was analyzed again once all of the interviews had been completed using comparative, axial and selective coding (Charmaz, 2006) to check the

consistency of the categories. The purpose of these analyses is to identify core categories and the theme that make up these categories (Glaser & Strauss, 2009).. The core categories make up the main elements of the model described in the finding section below.

Findings

Two core themes emerged from the data: one which revolved around interviewees' definition and sense making of the term positive news, and the other around their motivations to read positive news:

1. Definition of positive news:

Positive news

Constructive journalism

The role of the journalist

2. Motivations for and consequences of consuming positive news:

Balancing negativity bias and its upshots

Increased hope and optimism

Increased self-efficacy

Active coping

Increased engagement

Improved mood

Increased social cohesion

Alignment with value system

These core categories and their themes are displayed in more detail in table 1.1 & 1.2 and unpacked in the following sections.

Table 1: Defining positive news

<u>Category</u>	<u>Description</u>
Positive Content	Rigorous journalism/ Good journalism Shows positive responses to the problem Highlights small but significant positive steps Reports critically on tangible progress (not speculation) Exposure to possibility Gives solutions importance through exposure Provides useful/practical information Provides variety Stories of substance Useful information Empowers the reader Disconnect between what is and what many consider it to be Not sugar coating big issues Not ignorance or denial of problems Not "and finally" Not forced Not just happy stories Not escapism Not advocacy journalism Not PR Not fluff Not unimportant Not rosy picture of the world Not propaganda Not enough to cover good news, it is about how you cover good news
Constructive Journalism	Rigorous journalism that focuses on the whole picture

Highlights problem and solution
Reporting problem with compassion and empathy
Reporting critically on solutions
Give prominence to the process, not the person
Taking a proactive approach to finding constructive elements
Accurate reflection of reality
Provides balance/ well rounded view
Provides perspective/ context
Enabling better understanding of the complex reality
Long term approach on issues
Responsible journalism
Social purpose its primary incentive
Instinctive/ Intuitive reporting style, framework came after

Role of the journalist Rarely break news like before
Provide context and verification rather than just content
Helps people make sense of the facts being presented
Where there is less urgency there is more scope for depth

Definition of positive news

When seeking to define the term positive news, based on what all interviewees considered it to be (authors & readers), it became apparent that there were two strands associated with it. The first relates to content; in terms of which stories are actually being reported. The second interpretation of positive news relates to the approach; referring to the way in which news is reported. To distinguish between the two, positive content will be referred to as positive news and positive approach as constructive journalism, as one of the interviewees explained@

"I wouldn't use the term positive news interchangeably [between content and approach]... that is why we talk about constructive journalism more from the framing point of view. Positive news is more about stories themselves rather than the technique or approach"

Positive news

Participants commonly considered positive news to be "stories of substance" that were centered on positive responses to problems in order to learn how issues are being dealt with as a way to empower the reader:

"We need to start asking questions of where is this issue being dealt with well and where is progress being made and what can we learn from that in order to deal with it elsewhere or in the future... It is about going into an issue in a way that more people can do something with"

Typically, participants defined positive news, as much by what it is as what it is not, claiming it to be neither "fluff", "forced", "unimportant happy stories", nor "escapism":

"Not talking about happy stories that are simply nice things that elicit positive emotions but do not necessarily have any usefulness beyond that emotional experience"

Interviewees found this important to address, since they felt it has been publicly misrepresented by the mainstream press where it has often been sidelined to an “and finally” note at the end of the news, which are often “light-hearted, soft stories that bear no weight to the central media narrative”. The authors suggested that this created “a disconnect between what it is and what people consider it to be”. Participants often voiced defensive position in this respect, as they addressed the criticism of positive news as being “naïve”, “ignorant” or in “denial of problems”, by suggesting that positive content is there to add to the wider narrative, not replace it:

“I don’t want fantasy lalaland positive news that is always in denial about real difficulties, I want news that shows a possibility of redemption, shows a possibility of how things can be solved.”

The final comment interviewees made about positive news’ reputation was to distinguish it from PR or propaganda:

“The difference between positive news and PR is that the fundamental thing is purpose... Positive news is about serving society whereas PR is about serving a commercial interest”

Constructive journalism

When defining a positive approach to reporting, interviewees referred to it as constructive journalism. This typically was referred to as a “totality of

storytelling” that “highlights the problem and the solution” to enable a “more accurate reflection of reality”:

“Constructive journalism is rigorous journalism that focuses on the whole picture... it’s about going beyond the problem to also cover what is being done about it”

It was commonly noted that it is not enough to simply have positive and negative content to be considered constructive. It is very much about *how* we tell stories of problems and solutions in order to empower the reader. It was referred to by one of the readers as *“journalism that cares”*. When reporting problems, participants suggested it to be constructive by having empathy or compassion:

“It is possible to tell a really awful, terrible, dark and miserable story but do it from a compassionate place and the reader will really care”

When reporting on solutions, interviewees considered it to be constructive to remain critical. This meant not overstating their importance and reporting more on the process of progress rather than the person instigating it:

“It is important to give prominence to the approach and method beyond the hero or director... if you want to cover the solution critically; you have to look at the process.”

This approach provides more scope for the term “positive”, as it enables both problems and solutions to be included. This nuanced understanding can be linked to their understanding of the role of the journalist.

Journalist role in constructive journalism

Constructive journalism was identified to be a growing field of journalism partly due to the changing role of the journalist in a modern day media environment. With the rise in bloggers, social media, citizen journalism and affordability of technology, the journalists may “*no longer be the ones breaking the news like before*”. In this case, there is an opportunity for the journalist to provide context and verification rather than just content in order to help people make sense of the facts being presented:

“I feel as news becomes less of an urgency for us to report because its already out there, we start adding depth, we are coming in for context or for verification as journalists”

Table 2: Motivations for and consequences of reading positive news

<u>Category</u>	<u>Description</u>
Balance Negativity	
Bias	Lack of context/incomplete picture Effects Personal View Can cause Anxiety Disempowering Feel small Feel Isolated

	<p>Feel powerless</p> <p>Feel helpless</p> <p>Feel hopeless</p> <p>(Decisively) Disengaged</p> <p>(Actively) avoid negative news</p> <p>Desensitized to negative news</p> <p>Depressing</p> <p>Feel crushed</p> <p>Sucked/dragged in</p> <p>Fed up</p> <p>Reduces social cohesion</p> <p>Sees negative in others</p> <p>Commercial decision</p> <p>Exploitative of human instinct to pay attention to bad news</p>
Increase Hope	<p>Shows resolve to problems in present or past and offers hope</p> <p>Shows there can be good in bad</p> <p>Aware of possibilities</p>
Increase Optimism	<p>Aware of possibilities</p> <p>Positive outlook on future</p>
Increase Self efficacy	<p>Empowered</p> <p>Shows that actions make a difference</p> <p>Feeling of being able to help</p>
Increase Active Coping	<p>Seeing positive helps them cope with negative</p> <p>Leads to a proactive approach to problem solving</p> <p>Motivated to help create solutions</p> <p>Contributive behaviour</p>
Increases Engagement	<p>Motivated to hear about solutions</p>

	Read in depth
	Become less ignorant
	Personal support/loyalty for the company providing positive content
	More likely to share content
Improves Mood	Feel good
	Feel happy
	Feel better
	Feel joy
	Heart warming
	Feel inspired
Increases Cohesion	Less isolated
	Feeling of connection
	Admiration for others
	More faith in humanity
	More tolerant
	More compassionate
Fits with personal values	Honest
	Positive
	Problem solving/ solutions seeking
	Optimist
Outlier	Feeling of inadequacy
	Guilt/shame

Motivations for and consequences of reading positive news

Interviewees were commonly motivated to read Positive News in an effort to balance the perceived negativity bias. It became clear that reading positive news

reduced the detrimental psychological consequences associated with reading predominantly negative content:

“It makes you more resilient to reading some negative news”

Furthermore, interviewees also noted that reading positive news actively promoted more positive responses.

“I think that if there is an overall feeling of empowerment by regular people because they see that change and positive outcomes are possible”

It is important to note that nearly all readers included positive news in *addition* to the mainstream media so many of the benefits expressed are the result of balance and a more well rounded perspective of reality, rather than a positively skewed perspective of the world.

Provides balance/perspective

Readers generally acknowledged the benefit of problems focused journalism but there was a shared feeling that the overrepresentation of problems had led to a “negativity bias” in the media:

“There are reasons around the journalistic purpose of exposing wrong doings and being a watchdog and holding power to account. I think that is very valuable, but that has come to dominate the way we do news”

The imbalance in news reporting was argued to give the readers an imbalanced understanding of what is going on in the world, with one reader suggesting “*We are not given a scale and not given a proportion*”. It was a common response that reading Positive News counteracted this by providing “*balance*”, which was suggested to offer give the reader a better “*perspective, provide context and offer a more accurate reflection of reality*”.

Interviewees linked the excess of negativity in the news to be anxiety inducing. The readers experienced this in varying degrees with most speaking about it mildly referring to it as a “*state of alert*” but in few cases it was more extreme, with one reader confidently saying, “*I was definitely suffering anxiety directly because of the news... it was becoming quite debilitating*”.

The readers recognized that their anxiety levels are lowered by reading Positive News:

“It reduces anxiety by making you aware of the possibilities there are in the world rather than the lack of possibilities”

Increased self efficacy/ active coping

The majority of readers expressed feeling disempowered by reading about unresolved or growing problems. There was a shared feeling that they felt unable to *do* something and they identified it as making them “*feel small*”, “*feel isolated*”, “*feel powerless*” and “*feel helpless*”:

“It’s been the case for a long time that the mainstream media has... essentially disempowered citizens from their ability to take action in the world”

In contrast, participants linked reading Positive News to making them feel more empowered by *“making people aware of specific developments and initiatives”*, showing that there can be effective resolve and progress in response to problems and helps them believe that their actions are able to make a difference:

“By highlighting small but significant steps, it exposes the reader to possibility and can empower them to realize their own potential to make a difference”

“The action taken may not be directly related to content of article but more inclined to roll up sleeves and do something about something”

Increased hope & optimism

Readers generally suggested they felt pessimistic as a result of the negativity bias. The sensationalist way in which problems are perceived to be reported led them to feel *“overwhelmed”* and *“hopeless”*. There was a feeling that when problems were reported constructively, it created a better perspective and reduced this feeling of hopelessness:

“When you read negative news and its only negative, you just come away feeling very, kind of, well everything is terrible... that everything is kind of hopeless”

There was an agreement around the idea that reading Positive News led to perceived increases in optimism and hope about the future. The majority of participants recognized this feeling of hope or optimism to be the result of becoming aware of the possibility in the presence of a problem, rather than as a result of reading a positive news story that is problem free:

“Reports on problems but also on what positive things are happening on the ground or on people starting to address the problem... that hold out some hope for this situation”

Some readers identified hope and optimism as motivations for reading Positive News rather than consequences. Those who considered themselves to be hopeful and optimistic sought to find news that was more in line with their outlook on life. One reader simply stated, *“I am a positive person, and I like positive news”*.

Increases engagement

A further problem the readers identified with the excess of negativity is a lack of engagement with the issue. The two dominating reasons for this lack of engagement correspond with the existing research. The first reason suggested was active avoidance; one reader said that they *“skim read negative articles”* or *“avoid them all together because of the way in which they dig up the worst of the worst”*. The second reason for this lack of engagement was suggested to be the result of desensitization:

“You have all of those bad things in half an hour and we are so numbed to the emotional experience ... because we have had to fortify ourselves to make ourselves incredibly indifferent”

In contrast, positive news reported constructively, lead to greater engagement with the readers saying they would be *“more likely to read the article in depth”*, *“share stories”* and *“pay for content”*. It was further suggested that by reporting in a more constructive way in the presentation of bad news as well as including positive news content makes the reader more sensitive to the stories reported and stimulates a feeling of empathy, connection and concern for the issue presented as well as a feeling of interest in what will happen next. They also suggested they would be more likely to share stories and pay for content.

Improves mood

Readers who spoke about the mainstream media criticized it as being too negative to the point where it is referred to as *“depressing”*. The “depressing” nature was suggested by the majority of readers to be counteracted by including positive news in their media diet, claiming that it improved moods and made them *“feel good”*, *“feel happy”*, *“feel better”*, *“feel joy”* and *“feel inspired”*. The improved mood appeared longer lasting than the immediate emotional experience of reading Positive News and was suggested to leave an emotional imprint that transfers the identified positive feeling into a positive mood or *“positive mindset”*.

In contrast to this, one reader suggested reading Positive News, on occasion, has lowered their mood as a result of feeling that their efforts to contribute constructively are not good enough in comparison to people they are reading about:

“It also makes me feel a bit inadequate sometimes... I feel a bit of shame because other people that have already managed to do something more than what I'm doing about it.

This highlights the importance of reporting on solutions constructively, pushing past the hero narrative to report on the process rather than the person instigating it as a way to mitigate this feeling of shame or inadequacy.

Increases social cohesion

The negativity bias was commonly identified to “*reduce social cohesion*”, with a shared feeling it led them to “*see the negative in other people*”, and feel “*isolated*” from the community. This was often expressed to be the opposite experience when participants read Positive News, suggesting it created a sense of “*admiration for other people*” and “*restored their faith in humanity*”:

One has to keep reminding oneself of the goodness of humanity and [reading Positive News] is a good way of doing that

Few readers went further to suggest that Positive News leads to an increased sense of community where people are more motivated to contribute towards it.

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to explore the experience of those producing and consuming Positive News with the purpose of creating a working definition for the concept of positive news and to discover the motivations and consequences of those reading it. The intuitive consensus of what participants considered the term positive news to be, as well as the consistency of perceived consequences, highlights the strength of the categories identified. The diversity of personal experience allowed nuances to be included in the emergent theory to suggest limitations and boundaries.

Definition of positive news (content & approach):

Participants were asked how they would define the term positive news and the narrow response allowed a succinct definition to emerge. This paper can therefore offer the following lay definition for positive news as “rigorous journalism that reports critically on tangible progress being made in order for us to learn about how issues are being dealt with”. The academic field lacks a comparative definition but the suggested definition is consistent with organizations that are offering this kind of reporting.

Constructive Journalism also emerged as a distinctive term, when participants were asked to define the term positive news. Participants distinguished between content (what is reported) and approach (how it is reported) and offered the

term constructive journalism to refer to the approach. The consistency of the participants descriptions, allowed these working definitions to emerge, and hence the following definition of constructive journalism can be offered: “a rigorous journalism that seeks to provide a balanced and in depth understanding of an issue by reporting accurately on both problems *and* solutions in a way that empowers the reader”. This balance is useful in creating context and helps readers understand what this story means, its impact, the failings, the opportunities, our personal proximity and informs on a more practical level what we can do as individuals.

Both positive news and constructive journalism are intertwined but not interchangeable. Positive news is a *part* of constructive journalism, whereby solutions focused content can be included in the mainstream narrative and provides informative value when reported constructively. Constructive Journalism, however, is not limited to solutions focused news, it can also be an approach used to report problems.

Motivations for and consequences of reading Positive News

The emergent categories seemed two-dimensional as some interviewees recognized them to be motivations for reading Positive News and others consequences of reading Positive News. This is supported by some of the readers saying it “*changes the way I see the world*”, whilst others note it “*reinforces the way in which I see the world*”. Those who considered these to be a motivation did so as it “*fits with their personal values*”. Those who consider themselves hopeful, optimistic and have a belief in their ability and a motivation to effect change; will

seek out material that is line with their outlook on life. The suggestion that the categories identified can be both motivation *and* consequence created the most significant finding, creating logical reasoning that increasing consumption of positive news content, reported constructively, can create a positive feedback loop. For example, positive news can lead to optimism and those that are optimistic tend to seek out more positive content. This is the comparative opposite of the anxiety feedback loop; reading predominantly negative news can lead to anxiety and those in a state of anxiety may seek out negative news (Mogg, Mathews & Eysenck, 1992). This is supported by research suggesting that individuals with high optimism or self efficacy pay more attention to positive stimuli and those with low levels of self efficacy or low levels of optimism pay more attention to threat related stimuli (Karademas et al., 2007).

Optimism, hope, self-efficacy & active coping

The two most valued consequences of reading positive news were identified to be the cultivation of or restoration of optimism and hope. This perceived increase in optimism could explain the perceived reduction in anxiety and depressive symptomatology as they are negatively related to optimism (Shnek et al., 2001). Optimism has instead been positively related to subjective wellbeing (Diener & Chan, 2011) and has commonly been associated with good morale, more competent elaboration of negative information and is linked to perseverance and effective problem solving by engaging with and approaching the problem as their preferred coping mechanisms (Scheier, Carver & Bridges, 2001; Roth & Cohen, 1986). This seems almost synonymous with the purpose of the news as defined by Lewis (2012); the reader is better able to process

negative information as a result of being engaged with the issue and with the belief that there *can* be a better future, they are empowered to act on the information presented.

Hope has also been identified to be a vital coping resource (Lazarus, 1999). Prestin (2013) suggests it to be the “emotional fuel” that motivates individuals to manage stress and persevere in the presence of problems. Although optimism can exist in spite of a lack of personal influence to affect the outcome of a situation (Carver & Scheier, 1998), hope is often dependent upon self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). This highlights the important link between hope and active coping (Coyne, Aldwin & Lazarus, 1981). The readers unanimously expressed a feeling of empowerment as a result of reading Positive News and had an increased belief that their actions were able to make a difference. Bandura (1997) suggests that this feeling of self-efficacy is fundamental to people becoming active agents. People with higher levels of self-efficacy are likely to believe that they are capable of problem solving and more likely to engage in trying (Torkzadeh & Van Dyke, 2001). Hope, optimism and self-efficacy are indispensable to feeling engaged, empowered and capable to act.

Improves engagement

The negativity bias appeared to be the most cited reason for disengagement. Readers of Positive News expressed a strong engagement with the stories reported as well as a loyalty to the brand. They identified that they were more likely pay for the content and share stories. This is supported by a study conducted by Berger & Milkman (year) “although negative news stories receives

more attention, good news is socially transmitted more frequently”. Again, if the purpose of the news is to engage its citizens, it is limiting its potential by underreporting positive content, reported constructively.

Improves social cohesion

The news has been accused of “*scare mongering*” and making people feel *frightened*”. This cultivation of fear can erode social cohesion and concern with global challenges as it is linked to an evolutionary survival instinct to protect ourselves, showing less concern for others welfare (Sheldon & Kasser, 2008). However, reading Positive News appeared to enhance social acceptance and integration by increasing a feeling of community as a result of having an increased faith in humanity to believe they are capable of kindness and resourcefulness. This created an expressed increase in their own social value, considering themselves having something worth offering to society as well as feeling motivated to do so.

Improves mood

This finding is consistent with previous research which suggests that negative news lowers mood and positive news increased mood. Improved mood is positively associated with subjective well-being, functioning and positive affective state (e.g. Carver et al., 2005; Eid & Diener, 2004). Those who exhibit high positive affect are generally shown to be more socially active (Peterson, 2006). In addition, motivation to take positive action significantly increased with higher levels of positive affect (Berkowitz & Connor, 1966; Cunningham, 1979)

such as donate to charity, participate and become more environmentally friendly. This helps explain the increased motivation to contribute to society.

The table below offers a model that distinguishes between the outcomes of the negativity bias, constructive journalism and positive news. Drawing on the findings described above, the model suggests that while constructive journalism and positive news were often defined and discussed against the background of negative news, as seen below, constructive journalism and positive news are not seen not only as means to counteract the detrimental impact of the negativity bias, but as news that produces outcomes that are valued in their own right.

Table 3: Perceived effects of negativity bias, constructive journalism and positive news

Effects of Negativity Bias	Effects of Constructive Journalism	Effects of Positive News
Lack of context/ Risk assessment	Reduces imbalance	Gives perspective
Increases Anxiety	Reduces Anxiety	Reduces Anxiety
Feeling Disempowered	Aware of Possibility	Increases self-efficacy
Increases hopelessness	Reduces hopelessness	Increases hope
Increases pessimism	Reduces pessimism	Increases optimism
Lack of engagement	Reduces desensitization	Increases engagement
Depressing	Reduces depression	Improves mood
Creates social divide	Reduces negative feeling towards others	Increases social cohesion

Limitations

The results presented in this research are subject to limitations, which offer direction for future research. The most significant of these relates to this paper being a qualitative study, focusing on the experience of 14 individuals with an active common interest in Positive News. The transferability is limited due to the small sample size, however this sample size met the criteria proposed by Guest (2006). Despite its limit in transferability, the results provide a model that can be tested empirically by future research to determine the strength of the relationship between positive news and psychological wellbeing as well as determine its direction. A further limitation is that time is not taken into consideration for this study, these consequences are not distinguished between immediate effects of reading positive news and benefits that occur after a period of time. Further research may explore a pre-and-post test as well as a longitudinal study to identify any difference between immediate and lasting effects.

Conclusion

The fourteen people interviewed provided a vivid and detailed picture of their experience of consuming and producing positive news as well as their understanding of the term “positive news”. The findings of the study suggest that there is a distinction between positive news, which is a term that captures the content of what is reported, and constructive journalism which captures the way that a topic is reported which offers consumers a balanced and in depth understanding of the topic being reported. The findings also suggest that the outcomes and motivations to consume positive news are tied together in a

feedback loop, with one strengthening the other. Lastly, while much of the discussion on the outcomes of positive news and constructive journalism emerged against the backdrop of the negativity bias in news reporting, the findings suggest that positive news and constructive journalism are not seen not only as means to neutralize the damaging impact of the negativity bias, but as news that yields valuable outcomes in their own right. It is important to note that reporting positive news does not require that we ignore negative news; rather, it requires that we *not ignore positive news* and that, where feasible, we include it into the wider narrative. This study, therefore, reiterates a call to action made in 1987 to “increase the inclusion of legitimate less fluffy good news” (Galician & Vestre, 1987) into the mainstream news to accommodate the variety of informational needs in order to truly be “mass” media.

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