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Beyond the Problem: The Impact of Constructive News Reporting on the Perception of Societal Issues in The Netherlands

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Abstract

This study examined how exposure to constructive audiovisual news shapes people's perception of societal issues in the Netherlands. An online experiment was conducted among 575 participants aged 18 to 90 years old. Participants were randomly assigned to watch an audiovisual news item, either constructive or nonconstructive news, about plastic waste in the ocean or the Dutch housing market. The study investigated how these different reporting styles affected participants' perceptions of the main message, their awareness of the seriousness of the societal issue, and their evaluation of the journalistic quality of the news report. Results showed that, contrary to critics' concerns, constructive news did not reduce perceived problem awareness: participants across conditions reported similarly high levels of awareness regarding the seriousness of the issues presented. Perceived journalistic quality also remained high in both constructive and nonconstructive conditions, indicating that incorporating constructive elements did not compromise credibility. Furthermore, constructive news appeared to encourage a broader, more solution-oriented perspective, prompting participants to consider opportunities and future prospects. Importantly, this broader perspective did not come at the expense of perceived problem awareness or journalistic quality. Overall, the findings provide empirical support for the value of constructive journalism in the Dutch media context.

Keywords: constructive journalism; audience perspective; problem awareness; journalistic quality; audiovisual news

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1. Introduction

One of the core purposes of journalism is to provide information that enables individuals to make independent and informed choices. News offers information that broadens people's views of the world and helps them understand and engage with political and social issues (Aalberg & Curran, 2012). In recent years, however, the number of people avoiding the news has increased, partly due to the strong focus on problems and crises in news coverage (Newman et al., 2017, 2022, 2024). This bias towards negativity can negatively affect people's mood and well-being (Boukes & Vliegenthart, 2017; de Hoog & Verboon, 2020). As more members of the public turn away from the news, concerns have emerged regarding whether citizens remain sufficiently informed to make well-informed decisions and contribute to societal change (Damstra et al., 2023). These concerns—the negativity

bias in news, increasing news avoidance, and the risk of a less-informed public—underline the importance of studying constructive journalistic formats (Mäder & Rinsdorf, 2023).

In response, some media outlets and editorial departments have begun to move beyond traditional journalistic practices by incorporating more constructive approaches to news production (Bonn Institute, n.d.). Examples in the Netherlands include the newspapers *Trouw* and *Algemeen Dagblad*, as well as online journalism platforms *NU.nl* and *De correspondent*. Although television remains the main source for news in the Netherlands—33 percent of the respondents report television as their most frequently used medium (Commissariaat voor de Media, 2025)—the effects of constructive television news have been understudied compared to those of written constructive news (Lough & McIntyre, 2023; McIntyre & Lough, 2023).

At the same time, critics argue that constructive journalism may blur the boundaries between reporting and advocacy, potentially compromising traditional notions of objectivity and downplaying the seriousness of societal problems (Bro, 2025). Therefore, this study aims to examine whether the journalistic approach used in television news (constructive vs. nonconstructive) leads to differences in perceived journalistic quality, whether it leads to different interpretations of the main journalistic message, and how it affects perceived seriousness of the issues among Dutch participants.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Constructive Journalism and Perceived Journalistic Quality

Constructive journalism emerged in the mid-2010s as a form of reporting current events that focuses beyond conflicts and problems. One of the key pioneers was Cathrine Gyldensted, who introduced constructive journalism as a practice that uses behavioral sciences, such as positive psychology. In her formulation, constructive journalism sought to "create productive and engaging coverage while holding true to journalism's core functions" (McIntyre & Gyldensted, 2017, p. 23). Subsequently, it is assumed that including constructive elements—such as solution-, future-, and action-oriented perspectives—can contribute to the well-being of individuals as well as to society (Hermans, 2022; Hermans & Drok, 2018; Hermans & Gyldensted, 2019).

The Constructive Institute refers to solutions, nuance, and democratic conversation as the foundation of constructive journalism practice. It is "an editorial approach that goes beyond reporting with the "if it bleeds, it leads" culture so that audiences get the full story, not just half the picture" (Constructive Institute, n.d.).

More recently, Bro (2025) conceptualized constructive journalism as existing on a continuum rather than as a dichotomy between traditional and constructive reporting. He argued that constructive elements can be integrated to varying degrees within conventional journalistic formats, and raised questions about journalistic roles, responsibilities, and objectivity. This perspective is relevant to the current study because it provides an opportunity to investigate how integrating constructive elements—while still reporting on important societal issues—affects the public's perception of societal matters.

Across these definitions, there is broad agreement that constructive journalism should not be equated with positive journalism. Constructive journalism does not imply ignoring societal problems or replacing critical scrutiny with optimism. Instead, it aims to complement traditional problem-focused reporting by providing additional context and exploring potential responses or solutions while maintaining attention to the problem itself. In this sense, constructive journalism seeks to broaden the scope of reporting while maintaining journalism's traditional watchdog role.

Despite this, the approach has generated ongoing debate within both journalistic practice and academic scholarship. Critics argue that constructive journalism may challenge

core journalistic values, such as neutrality and independence, and that emphasizing positive developments could risk turning journalism into "uncritical "happy news"" (Djerf-Pierre & Ekström, 2025, p. 3). Critics worry that journalism that goes beyond merely highlighting problems may shift toward advocacy (Bro, 2025; Djerf-Pierre & Ekström, 2025; Overgaard, 2023). Although relatively little research has been conducted on this topic, existing studies do not support the assumption that constructive journalism has negative consequences for perceived journalistic quality (Baden et al., 2019; McIntyre, 2020; Schäfer et al., 2024). To address this tension regarding the potential consequences of adopting a constructive approach for the perceptions of journalistic norms and standards, this study examines how news users perceive journalistic quality of constructive and nonconstructive news reporting.

RQ1: *Does the journalistic approach used in television news (constructive vs. nonconstructive) lead to different perceptions of journalistic quality?*

2.2. Constructive Journalism and Perceived News Message

As constructive journalism aims to provide the public with an accurate and contextualized picture of the world, it is important to investigate how audiences perceive relevant issues being reported on and whether the news format influences their perception of the problem. Previous research has suggested that constructive journalism may contribute to a more balanced and less negative interpretation of societal developments by audiences (Mäder & Rinsdorf, 2023).

To examine how people perceive the state of the world, Rosling et al. (2018) analyzed survey data on global trends and development and concluded that respondents achieved worse results than expected—even worse than when they would have responded arbitrarily. The researchers argued that people's misconceptions of reality and their often very negative world views were reinforced by negative news reporting. More traditional news media may thereby contribute to a less accurately informed audience (Rosling et al., 2018). As constructive journalism aims to provide an accurate and contextualized picture of the world, "the hypothesis [. . .] is that constructive journalism could counteract a negative, destructive world view: because recipients realize that things can also work well and that there are good approaches to solving pressing problems" (Rusch et al., 2022, p. 2222). In addition, previous research has shown that constructive news can influence how audiences process and interpret information by eliciting fewer negative and more positive emotional responses (Swijtink et al., 2023). Constructive news has also been associated with higher levels of engagement among younger audiences, suggesting that this news format may offer a way to counter growing disengagement with the news (Hermans & Prins, 2022).

However, research on how constructive news reporting influences people's perceptions of the main message of a news story remains limited, particularly among adult audiences. Existing studies have mainly focused on emotional responses, engagement, or knowledge outcomes, while less attention has been paid to how audiences themselves interpret the central meaning or takeaway of constructive news stories (McIntyre & Lough, 2023). In an experimental study by Swijtink and Hermans (2023), young teens between 10 and 15 years old were asked in an open-ended question on what they perceived to be the main message of the news item they had just watched. Results showed that youngsters watching a traditional, nonconstructive news item often referred to the general information about the issue reported on, whereas youngsters who saw a constructive news item about the same topic more often referred to specific information with solutions and action perspectives, relating the information to themselves more often. For example, their takeaway was that they should and could actually do something to help (Swijtink & Hermans, 2023). This may contribute to lower feelings of powerlessness after exposure to constructive news and could potentially help reduce news avoidance. Up until now, however, no research appears

to have examined how constructive news reporting influences the perceived message of adult audiences. Therefore, explorative research question 2 was formulated.

RQ2: *Does the journalistic approach used in television news (constructive vs. nonconstructive) lead to different perceptions of the main message among participants?*

2.3. Constructive Journalism and Problem Awareness

Equally as important as people's interpretation of the news message is whether people are aware of the seriousness of the problem reported on in the news item. As some critics raised concerns that constructive news stories may be too positive, insufficiently critical, and undermine the newsroom's ability to depict important social events realistically (Overgaard, 2023), the question as to whether people who see or read constructive news would underestimate the problem reported on in the news is raised. Therefore, this study also investigates whether people who see constructive news are still aware of the seriousness of the problem mentioned.

To date, research has paid limited attention to the relationship between constructive journalism and problem awareness. More generally, however, studies have examined how media use relates to individuals' awareness of societal problems. For example, Arlt et al. (2011) investigated how climate problem awareness and media usage were related to each other. They used a survey to ask German participants to rate their problem awareness on a 4-point scale and measured political media usage of television, print media, and the internet. The researchers concluded that media usage did have a certain influence on awareness of climate problems, but findings differed regarding different media. Respondents who informed themselves via public news programs had "a greater awareness of climate problems than those who did not watch any news or watched only commercial programmes. The usage of weekly print media, on the other hand, had a slightly negative effect on problem awareness" (Arlt et al., 2011, p. 57). Other studies have confirmed that varying extents of information on climate change in the media have proven to affect the awareness of the general public (Schmidt et al., 2013).

Ariestya et al. (2022) examined whether different news frames about climate change influenced climate change awareness in a specific group, generation Z (people born from 1995 to 2012). In an experiment, participants were divided into three groups containing online climate change news: a jargon group, a frame group, and a control group. Findings showed that online news frames did influence climate change awareness of Gen Z, but jargon did not. Uncertainty–risk frames caused higher climate change awareness than economic cost–benefit frames. From both these studies, it can be concluded that the use of different news media and different news frames can influence people's problem awareness (Ariestya et al., 2022; Arlt et al., 2011). As it is unclear whether constructive news influences the public's problem awareness, the following research question was formulated.

RQ3: *Does the journalistic approach used in television news (constructive vs. nonconstructive) lead to different perceptions of problem awareness?*

3. Method

To answer the three research questions, a between-subjects design was used to compare participants' perceptions of journalistic quality (RQ1), the main message (RQ2), and problem awareness (RQ3) after exposure to constructive versus nonconstructive television news. Two socially relevant and problematic topics—plastic waste and the housing market—served to examine the influence of the independent variable news version (constructive audiovisual news vs. nonconstructive audiovisual news). This study was part

of a larger study, investigating not only the perception of the public but also the effect of constructive news on emotions and knowledge of the audience (Swijtink et al., 2023).

3.1. Participants

The original sample of the study consisted of 600 participants. Data cleaning led to the exclusion of 25 participants: 12 participants reported that the video and/or sound of the news item did not work and 13 participants showed insufficient response variation (e.g., articulating or selecting almost identical answers across items). The final sample therefore consisted of 575 participants ranging from 18 to 90 years old (M = 56.4, SD = 14.5), of whom 287 were male, 287 were female, and one person identified as other.

3.2. Materials

This study used audiovisual news items because Dutch television news broadcast programs are still very important in news consumption in the Netherlands (Commissariaat voor de Media, 2025). Also, the effects of constructive audiovisual news have been understudied compared to written constructive news (McIntyre & Lough, 2023).

To assure ecological validity, actual footage from the Dutch Broadcasting Foundation (NOS, n.d.) was used to create the news items for this study. As research has shown that visuals can be a factor in reported outcomes (Kleemans et al., 2019; McIntyre et al., 2018), all visuals used matched the accompanying text. Two societal issues were used: plastic waste in the ocean and the deteriorating Dutch housing market. For each topic, a news item with a constructive and a nonconstructive approach was created, resulting in four news items in total. Within this study, constructive elements were implemented in orientation towards the future and towards solutions. Both the constructive news item on plastic waste and the one on the housing market outlined the problem, as well as the possibilities of what already works or could work to prevent the problem. The nonconstructive versions also outlined the problem, whereas negative additions confirmed the size of the problem.

The constructive and nonconstructive news items about plastic waste started the same way, with an explanation of the importance of the ocean and the introduction of the problem of plastic waste. Subsequently, the constructive item continued with a hopeful solution- and future-oriented message from a young Dutch man. This man had invented an easy-to-build plastic shredder that could help people from all over the world to contribute to the solution of the plastic waste problem in the future. In the nonconstructive version, the news item continued with the message from an expert that there will be more plastic than fish in the ocean by 2050. No solution or possibilities for the future were included in this version. Both news items ended with the same end tune and were of similar length, as seen in Table 1.

The constructive and nonconstructive news items about the housing market started from different perspectives. The constructive news item opened with a solution-based perspective showing the actions that the government is taking to stimulate and improve the housing market. The nonconstructive version focused solely on the difficult situation of the housing market. Both versions continued with the same example of a man not being able to find a house. The second part of the constructive news item continued with the explanation of the measures taken by the government, subsequently confirmed by an expert. This version ended with the man earlier presented in the news item confirming these measures might help him to find a house, adding a perspective the audience can personally relate to. The second part of the nonconstructive news item continued with a politician explaining the housing market situation, demonstrating an institutional perspective. It ended with the reporter painting a picture of the future of the housing market, as seen in Table 2.

Table 1. Content of the constructive and nonconstructive versions of the newscast for plastic waste. Parts of the constructive and nonconstructive news versions that were alike are in *italics*.

	Constructive	Duration	Nonconstructive	Duration
Intro (part 1)	*Basic information about the ocean and its importance for life on earth*	*00:33*	*Basic information about the ocean and its importance for life on earth*	*00:33*
Intro (part 2)	*Basic information about the problem of plastic waste*	*00:28*	*Basic information about the problem of plastic waste*	*00:28*
Part 1	*Information about microplastics*	*00:08*	Problem based: Expert explains danger of plastic waste in the ocean	00:42
Part 2	Solution based: Solution presented by young man to explain how it is used all over the world	01:04	*Information about microplastics*	*00:11*
Part 3	Future oriented: Statement by young man that every small contribution can make a change	00:14	Future oriented: Statement by an expert about the consequences in the future	00:32
End tune		*00:05*		*00:05*
Total		02:32		02:31

Table 2. Content of the constructive and nonconstructive versions of the newscast for the housing market. Parts of the constructive and nonconstructive news versions that were alike are in *italics*.

	Constructive	Duration	Nonconstructive	Duration
Intro	Solution based: The presenter explains measures taken by the government to stimulate the housing market; these are confirmed by a political reporter	00:38	Problem based: The presenter explains housing market and why it is impossible for people to buy a house	00:18
Part 1	*Example of a young man not able to find a house*	*00:28*	*Example of a young man not able to find a house*	*00:28*
Part 2	Solution based: The presenter presents two solutions to the problem, which are explained with the help of an illustration	00:38	Problem based: A political reporter explains the issues facing the government to improve the housing market, which are illustrated by a quote from a minister	00:22
Part 3	Future oriented: An expert confirms that the measurements taken by the government might help in the future; the young man from part 1 confirms this expectation	00:22	Future oriented: The political reporter paints a picture of the future for the housing market	00:51
End tune		*00:05*		*00:05*
Total		02:11		02:04

Before the main study, a pretest was conducted to test whether the stimulus materials were perceived as constructive and nonconstructive. The procedure and results of the pretest can be found in Appendix A. In conclusion, the manipulations were considered successful.

3.3. Procedure

The independent survey and data agency CheckMarket (n.d.) recruited all participants for the main study, ensuring a representative sample of the Dutch population was provided. The online experiment was conducted and completed over a time span of four

days. Participation was voluntary, and participants completed the experiment online. To participate, participants followed a link that led them to a brief introduction explaining the purpose of the study. After providing informed consent, participants first answered several demographic questions, followed by a sound and video check. When both sound and video worked sufficiently, participants were randomly assigned to one of the four audiovisual news items.

After watching the news item, participants answered various questions (see also Swijtink et al., 2023). The questions concerning the current study focused on how the participants perceived the problem presented in the news item. After completing the questionnaire, the participants read a brief explanation of the goal of the study, in which it was clarified that the news item they watched was made especially for the purpose of the study. Finally, participants were thanked for their participation. Afterwards, the survey agency CheckMarket gave all the participants standard compensation for their participation.

It took participants on average 11.7 min (SD = 8.30) to complete the questionnaire. A randomization check showed that the time required to finish the questionnaire did not vary between the four different conditions of the study: $F(3, 571) = 2.48$, $p = 0.60$. No other significant differences between the four groups were found either regarding age, $F(3, 571) = 0.54$, $p = 0.66$; gender, $\chi^2(6) = 8.91$, $p = 0.18$; or level of education, $\chi^2(6) = 2.61$, $p = 0.86$.

3.4. Measures

Journalistic quality: To measure perceived journalistic quality, five statements were included based on Urban and Schweiger (2014). Participants were asked to indicate on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) to what extent they found the news item relevant, comprehensible, neutral, reliable, and informative. The different items showed acceptable reliability as a scale to measure journalistic quality (plastic waste: Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.75$, $M = 5.43$, $SD = 0.92$; housing market: Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.76$, $M = 5.15$, $SD = 0.98$).

Perceived main message: After watching the news item, participants were asked what they considered to be the most important message using an open-ended question.

Problem awareness: Participants were asked to indicate on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) how important they perceived the problem demonstrated in the news item. Three statements based on Arlt et al. (2011) were used. A scale reliability check showed that one concept for problem awareness on plastic waste (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.69$, $M = 5.75$, $SD = 1.11$), and one concept for problem awareness on housing market (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.81$, $M = 5.74$, $SD = 1.10$) could be constructed (Field, 2018).

Pre-existing perception: To measure pre-existing feelings towards the social issues presented in the news item, two statements were used. Before seeing the news item, all participants were asked to rate on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) whether they considered the environment and the housing market as important societal issues.

Demographics: Participants were asked to fill in their gender and age. Age was later divided into three different groups: upper age (61–90-year-olds, 46.1% of the participants), middle age (41–60-year-olds, 38.6% of the participants), and young age (18–40-year-olds, 15.3% of the participants). Following this, participants were asked about their level of education. Eight levels of education that are common in the Netherlands were used to measure this variable. For the analysis, the different levels were merged into three standard categories identified by the national statistical office of the Netherlands (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2016): low, middle, and high levels of education.

3.5. Data Analysis

Given that the study included two different news topics (plastic waste and the housing market), all analyses were conducted separately for each topic throughout the paper to account for potential topic-related differences.

To address RQ1, separate independent samples t-tests were conducted for both topics. To answer RQ2, participants were asked via an open-ended question to indicate what they considered the most important message of the news item. Responses to this question were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis (Baarda, 2009; Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). First, labels were assigned to the responses to describe their content. These labels closely resembled the original wording of the responses. Second, labels that resembled each other were grouped together. Subsequently, a researcher identified broader categories within these grouped labels. This process resulted in a coding scheme consisting of eight categories for the variable of perceived main message (see Table 3). A second researcher independently coded the participants' responses using this coding scheme. The codes assigned by both researchers were then compared, and all discrepances in categorization were discussed in detail until agreement was reached.

Table 3. Categories and explanations of thematic analysis of perceived main message.

Category	Explanation
General topic	Focuses on responses that explicitly mention the topic or issue presented in the news item
Perspective	Focuses on a forward-looking or future-oriented references
Prevention	Focuses on preventing the problem mentioned in the news item
Self-efficacy	Focuses on participants' responses indicating that they believe they can personally contribute to addressing the problem mentioned in the news item
Responsibility	Focuses on who is responsible for the problem mentioned in the news item
Attention	Focuses on participants' acquisition of knowledge or awareness
No answer	When the participant gave no answer or indicated they had no idea
Other	Anything that did not fit into one of the above categories

To address RQ3, two analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs) were conducted: one for the topic of plastic waste and one for the housing market topic. Gender, age, educational level, and pre-existing perceptions of the social issue were included as covariates to control for their potential influence on the dependent variable. Only covariates that showed a significant effect are reported in Section 4.

4. Results

4.1. Perceived Journalistic Quality of Constructive and Nonconstructive Television News

The first research question was formulated to examine whether participants perceive differences in journalistic quality between constructive and nonconstructive television news items. Results show no significant differences in journalistic quality scores between the constructive (M = 5.44, SD = 0.84) and the nonconstructive groups (M = 5.43, SD = 0.99) who watched an item on plastic waste, $t(286) = 0.14$, $p = 0.89$. The same holds for the participants who watched the item about the housing market (constructive M = 5.17, SD = 0.96; nonconstructive M = 5.13, SD = 1.00; $t(285) = 0.38$, $p = 0.70$). Both groups reported that the news items had relatively high journalistic quality standards, irrespective of whether they saw a constructive or nonconstructive news item.

4.2. Perceived Main Message of Constructive and Nonconstructive Television News

The second research question investigated participants' perceptions of the main message of the constructive or nonconstructive news item. Responses were coded according to the thematic analysis scheme outlined in Table 3. Percentages of participants' responses per category, topic, and news type are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Percentages of participants' responses per category, topic, and news type.

	Plastic Waste		**Housing Market**	
	Constructive (*n* = 144)	**Nonconstructive (*n* = 144)**	**Constructive (*n* = 144)**	**Nonconstructive (*n* = 143)**
General topic	42.36	37.50	67.36	69.93
Perspective	2.78	1.39	15.97	9.09
Prevention	22.92	29.17	0.69	-
Self-efficacy	14.58	0.69	-	-
Responsibility	0.69	10.42	0.69	6.29
Attention	4.86	13.89	-	3.50
Other	5.56	4.86	8.33	5.59
No answer	6.25	2.08	6.94	5.59

4.2.1. Plastic Waste: Perceived Main Message of Constructive and Nonconstructive Television News

For the plastic waste topic, the constructive and nonconstructive news items both primarily elicited responses categorized as general topic (constructive 42.36%, nonconstructive 37.50%) and prevention (constructive 22.92%, nonconstructive 29.17%). A closer examination of the responses within the general topic category revealed differences within the category and conditions, as seen in Table 5.

Table 5. Responses (percentages) within the general topic and perspective categories for plastic waste.

	Plastic Waste	
	Constructive (*n* = 144)	**Nonconstructive (*n* = 144)**
General topic—general	4.17	4.17
General topic—problem	9.72	31.25
General topic—opportunity	28.47	2.08
Total general topic	**42.36**	**37.50**
Perspective—hopeless	-	0.69
Perspective—hopeful	2.78	0.69
Total perspective	**2.78**	**1.38**

In the constructive condition, 28.47% of the responses within the general topic condition emphasized opportunities, whereas in the nonconstructive condition, 31.25% focused on the problem. Examples of responses emphasizing opportunities included: "Plastic soup is terrible, but solutions are slowly emerging, such as the machine shown," and "Way too much plastic ends up in the oceans, but it can be solved in a simple way". In contrast, responses focusing on the problem included: "Microplastics in the ocean will become an increasingly bigger problem, and the sea and ocean are essential for our lives," and "Plastic is a serious polluter". Around 4% of the responses in both conditions included the general topic but did not refer to either opportunities or problems, with examples including: "Plastic in the sea".

Responses categorized as prevention in both the constructive and nonconstructive news items focused on general strategies to prevent the problem of plastic waste, without specifying who should take action or who is responsible. Examples included: "Avoid plastic waste," "Plastic must be reduced," and "Do not throw plastic into nature."

In addition, the constructive news item in particular elicited responses related to self-efficacy (14.58%), reflecting participants' beliefs in their own ability to take action to address the problem. Examples of self-efficacy responses included: "We can all do something about the plastic waste in the sea," and "Everyone can help to combat plastic pollution". By contrast, the nonconstructive news item elicited more responses related to responsibility (10.42%), which shifted the problem outside of what someone can do about the problem themselves and focused on who or what is responsible for the problem of plastic waste, with examples including: "We as humans pollute the seas with plastic".

Finally, attention-related responses were more frequent in the nonconstructive condition (13.89%) than in the constructive condition (4.86%). In both conditions, the responses reflected participants' focus on the seriousness or alarming nature of the issue of plastic pollution: "Environmental pollution is a real problem" and "Awareness of large-scale pollution caused by humans".

Overall, while self-efficacy responses—predominantly given in the constructive condition—highlighted personal agency and participants' sense of individual ability to make a difference, responsibility responses—predominantly given in the nonconstructive condition—emphasized that the problem lies with others or external factors. Prevention responses, in turn, addressed general strategies and were present in both conditions. Finally, the higher proportion of attention-related responses in the nonconstructive condition suggests that this news item primarily drew participants' focus to the seriousness of the problem itself, whereas the constructive news item elicited responses that emphasized opportunities and individual agency.

4.2.2. Housing Market: Perceived Main Message of Constructive and Nonconstructive Television News

For the housing market topic, the constructive and nonconstructive news items both mostly elicited responses categorized as general topic (constructive 67.36%, nonconstructive 69.93%) or perspective (constructive 15.97%, nonconstructive 9.09%). A closer examination of the responses revealed differences within the categories and between the conditions, as seen in Table 6.

Table 6. Responses (percentages) within the general topic and perspective categories for the housing market.

	Housing Market	
	Constructive (*n* = 144)	**Nonconstructive (*n* = 143)**
General topic—general	5.56	10.49
General topic—problem	4.86	59.44
General topic—opportunity	56.94	-
Total general topic	**67.36**	**69.93**
Perspective—hopeless	3.47	9.09
Perspective—hopeful	12.50	-
Total perspective	**15.97**	**9.09**

For the constructive news item, responses within the general topic category predominantly emphasized opportunities (56.94%), alongside a smaller proportion of problem-

focused responses (4.86%). Examples of opportunity-focused responses included: "Better conditions for starters and lower prices for homes" and "The government is taking measures to make owner-occupied homes financially affordable". An example of a problem-focused response included: "Starters still find it difficult to find a home".

For the nonconstructive news item, responses within the general topic category predominantly highlighted the problem (59.44%) or referred to the general topic without further evaluation (10.49%); no responses emphasizing opportunities within the general topic category were identified. Examples of problem-focused responses included: "The housing market is locked for starters and living in the city is for the rich" and "There are few to no opportunities for many people with a normal income to get a house". Mentions of the general topic included responses such as "housing shortage" and "scarcity in the housing market".

Within the perspective category, responses in both the constructive and nonconstructive conditions could be distinguished as either hopeless or hopeful. The constructive conditions mainly elicited hopeful responses (12.50%), such as "Young people get a better chance at buying a home". In contrast, from the nonconstructive condition, only responses reflecting a hopeless perspective were identified (9.09%). Examples of these included: "For some people, despite having a job and a good income, it will be completely impossible to buy a house" and "Looking for homes is not feasible, they do not exist. And if they do exist, they are unaffordable. And for the time being, it seems that a home seeker has no chance, anywhere".

Responses related to responsibility were more frequent in the nonconstructive condition (6.29%) than in the constructive condition (0.69%). These responses typically attributed blame to the government or specific political parties for the deteriorating housing market, with examples including: "The cabinet is making a mess of it as usual!".

Finally, prevention and self-efficacy responses were negligible for the housing market topic for both conditions, indicating that participants rarely referred to concrete actions of their own ability to influence the issue.

Overall, the constructive news item appeared to encourage opportunity-oriented and hopeful interpretations of the housing market, whereas the nonconstructive news item primarily elicited responses emphasizing the severity of the problem, hopelessness, and the attribution of responsibility to external actors.

4.3. Problem Awareness of Constructive and Nonconstructive Television News

The third research question examined whether participants differed in their perceived seriousness of the societal problem (problem awareness) after viewing either constructive or nonconstructive television news. No significant differences in problem awareness were found between participants who watched a constructive versus a nonconstructive news item about plastic waste, $F(1, 282) = 0.45$, $p = 0.505$, $\eta^2 p = 0.002$. Similarly, no significant differences were observed for the housing market news item, $F(1, 282) = 3.65$, $p = 0.057$, $\eta^2 p = 0.013$, as seen in Table 7.

Table 7. Mean problem awareness score (SD) per topic and per news type.

	Plastic Waste		**Housing Market**	
	Constructive (*n* = 144)	**Nonconstructive (*n* = 144)**	**Constructive (*n* = 144)**	**Nonconstructive (*n* = 143)**
Problem awareness	5.77 (1.06)	5.72 (1.16)	5.62 (1.16)	5.87 (1.02)

As shown in Table 7, the seriousness of the problem was perceived as high across all conditions, with participants reporting mean scores above 5.6. These results therefore

provide no evidence that a constructive journalistic approach reduces perceived problem awareness.

When controlling for demographic characteristics, the results indicated that the covariate age was significantly related to the participants' problem awareness. This was the case for the plastic waste topic, $F(1, 282) = 26.33$, $p < 0.001$, $r^2 = 0.08$, as well as the housing market topic, $F(1, 282) = 20.38$, $p < 0.001$, $r^2 = 0.05$. These findings suggest that as age increases, a participant's awareness of the seriousness of the problem also increases, regardless of the type of news reporting.

5. Discussion

This study examined the public's perceived main message of constructive television news and whether a constructive reporting style influences perceived problem awareness and perceived journalistic quality. In doing so, the study addressed central concerns of constructive journalism: whether including solution- and future-oriented elements may weaken audiences' sense of seriousness of societal issues (Bro, 2025; Djerf-Pierre & Ekström, 2025; Overgaard, 2023). Specifically, the study investigated whether these concerns are valid—that is, whether audiences attribute less journalistic quality to constructive news and whether they underestimate the seriousness of the societal problem after viewing constructive news.

The findings do not support concerns about potential negative consequences but instead indicate that constructive news reporting does not diminish audiences' perceptions of the seriousness of societal problems. Across both news topics that were studied—plastic waste and the housing market—participants reported similarly high levels of perceived problem awareness, regardless of whether they watched a constructive or nonconstructive news item. This is an important finding within the broader debate surrounding constructive journalism, as critics have argued that constructive news reporting may risk softening or downplaying social issues (Djerf-Pierre & Ekström, 2025; Overgaard, 2023). The current study counteracts this concern empirically.

Furthermore, concerns that a constructive approach to news reporting would negatively affect perceived journalistic quality were not confirmed. Participants in all conditions evaluated the news items as relatively high in relevance, reliability, comprehensibility, neutrality, and informativeness, indicating that perceived journalistic quality was similar for both constructive and nonconstructive television news. This finding is in line with earlier research showing that constructive journalism does not necessarily weaken journalistic values or standards (Baden et al., 2019; McIntyre, 2020; Schäfer et al., 2024). The findings therefore refute the assumption that including constructive elements might shift journalism toward advocacy or uncritical news (Bro, 2025; Djerf-Pierre & Ekström, 2025; Overgaard, 2023). Instead, the results suggest that constructive journalism can maintain similar (high) levels of perceived journalistic quality as nonconstructive journalism.

At the same time, the results demonstrate that constructive and nonconstructive news clearly shape how participants articulated the main message of the news item. Participants exposed to constructive news more frequently emphasized opportunities, hopeful perspectives, and in some cases self-efficacy, whereas participants exposed to nonconstructive news more often focused on problems, hopelessness, or responsibility. These findings align with research suggesting that constructive journalism can influence how audiences interpret and process news content, often leading to more solution- and action-oriented or contextually nuanced interpretations across different audiences and contexts (Hermans & Prins, 2022; Mäder & Rinsdorf, 2023; Swijtink & Hermans, 2023; Swijtink et al., 2023).

Importantly, together with the results on perceived problem awareness and journalistic quality, these findings suggest that constructive journalism does not replace problem-

oriented reporting but instead complements it with additional interpretative dimensions. Participants remained aware of the seriousness of the issues while simultaneously considering possible solutions, opportunities, or future developments. In this sense, constructive journalism appears to broaden the way audiences cognitively process societal issues rather than reducing critical awareness. This interpretation is consistent with Bro's (2025) conceptualization of constructive journalism as a continuum rather than a dichotomy, in which constructive elements can coexist with traditional journalistic functions.

Together, these findings contribute to the growing body of audience-centered research on constructive journalism. Prior research has mainly focused on the emotional benefits of constructive reporting (Lough & McIntyre, 2023; McIntyre & Lough, 2023). The present study extends this research by demonstrating that constructive television news also affects interpretations of societal issues, specifically in terms of perceived main message, while maintaining perceived journalistic quality and problem awareness. In doing so, the study adds to the limited body of research on audiovisual constructive news specifically.

Although the overall pattern of findings was consistent, differences emerged between the two topics. The housing market condition showed stronger contrasts between constructive and nonconstructive television news in participants' perceptions of the main message than the plastic waste condition. Several factors may account for this difference.

First, the two topics differ in perceived individual agency. Plastic waste allows for relatively concrete forms of individual action (e.g., recycling, reducing plastic consumption), whereas the housing market is more strongly associated with structural and political processes outside of individual control. This difference may explain why constructive reporting on plastic waste elicited self-efficacy responses, while constructive reporting on the housing market did not. This finding aligns with earlier research suggesting that the effects of constructive journalism may depend on topic-related relevance (Hermans & Prins, 2022).

Second, structural differences in the stimulus materials themselves may have contributed to the observed differences. In the housing market condition, the constructive framing was introduced at the start of the news item, thereby immediately establishing the interpretative lens of the story. In the plastic waste condition, the constructive elements were introduced later in the item, following a more traditional problem-first structure. This suggests that not only the presence of constructive elements but also their placement within the narrative structure may shape audience interpretations. The findings suggest that constructive journalism is not merely about adding constructive elements but also about how and when these elements are embedded in the narrative structure. Future research should therefore not only examine the effects of including constructive elements but also investigate whether the placement of these elements within the news narrative (e.g., in the lead versus the closing segment) influences audience perceptions and interpretations. Such research would help disentangle content effects from sequencing effects and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of constructive storytelling practices.

This study encounters several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, although ecological validity was enhanced by using authentic footage, this also constrained the flexibility of stimulus construction. Structural differences between the items—particularly regarding narrative sequencing and the degree of overlap between versions—may have influenced the results. While this reflects real-world journalistic practice, it complicates strict experimental control.

Second, only two societal news topics were included in this study: plastic waste and the housing market. The extent to which findings can be generalized to other news topics or issue domains—such as health, crime, or international conflict—needs further investigation. Future research should therefore examine a broader range of news topics varying in levels of perceived individual versus structural controllability.

Third, participants in the current study were exposed to only one news item. Although this design made it possible to examine the immediate effects of constructive versus nonconstructive television news, it remains unclear whether these effects persist over time. Future longitudinal studies could therefore provide valuable insights as to whether the observed effects on audience perceptions remain stable over longer periods of news consumption (see also McIntyre & Lough, 2023).

Finally, future research should further investigate constructive journalism across different media formats. Existing research on constructive journalism, including the present study, has primarily focused on written news and audiovisual news formats (Lough & McIntyre, 2023). However, news consumption increasingly takes place across a broader range of digital and interactive platforms, such as social media, podcasts, and mobile news applications (Newman et al., 2024). Future studies should therefore examine whether the effects of constructive journalism differ across these various media environments and how format-specific characteristics may shape audience perceptions and interpretations of societal issues.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, the findings indicate that constructive television news encourages audiences to adopt a broader interpretative lens in which opportunities and future perspectives are considered alongside recognition of societal problems. Importantly, this broader perspective does not appear to come at the expense of perceived problem awareness or perceived journalistic quality. The results therefore do not support the assumption that constructive journalism weakens critical reporting or diminishes awareness of societal problems. Instead, they suggest that constructive journalism can complement journalism's traditional watchdog role by offering additional perspectives on possible developments and future outcomes.

Moreover, the study shows that constructive journalism influences not only emotional responses, as often emphasized in previous research, but also how audiences interpret and frame societal issues. While encouraging a broader, more solution-oriented perspective, constructive news does not appear to reduce perceived problem awareness or perceived journalistic quality. Taken together, the findings provide empirical support for the value of constructive journalism in shaping audience interpretations without compromising key journalistic functions.

These findings are particularly relevant in a media environment characterized by increasing news avoidance, a persistent negativity bias in news coverage, and concerns about a less-informed public. By broadening the narrative frame through which societal problems are presented, constructive journalism may offer journalists and news organizations an alternative approach of informing audiences that goes beyond problem-focused reporting while still maintaining journalism's core democratic function of informing citizens about pressing societal challenges.

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Appendix A

Before carrying out the main study, a pretest was conducted to test the stimulus materials. The authors' network in the Netherlands was used to attract 95 participants (M_{age} = 36.9, SD_{age} = 15.5, age range = 19–73, 65.3% = women). These participants did not participate in the main study and were exclusively recruited for the pretest. During this test, all the participants answered a few demographic questions before being randomly assigned to one of the four news items (e.g., plastic waste constructive news item, plastic waste nonconstructive news item, housing market constructive news item, housing market nonconstructive news item). Subsequently, they indicated on a 7-point scale whether they perceived the news item as positive (1 = negative, 7 = positive), hopeful (1 = not very hopeful, 7 = very hopeful), future oriented (1 = oriented on the past, 7 = oriented on the future), and solution oriented (1 = oriented on problems, 7 = oriented on solutions).

Results showed that the constructive news items significantly differed from the nonconstructive news items on positivity, hopefulness, and solution oriented, as seen in Table A1. As expected, participants found the constructive news items to be more positive, more hopeful, and more solution oriented than the nonconstructive news items. No significant difference was found for the future-oriented variable between the constructive and the nonconstructive news versions. In retrospect, this outcome can be easily understood by the content of the news, as the nonconstructive news items paid attention to the future as well, but with a hopeless, more negative point of view. In contrast, the constructive news items looked to the future with a more inspiring and hopeful tone of voice. In conclusion, the manipulations were considered successful.

Table A1. Results of the pretest of the stimulus materials. Outcomes were measured on 7-point scales (7 being positive, hopeful, future oriented, and solution oriented).

	Constructive M (SD)	Nonconstructive M (SD)	F-Test (ANOVA, Two-Tailed)
Plastic waste			
Positive	5.40 (1.23)	2.52 (1.16)	$F(1, 46) = 69.44$, $p < 0.001$
Hopeful	5.36 (1.29)	2.87 (1.22)	$F(1, 46) = 47.23$, $p < 0.001$
Future oriented	6.20 (0.71)	5.83 (1.27)	$F(1, 46) = 1.629$, $p = 0.208$
Solution oriented	5.52 (1.42)	2.78 (1.35)	$F(1, 46) = 46.84$, $p < 0.001$
Housing market			
Positive	5.00 (1.29)	2.05 (0.84)	$F(1, 45) = 83.65$, $p < 0.001$
Hopeful	4.88 (1.54)	2.09 (0.87)	$F(1, 45) = 56.53$, $p < 0.001$
Future oriented	5.40 (1.66)	5.27 (1.12)	$F(1, 45) = 0.092$, $p = 0.763$
Solution oriented	5.56 (1.42)	2.09 (0.97)	$F(1, 45) = 93.23$, $p < 0.001$

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