Constructive Opportunities and Challenges
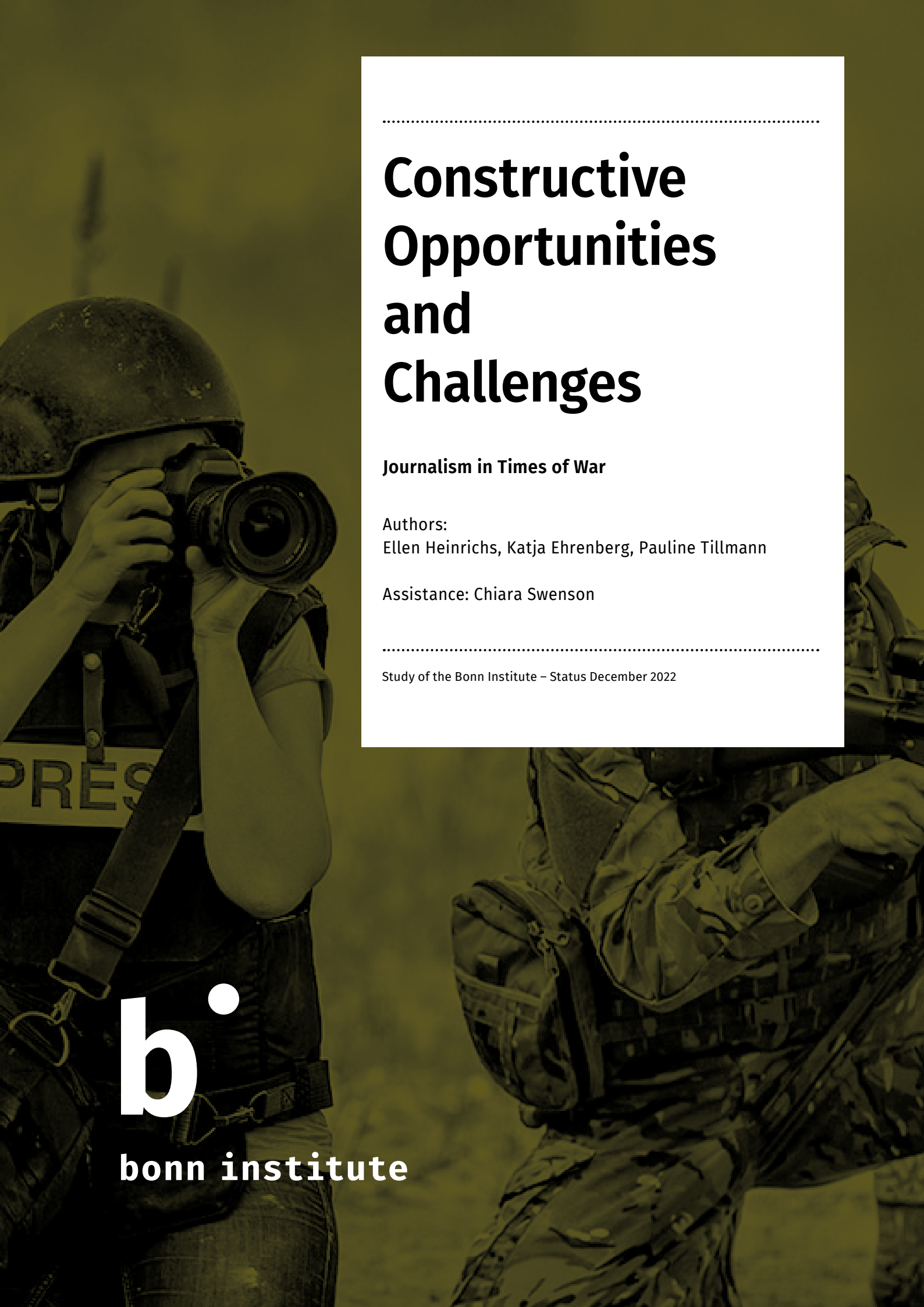
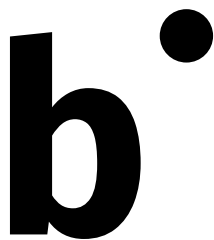**Journalism in Times of War**

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Ellen Heinrichs, Katja Ehrenberg, Pauline Tillmann

Assistance: Chiara Swenson

Study of the Bonn Institute – Status December 2022

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Constructive Opportunities and Challenges

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1.
Abstract

1. Abstract

During times of war and crisis, it is more important than ever that people remain motivated to inform themselves with fact-based reporting on events. At the moment, however, contradictory trends are emerging in Germany and elsewhere in the world: Interest in the news is flagging, trust in the media is dwindling and levels of news avoidance are rising. Coverage of the war in Ukraine is now fueling at least one of the three trends. The aim of this study is to provide media content producers with timely and practical knowledge on how to design war coverage in a way that meets the information needs of users so that people don't "tune out."

The hypothesis of this study is that constructive journalistic approaches have the potential to counter a disproportionately negative worldview and news avoidance. To test this theory, we conducted qualitative guided interviews with media users about their wishes when it comes to coverage of war. We also conducted qualitative guided interviews with journalists about whether they thought it possible to cover a war constructively and what kind of framework might be required to do so.

An evaluation of the discussions seems to suggest that news avoidance may not be an expression of disinterest but rather a self-defense strategy for dealing with psychological stress. User wishes partially aligned with central features of the constructive journalistic approach: a desire for solutions-oriented content that includes a range of perspectives on events and sufficient context and background information. There is also a clear need for more careful use of language and imagery in times of war.

Media content producers differed in opinion when it came to the question of how best to integrate constructive approaches into coverage of war, but nearly all saw possibilities and cited concrete examples. Nevertheless, underlying departmental conditions such as time, effort and work culture were identified as hurdles to implementation.

Overall, our results offer an opportunity to question established approaches to covering war in order to meet the information needs of users and counter the tendency toward news avoidance. Constructive journalism offers a framework to do just that. In order to underscore the practical nature of this study, we have put together and annotated a collection of "Good Practice" examples gleaned from clustered interview results.
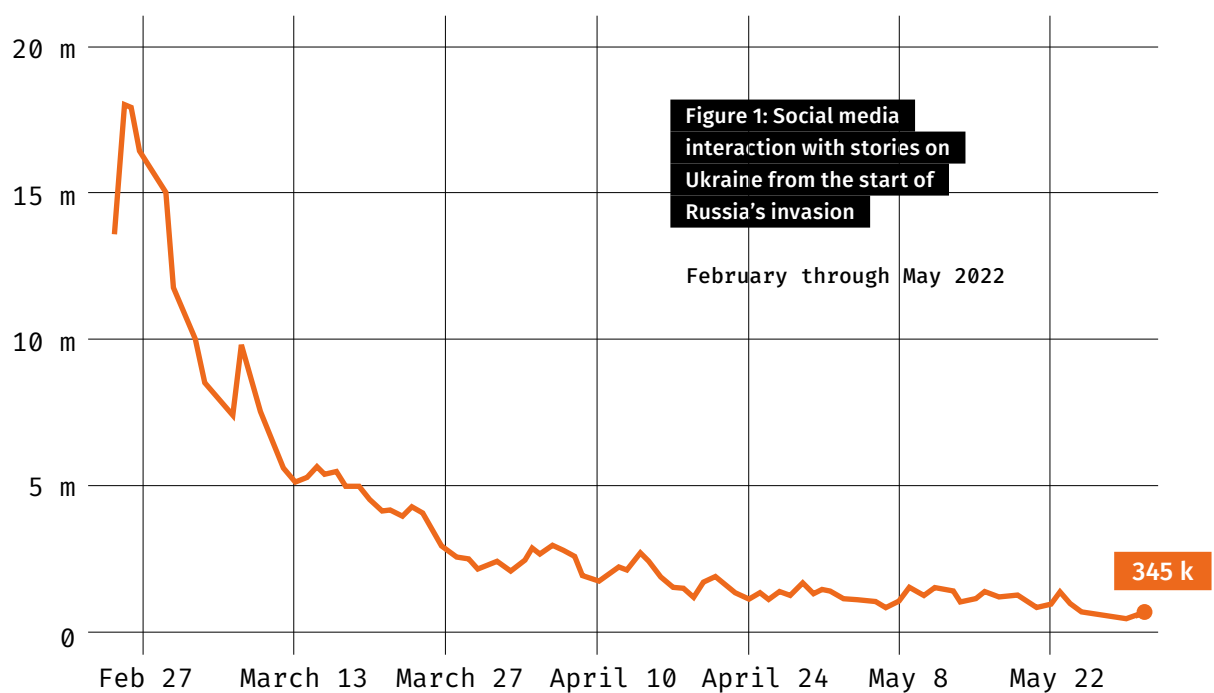
2.

News in Times of War

2. News in Times of War

When Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, it was seen around the world as the start of the first large-scale war in Europe since the end of World War II. What followed was a pattern that is often repeated in war coverage[1]: After an initially intense phase filled with special reports, social media hype, live updates and daily headlines, coverage then waned considerably—analog to fleeting public interest.

"If it were just about clicks, we could stop reporting on Ukraine immediately," one editor-in-chief from a regional newspaper in western Germany told the Bonn Institute one month after the Russian invasion.

In late May, NewsWhip, a tracking service, provided data showing that world-wide interaction (likes, comments, shares) with social media news articles on the war in Ukraine had dropped considerably since February.[2]

Figure 1: Social media interaction with stories on Ukraine from the start of Russia's invasion

February through May 2022

345 k

Adapted from Rothschild, N. (2022, June 3).

1   Löffelholz, M. (2004). *Krieg als Medienereignis II: Krisenkommunikation im 21. Jahrhundert (War as media event II: Crisis communication in the 21st century)*. Springer Verlag.
2   Rothschild, N. (2022, June 3). *World looks elsewhere as Ukraine war hits 100 days*. Axios. https://www.axios.com/2022/06/02/ukraine-russia-war-social-media-interest

"World looks elsewhere as Ukraine war hits 100 days," wrote the US news website Axios on dwindling public interest. "Don't forget Ukraine," pleaded author Samira El Ouassil in an appeal to readers of the German weekly magazine *SPIEGEL*. And speaking at a May 25 Council of the Baltic Sea States gathering, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock explained, "We have reached a moment of fatigue."[3]

In this study we ask: What kind of approaches can continue to provide users with fact-based information while keeping them from turning away from current events? What needs or wishes do media users have? What good examples already exist in practice?

First, however, we will examine the larger context in which topical fatigue over the Ukraine war is playing out.

News Consumption and Interest

Only informed citizens can make informed democratic choices. That is why it is essential, especially in times of war or crisis, that the majority of people remain motivated to inform themselves with the help of fact-based reporting on current events.

At the moment, however, a trend toward the opposite can be observed: The above-mentioned waning interest in coverage of Ukraine can be traced back to three larger trends: 1) decreasing interest in the news in general; 2) dwindling trust in the media; and 3) purposeful news avoidance.
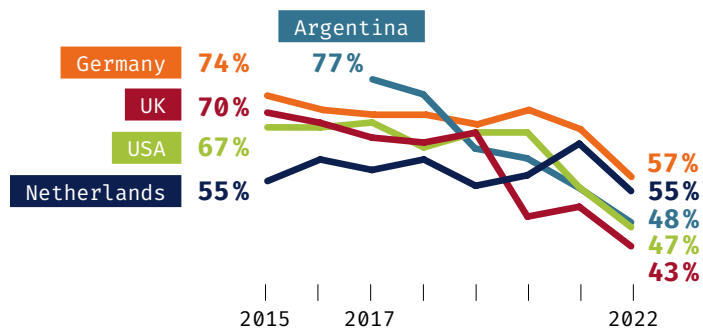
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[3] 3 El Ouassil, S. (2022, June 9). *Vergesst die Ukraine nicht (Don't forget Ukraine)*. Spiegel.
    https://www.spiegel.de/kultur/fatigue-vergesst-die-ukraine-nicht-kolumne-a-1d7c3a1c-aabe-45ee-
    b622-aa35ec4f5d92

Interest in the News

As the *Reuters Institute* at Oxford University has consistently shown in the annual Digital News Report it has published since 2017, global interest in the news has been waning for years, sinking from 63% in 2017 to just 51% in 2022.[4]

Argentina	77%
Germany	74%
UK	70%
USA	67%
Netherlands	55%

57%
55%
48%
47%
43%

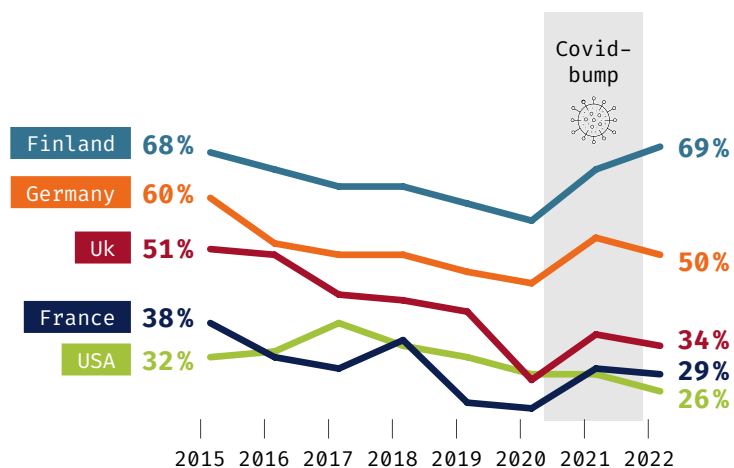2015   2017   2022

In Germany, interest in the news is slightly higher than the global average. Currently, 57% of those Germans polled describe themselves as "very or extremely interested" in the news. Still, in 2021, that number was 10% higher. Most respondents said they were interested in new developments in their own city or region, as well as in international and political news.[5]

Dwindling Trust

Another trend identified by the authors of the Reuters study was the loss of faith in established news services: Trust in the media fell in more than half of the countries surveyed in 2022, with only seven countries showing an increase. Globally, an average of four-in-ten (42%) say they trust most news most of the time.[6]

Figure 3:
Trust in the news

Adapted from
Newman et al. (2022).

Covid-bump

Finland	68%
Germany	60%
Uk	51%
France	38%
USA	32%

69%
50%
34%
29%
26%

2015 2016 2017 2018 2019 2020 2021 2022

4   Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Robertson, C.T., Eddy, K., & Nielsen, R.K. (2022). Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/Digital_News-Report_2022.pdf

5   ibid.

6   ibid.

The Reuters report found that half (50%) of those polled in Germany trusted the news. A long-term study by the University of Mainz provides more differentiated insight, charting a growing trust in the media among users in Germany at the start of the coronavirus.[7] However, as the Mainz study has been on pause, it is impossible to say whether the trend has shifted once again, as suggested by the Reuters study. Overall, researchers from Mainz found the gap between those who trusted the media and those who didn't had grown, with the undecided middle melting away.
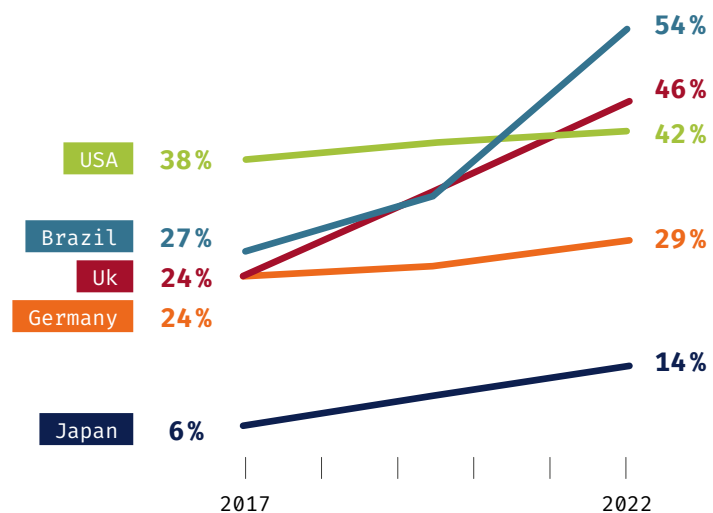
A new study from the University of Bielefeld found that the majority of young people in Germany do not trust the media, which suggests this trend could continue to increase over the coming years. More than one-third of young people suspect media outlets withhold important information from citizens (37.9%) and simply spread their own messaging (32.8%). The study found that 76% of youths did not trust newspapers, and 72% had no trust in journalists. Researchers conducted the poll among more than 1,500 children between the ages of 6 and 11, and youths up to 16 years of age.[8]

News Avoidance

At the same time, more and more people around the world are intentionally avoiding the news. The authors of the Digital News Report 2022 determined: "We're also seeing news fatigue setting in—not just around COVID-19 but around politics and a range of other subjects—with the number of people actively avoiding news increasing markedly."[9] In Germany, the number of people who say they "sometimes" or "often" avoid the news has also increased from 24% in 2017 to 29% in 2021.

Figure 4:
News avoidance

Adapted from
Newman et al. (2022).

USA 38%   54%
Brazil 27%   46%
Uk 24%   42%
Germany 24%   29%
Japan 6%   14%

2017   2022

7   Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz. (2020). *Langzeitstudie Medienvertrauen: Forschungsergebnisse der Studie 2020 (Long-term trust in media study: Research results of the 2020 study)*. Medienvertrauen Uni Mainz. https://medienvertrauen.uni-mainz.de/forschungsergebnisse-der-welle-2020-3/
8   Ziegler, H. (2022). *Vertrauensstudie 2022 – Angst vor der Zukunft? Jugendliche zwischen gesunder Skepsis und gefährlicher Verschwörungsneigung (Trust study 2022 – fear of the future? Youth between healthy skepticism and a dangerous tendency toward conspiracy)*. Releasd. https://releasd.com/p/0cKgbQ
9   Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Robertson, C.T., Eddy, K., & Nielsen, R.K. (2022). *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/Digital_News-Report_2022.pdf
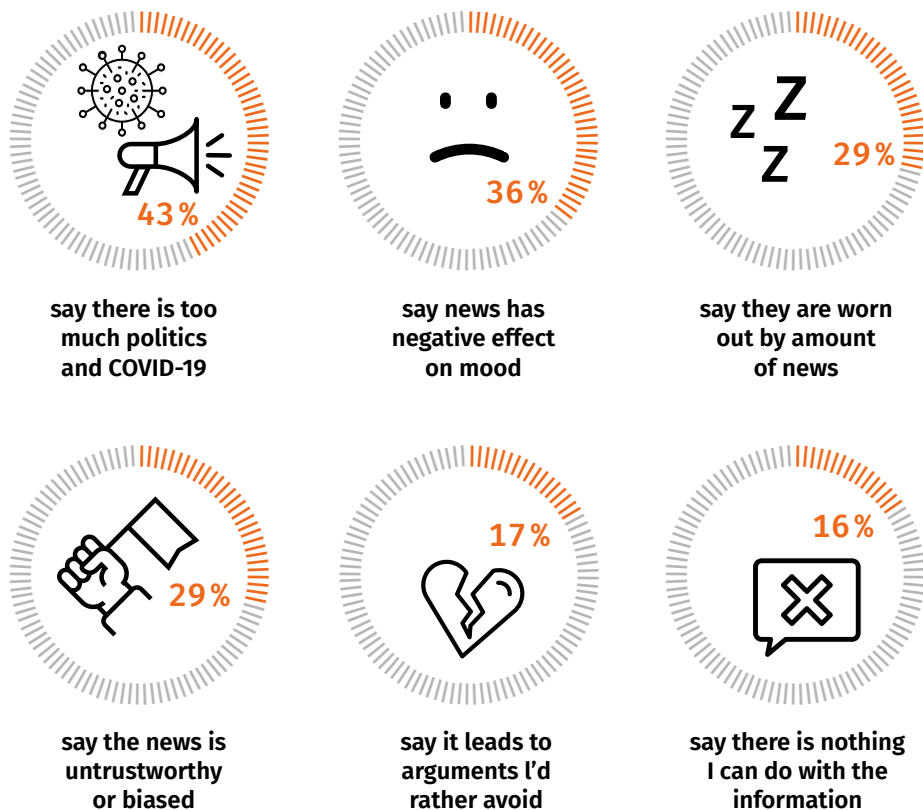
The main reason given across all markets for avoiding news is perceived excessive coverage of certain topics, particularly in relation to politics and the coronavirus (43%). But the negative impact of news consumption on one's mood (36%) and exhaustion resulting from news overload (29%) also play important roles.

Notably, a large proportion of 18-to-24-year-old media users in Germany said news stories led to arguments (21%) or claimed not to relate to (16%) or understand (10%) the news.[10] This largely mirrors the #UseTheNews study that German news agency dpa conducted among German youths and young adults in 2021: Roughly half of those polled said it was "not important to be informed about the latest news and current events" since they could not personally relate to the developments being covered.[11]

When it comes to these three trends—flagging interest, eroding trust and news avoidance—coverage of the war in Ukraine has amplified at least one. Data shows that the number of people in Germany engaging in news avoidance has grown considerably since Russia invaded Ukraine, jumping seven percentage points, for instance, between February (29%) and April 2022 (36%). That rise is far more pronounced than at any other time during the course of the study (2017–2022).

Figure 5:
Reasons for news
avoidance in all
surveyed countries

Adapted from
Newman et al. (2022).

43 %
say there is too
much politics
and COVID-19

36 %
say news has
negative effect
on mood

29 %
say they are worn
out by amount
of news

29 %
say the news is
untrustworthy
or biased

17 %
say it leads to
arguments I'd
rather avoid

16 %
say there is nothing
I can do with the
information

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10 Hölig, S., Behre, J., & Schulz, W. (2022). Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022: Ergebnisse für Deutschland (Results for Germany) (Working Paper No. 63).
Verlag Hans-Bredow-Institute. https://doi.org/10.21241/ssoar.79565

11 Hasebrink, U., Hölig, S., & Wunderlich, L. (2021). *#UseTheNews: Studie zur Nachrichtenkompetenz Jugendlicher und hunger Erwachsener in der digitalen Medienwelt (#UseTheNews: Study on news competence among youths and young adults in the digital media world)*.
Working paper from the Hans Bredow Institute. https://doi.org/10.21241/SSOAR.72822

Figures 6 a), b):
Increase in news
avoidance due to
the Russion Invasion
of Ukraine

Adapted from
Newman et al. (2022).

Germany ▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏ **29→36%**

Poland ▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏ **41→47%**

USA ▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏ **42→46%**

Uk ▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏ **46→46%**
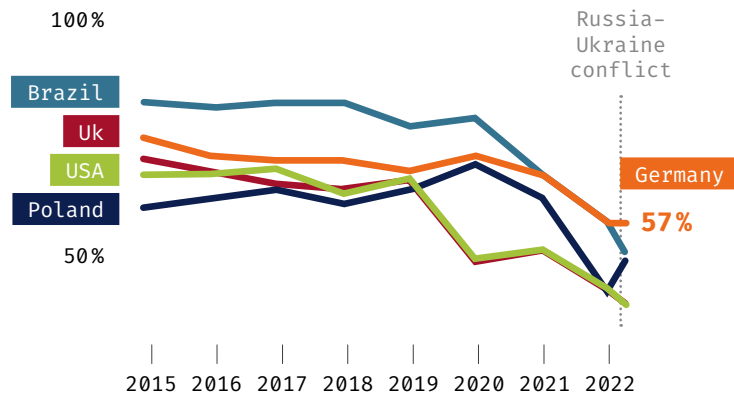
Brazil ▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏▏ **54→55%**
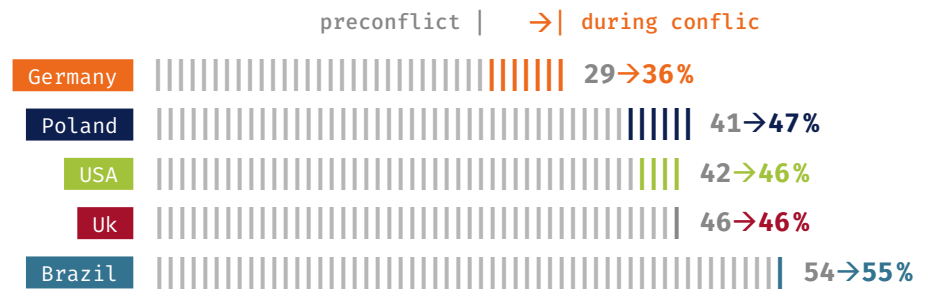
The authors of the Reuters study interpret the trend as such: "We know that one of the main reasons people avoid the news is because of the negative effect it has on their mood, so it would be unsurprising if the deeply depressing and concerning nature of the conflict [in Ukraine] has caused more people to turn away from it."[12]

Figure 6 b)

Adapted from
Newman et al. (2022).

100%

Brazil
Uk
USA
Poland

50%

Russia–
Ukraine
conflict

Germany

57%

2015 2016 2017 2018 2019 2020 2021 2022

Psychological Stress

At this juncture, we feel it important to expand on findings from the communication sciences and incorporate knowledge gleaned from psychological research. Such an interdisciplinary approach is characteristic for the *Bonn Institute* and offers a deeper understanding of the underlying causes of news avoidance, as well as possible approaches to confronting it.

A key point in this constellation is the question of whether individual psychological stress experienced due to media reports causes people to avoid or cut back on media consumption and, if so, to what degree.

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[12]   Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Robertson, C.T., Eddy, K., & Nielsen, R.K. (2022). *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/Digital_News-Report_2022.pdf

A British study took this into consideration in a survey mapping how television news reports affected viewers' moods, and how this in turn impacted the way those people viewed their own problems. The study showed that those participants who were shown negative news stories left sessions more fearful and sad than those who were shown stories that researchers had curated as neutral or positive. The results of this study suggest that the consumption of negative television news stories amplifies personal anxieties.[13] This is important in that it clearly shows the impact news (beyond war and crisis reporting) can have on an individual's psychological state.

Further studies have investigated the psychological effect that television and CCTV or video footage of life-threatening events can have on people. Analyses of news coverage of the September 11, 2001, World Trade Center attacks[14] and the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing show that the indirect video observation of life-threatening events can trigger more intense panic than if such an event is experienced firsthand at the scene. For example, the study found that individuals who had consumed large quantities of news on the Boston Marathon bombing had higher acute stress levels than those who had actually been on the street when the attack occurred.[15]

If an individual repeatedly or intensely experiences feelings of pain, suffering or violence (triggered either by firsthand personal experience or direct but secondhand observation, such as via television or video), and if such feelings are accompanied by a sense of powerlessness, reactions as extreme as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can result.[16] If individuals do not experience the traumatizing event firsthand but instead show signs of PTSD as a result of the experiences of others that they have either observed or heard about, one speaks of secondary traumatization. This can occur among media users as well as journalists, such as those who report on wars and catastrophes.

[13]   Johnston, W.M., & Davey, G.C.L. (1997). *The psychological impact of negative TV news bulletins: The catastrophizing of personal worries.* British Journal of Psychology, 88(1), 85-91. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8295.1997.tb02622.x

[14]   Holman, E.A., Silver, R.C., Poulin, M., Andersen, J., Gil-Rivas, V., & McIntosh, D.N. (2008). *Terrorism, acute stress, and cardiovascular health: A 3-year national study following the September 11th attacks.* Archives of General Psychiatry, 65(1), 73-80. https://doi.org/10.1001/archgenpsychiatry.2007.6

[15]   Holman, E.A., Garfin, D.R., & Silver, R.C. (2014). *Media's role in broadcasting acute stress following the Boston Marathon bombings.* Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, 111(1), 93-98. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1316265110

[16]   Berking, M., & Rief, W. (Eds.). (2012). *Klinische Psychologie und Psychotherapie für Bachelor (Clinical psychology and psychotherapy for bachelor candidates).* Springer Berlin Heidelberg. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-16974-8

If individuals repeatedly find themselves unable to influence events, cementing their sense of powerlessness over an extended period of time, they risk falling into a state of resignation and apathy. This can cause them to react to threatening events passively, even though they may clearly possess the tools to change the situation. This phenomenon, known in psychology as learned helplessness, is characterized by feelings of sadness, fear and general hopelessness[17] and can be triggered simply by observing life-threatening events,[18] such as, for instance, when one regularly consumes psychologically stressful reports of war or crises.

As author and neuroscientist Maren Urner has repeatedly pointed out in her work, the phenomenon of learned helplessness can have widespread impact: "That helplessness can foster pessimism and depression in individuals—the effects are just as dramatic on a societal level. Our willingness to actively participate in creating the world around us sinks, and we become far less inclined to help."[19]

Still, consuming war reporting does not automatically lead to this kind of cognitive "Flight." Other reactions to psychological stress exist as well, such as "Freezing" in the face of a problem or developing the desire to actively "Fight" it.[20] Seeking social support in the form of contact and exchange in terms of reciprocal comfort and practical assistance, known as "Tend-and-befriend"[21], is also a widespread reaction to psychological stress.
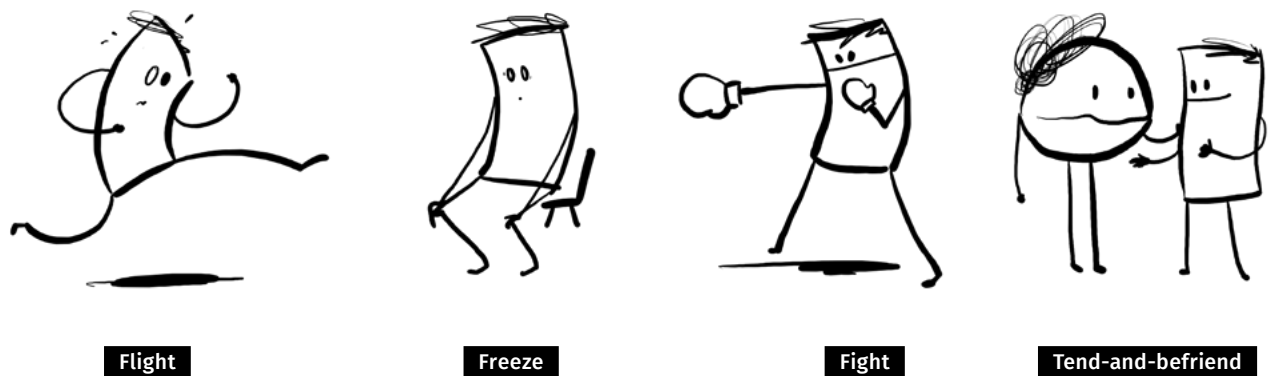

Flight   Freeze   Fight   Tend-and-befriend

Figure 7: Reactions caused by psychological stress

[17] Seligman, M.E.P. (1975). *Helplessness: On depression, development, and death.* W.H. Freeman & Co.
[18] DeVellis, R.F., DeVellis, B.M., & McCauley, C. (1978). *Vicarious acquisition of learned helplessness. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 36(8), 894. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.36.8.894
[19] Urner, M. (2019, May 6). *Schluss mit dem täglichen Weltuntergang (Enough with the daily apocalypse). Perspective Daily.*
https://perspective-daily.de/article/796-schluss-mit-dem-taeglichen-weltuntergang/sPZJF6da
[20] Kaluza, G. (2018). *Körperliche Stressreaktionen und die Folgen für die Gesundheit (Bodily reactions to stress and their health impact).* In: Gelassen und sicher im Stress (17–46). Springer.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-662-55986-4_2
[21] Taylor, S.E., Klein, L.C., Lewis, B.P., Gruenewald, T.L., Gurung, R.A.R., & Updegraff, J.A. (2000). *Biobehavioral responses to stress in females: Tend-and-befriend, not fight-or-flight. Psychological Review*, 107(3), 411–429. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.107.3.411

Ukrainian freelance journalist Nataliya Gumenyuk calls the increasing tendency of large parts of the global audience to turn away from stress-inducing news on the war in Ukraine "compassion fatigue," a phenomenon first described in burnout research. At a National Endowment for Democracy (NED) award ceremony, she explained: " The compassion fatigue already led to the way that people just don't want to consume sad things—it's too much, it's too hard." Gumenyuk says the phenomenon is not new: "That's what we felt with the Donbas war already."[22] Daryna Shevchenko, CEO of The Kyiv Independent, agrees: "I mean, news fatigue is a very natural thing; we already experienced it in 2014. We remember how Ukraine was on all the news. But then, in just, I don't know, maybe less than a year, people stopped talking about it."[23]

From a psychological perspective, news avoidance can be seen as a direct effect of stress at the information processing level: After an intense initial feeling of shock triggered by media stories of ongoing violence and threat, people are overcome with a feeling of helplessness. Many simply shut down. In this sense, news avoidance should not be viewed as an expression of disinterest. On the contrary, it is a healthy human self-defense strategy—albeit one with far-reaching consequences: People who avoid the news are more poorly informed and less able to make fact-based decisions. They also lack the basic information needed to actively participate in political discourse.

Hence, the question to be asked regarding war and crisis reporting is: How can journalists inform people in a way that neither turns them away from the news nor pushes them into a state of learned helplessness? It is essential to seek answers to this question because media outlets have to find ways to continue to reach audiences with fact-based information, both in the future but also now, in a world marked by man-made climate change and the resulting existential challenges and conflicts that it spawns. It is therefore essential to put the needs of media consumers at the heart of journalistic activity.

[22] National Endowment for Democracy. (2022, May 31).
      Ukraine's Public interest journalism lab rethinks reporting during war. ned.org.
      https://www.ned.org/ukraines-public-interest-journalism-lab-rethinks-reporting-during-war/
[23] Shevchenko, D. (2022, October 1). Background discussion in Bratislava.
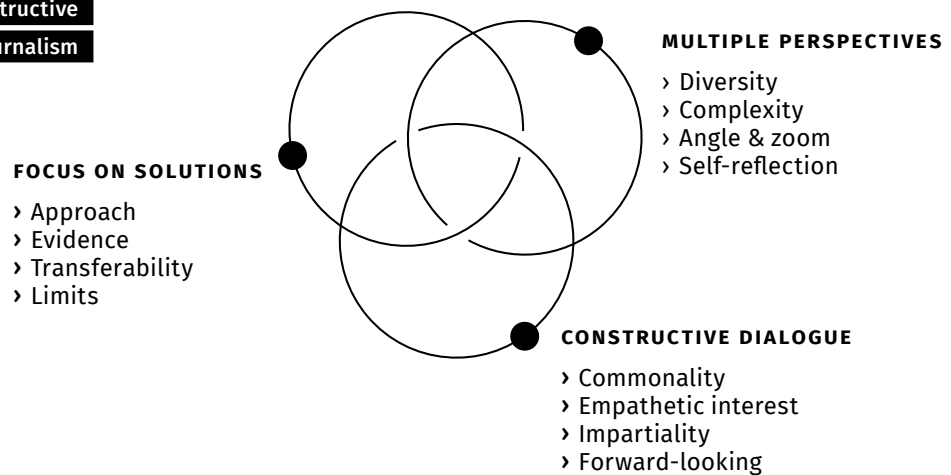
3.

What is Constructive Journalism?

b

3. What is Constructive Journalism?

Putting people's information needs at the heart of the matter: That is exactly what constructive journalism is about. Solutions-focused, rich in perspectives and constructive in dialogue: These are its three defining central elements (see figure). The Bonn Institute sees constructive journalism as having a dynamic, practice-oriented set of approaches that often augment the traditional craft of journalism. These include results-oriented research, interview and moderation techniques, a strong focus on diverse perspectives, representation and complexities, and a professional approach that borrows from mediation experience and is grounded in both empathic impartiality and professional distance.

Figure 8: The three elements of constructive journalism

MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

› Diversity
› Complexity
› Angle & zoom
› Self-reflection

FOCUS ON SOLUTIONS

› Approach
› Evidence
› Transferability
› Limits

CONSTRUCTIVE DIALOGUE

› Commonality
› Empathetic interest
› Impartiality
› Forward-looking

Constructive journalism aims to provide media users with a future-oriented, fact-based and nuanced picture of reality. By researching solutions just as meticulously as problems, it counters a one-sided negative worldview and bolsters experiences of self-efficacy (the conviction that it is possible to achieve desirable goals through one's own efforts or to successfully influence a situation) among media users by illustrating various potential courses of action.[24,25]

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[24]   Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review*, 84(2), 191–215.

[25]   McIntyre, K. (2019). Solutions journalism: The effects of including solution information in news stories about social problems. *Journalism Practice*, 13(1), 16–34.
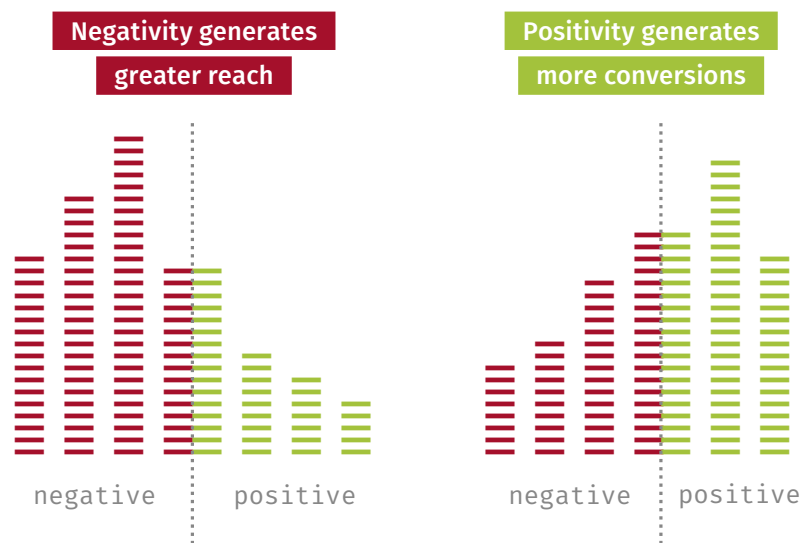
The role of the individual journalist in constructive journalism is defined by far more than the production of content. Instead, they operate as responsible public moderators, for instance through constructive discussion forums or community management. Analyses of user interests, with help from the internationally accepted User Needs model, assists journalists in gauging their own subjective sense of relevance in order to identify potential blind spots.[26]

The Bonn Institute considers the integration of constructive approaches into everyday journalistic practice to be a necessary step on the road to digitalization. Given the competition with other, perhaps more entertainment-oriented media, journalism can only be successfully monetized when one manages to remain relevant and useful to people. Recent analyses foresee great opportunities in this respect.[27]

An evaluation of digital user data collected from 11 regional newspapers as part of German news agency dpa and Schickler[28] publishing consultancy's DRIVE (Digital Revenue) initiative clearly showed that constructive journalism measurably adds product value by positively impacting the monetization of regional media.

Figure 9:
People like to read negative news, but they are more prepared to pay for positive/constructive news

Adapted from C. Mayer, personal communication, September 10, 2022. scoopcamp.

Negativity generates greater reach

Positivity generates more conversions

negative | positive

negative | positive

26   Ten Teije, S. (2022, November 10). *"The evolution of the user needs model: 'it needs constant change.'"* Smartocto. https://smartocto.com/blog/the-evolution-of-the-user-needs-model-it-needs-constant-change/

27   Heinrichs, E. (2021). *Lösungen, Perspektiven, Dialog (Solutions, perspectives, dialogue).* Grimme Institut. 40-47.https://www.grimme-institut.de/fileadmin/Grimme_Nutzer_Dateien/Institut/Dokumente/Lo__sungen_Perspektiven_Dialog.pdf

4.

Research Questions and Approaches

4. Research Questions and Approaches

At the core of our study are three key questions: 1) What needs do users have regarding coverage of war and conflict, and what characterizes successful war coverage in their eyes? 2) Do journalists think it possible to report constructively on war? 3) What framework do they need to do that?

During the course of our empirical data collection, we sought answers to these questions through guided interviews with media users as well as media content producers. The interviews, 28 in total, were conducted between May and July 2022.

Our aim was to provide journalists with timely and practical knowledge on how to design their war coverage in a way that will satisfy the audience's information needs while not driving people to "tune out." In order to underscore the practice-oriented nature of this study, we have put together a number of illustrated examples from information collected from clustered interview results. These show how empirical results can be translated from the theoretical to the practical realm.
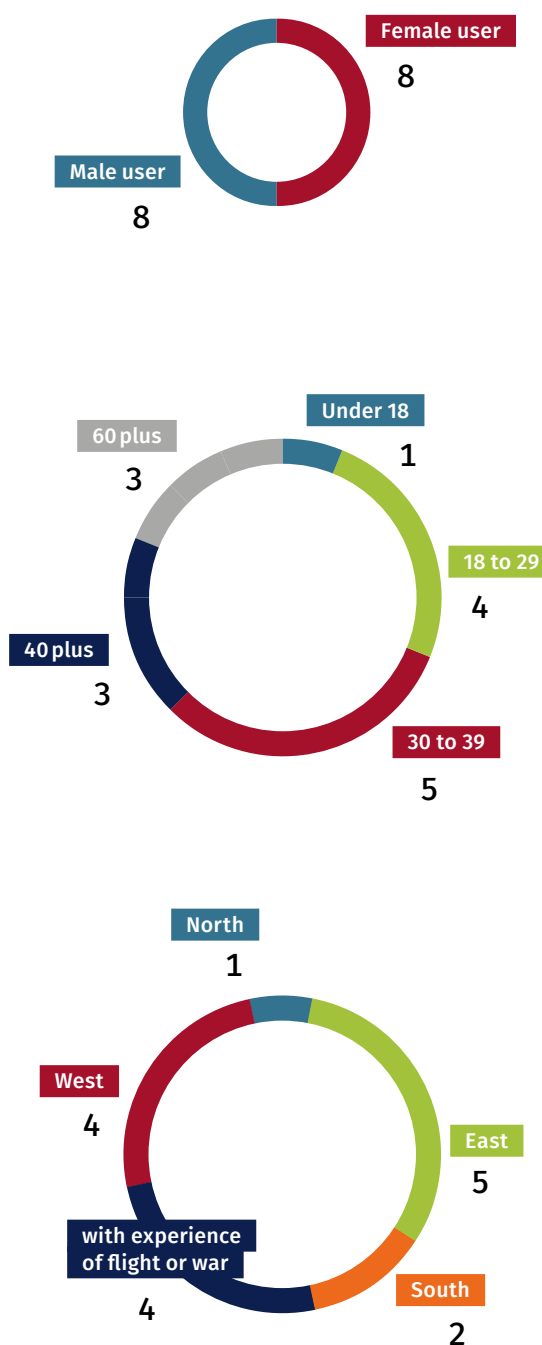
Figure 10:
Media companies at
which the interviewed
journalists work:

Approach

First, a diverse group of media users of varying ages and genders, from a number of different regions and with generally different life situations was assembled. We also made a concerted effort to select individuals who had experienced war and displacement themselves; these made up one-quarter of the group. All the media users live in Germany. A prerequisite for participation was that individuals regularly used German-language media (among others) to inform themselves. Media users were interviewed individually and in groups, for instance as to what they or group members had experienced during war and displacement.

Figures 11, 11a, 11b:
Sex, age, place of residence
of media users

Female user
8

Male user
8

60 plus
3

Under 18
1

18 to 29
4

40 plus
3

30 to 39
5

North
1

West
4

East
5

with experience
of flight or war
4

South
2

A second group made up of media content producers included freelance and staff journalists who work either as editors in German-language news departments or as reporters with practical experience as war or crises correspondents. Gender diversity and a diversity of work conditions were also taken into account when selecting this group. Media content producers were individually interviewed.

Figures 12 a), b), c): Sex, area of work, positions in media organizations

Female journalists 8

Male journalists 4

Non-profit media 1

Public media 4

Freelance 5

Privat media 2

Media consultant 1

Editor 6

Reporter 5
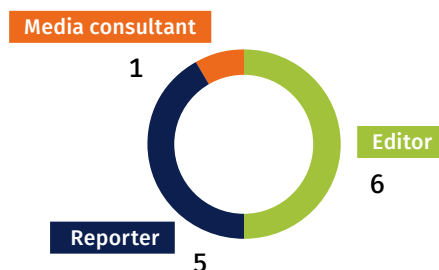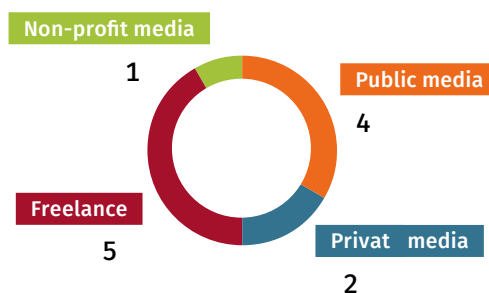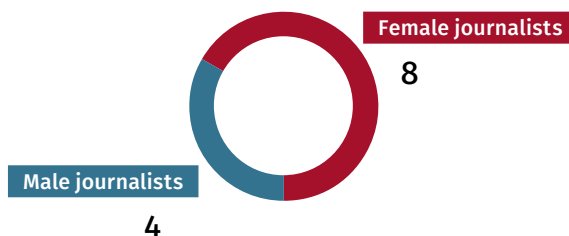
Discussions were guided, with the selection and order of questions loosely oriented on the path each interview took. After the interviews, statements were analyzed according to qualitative content analysis methods and summarized in the results section of the study. As the very personal experiences of participants often played a role in our in-depth interviews, we decided to make all quotes anonymous.

5.

War Coverage from the Media User Perspective

5. War Coverage from the Media User Perspective

The large majority of participants described themselves as interested in the news and appreciative of Germany's broad and diverse media landscape; however, individual consumption of information and media varied.

5.1 General Participant Information

Nearly all participants said they use public service broadcasters to inform themselves, and roughly half also use social media and messaging services. In terms of national media, users often referred to the online content offered by the German weeklies *ZEIT* and *SPIEGEL*. Regional media are not often consulted, and if they are, it is mainly due to some local relevance. Multilingual participants additionally inform themselves via foreign-language media outlets to obtain a more comprehensive picture, such as on the current state of the war.

Trust in Media

The majority of participants voiced a basic trust in German-language media offerings, with the nightly public television news show "Tagesschau" being singled out as an example of a trustworthy and reliable source across several platforms. Less trust was afforded to social media networks, where users said it was more difficult to filter out dis/misinformation. Trust is generally only given to known media brands or those that are suggested by friends.

Individual participants, especially those from Germany's eastern states (Berlin, Brandenburg, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Saxony-Anhalt, Saxony and Thuringia) voiced fundamental skepticism about the media. One participant from Leipzig said, "I can't trust those people [journalists] when I see particular stories that don't reflect things the way I have experienced them." He referred to news reports during the first years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and German reunification. From his point of view, the media presented western German audiences with a skewed image that persists to this day. He says he "avoids official media as much as possible." Although interested in keeping abreast of the news, he cancelled various newspaper subscriptions. He says he currently gets most of his information via YouTube but adds that he is "one of those types who will sit through an entire parliamentary debate."

One participant, a western German resident and a Russian-German (*Russland-deutsche*)—a general term for individuals who themselves or whose ancestors once migrated to and lived in Russia or former Russian imperial or Soviet territories—shared his view on the media habits of the Russian-German community, whose 2.4 million members make one of Germany's largest minorities.[29] He observes that, "A great number of them only consume Russian-language media, either because they don't really have a command of German, or because they trust them more [than German or European media outlets] as a result of their socialization or family tradition." That, says the man, "is the most interesting thing, because those people have an entirely different reality."

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[29] Panagiotidis, J. (2018, July 13). Wer sind die Russlanddeutschen? (Who are the Russian-Germans?). Federal Agency for Civic Education. https://www.bpb.de/themen/migration-integration/kurzdossiers/252535/wer-sind-die-russlanddeutschen/

5.2 Perceptions of Current War Coverage

Reports on armed conflict, such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine, are often afforded lots of time during news shows. Many participants said they felt war reporting often lacked a diversity of perspectives, something they found burdensome.

Psychological Stress

Nearly all participants reported experiencing emotional stress, primarily through pictures or video material. Still, they addressed different aspects of it. Some, for instance, described a heavy feeling of helplessness when looking at pictures of war. This was especially true of those individuals who had experienced war firsthand or been forced to flee because of it. One Ukrainian interview partner said that she consumed news practically non-stop at the beginning of the war. That negatively impacted her psychological wellbeing: "I was really depressed; we were all sick." After drastically reducing her news intake and only reading select information, she says she is doing better.

Even individuals who had never directly experienced war or displacement reported feeling stressed by news coverage, saying it prompted them to consciously limit news intake, especially photos and video. Some were quick to switch to print or audio channels to stay informed. Others avoid coverage of the war altogether. Many find it helpful to speak with friends about events or get involved by actively helping those who have fled to Germany.

Narrow Perspective and Negative Focus

More than half of our interview partners said they had experienced a certain one-sidedness in news reports. "It's always the same people making the same statements [on talk shows]," assessed one participant.

Other participants found regional imbalances when it came to the topics covered. One interview partner explained: "It's really a shame that you read endless reports on the USA, for instance an entire story on a bookshop in New York, but war is raging in other parts of the world, and we have no idea what's going on there."

Others still said they felt eastern German perspectives were often absent from news reports, especially regarding the war in Ukraine. "I don't want to claim that everyone in the East [of Germany] admires Putin. That's not true. Still, people definitely have a slightly different perspective. At least those who still remember life in the GDR," a young man from Saxony explained, adding that this perspective isn't often conveyed. In his view, one reason for this is that "media offices aren't usually based in the East."

Many also saw imbalances regarding the representation of different life situations. It is clear that some interview partners see no reflection of their situation in the news, whereas others' situations are overrepresented.

Another participant was critical of the media's traditional focus on problems: "Essentially it's a distortion of reality if you don't show enough of the initiatives that improve a bad situation." But a different interview partner saw things in another light, praising news outlets for their reporting on relief efforts and initiatives: "I know what's happening and see another, more personal side of the war. That, for instance, gets far less attention in the Turkish media than it does in German news shows."

Stereotyping and Lack of Context

Some interview partners saw it as a positive that contextual and background information has featured so prominently in current war coverage. Others said it's still not enough. One interview partner, referring to the invasion of Ukraine, asked: "How did it come to this? No one thought it would happen, not even my Russian friends." Others say they would like to see more information that parents or teachers could share with children.

Several interview partners said they lacked information and plausible explanations of the roots and impact of the war: "You can't judge a historical event like this war without knowing history. And that is nowhere to be found in almost any news reporting." Another said: "People are busy with the effects [of the war] but don't bother explaining its context. Why are gasoline or LNG [liquified natural gas] prices so high? They probably think people will immediately understand why. But they don't."

While many of those interviewed emphasized just how important the work of war correspondents on the scene is, some said they feel as if foreign correspondents are too strongly influenced by bias and personal points of view, such as, among others, the "perspective that we here in Germany are in the 'first world,' and that they [journalists] supposedly know exactly what is going on, presenting things as they see them," one respondent summarized. "You are always looking through someone else's glasses, rather than getting reports directly from locals," the respondent added.

In particular, journalists who do not speak the language of the region they are reporting from are often criticized for victimizing protagonists: "They present everything happening in the country in a pitiful way" and tend to show people in war zones "as weak, pitiable and needing help," and "as if they are somehow less valuable than people in Germany." In such instances, media users see journalists with little local knowledge falling back on overgeneralizing stereotypes: "There is no 'Syrian perspective,' no 'refugee perspective,' no 'German perspective.'"

5.3 Wishes and Expectations for War Coverage

During interviews we asked participants how they envision war and conflict reporting that could be described as appropriate and informative but not psychologically stressful.

Representation and Diversity

To feel well-informed, study participants said they would like to see representations of different points of view and different life situations. One example offered suggested "entirely normal people should be able to be on talk shows—really be part of the discussion." Several participants called for more diversity in German newsrooms in order to increase the range of perspectives.

Up-close and Personal Stories

Whereas the work of correspondents is generally respected, some media users still want to see more human-interest stories that show the challenges people face in war zones and how they cope with these.

Respectful and Solutions-oriented

A number of participants said straight out that they would like to see more solutions-oriented questions being asked and answered, as well as reports looking at a possible end to the war: "What's the quickest way to end the war?" Another said they would like to see journalists have a more empathetic attitude, saying correspondents should ask questions in a way "that makes people feel as if they are being taken seriously."

Another participant said it was very important to find solutions-oriented reporting "that highlights another perspective and makes clear that a lot is being done for peace. Where I can say: 'Wow! Those kind of people exist, too.'"

Several media users said they would like to see or hear more stories illustrating what tangible courses of individual action are available. "Sometimes I wish I had more information about how to constructively deal with the situation, and that more was being said about the possibilities that each of us has to actually do something," said one participant.

Background, Verification, and Transparency

One participant suggested that media outlets should embed links that would allow users to inform themselves further about mentioned individuals or organizations, much like they would on Wikipedia: "Something succinct."

Interview partners also expressed the desire for social media companies, which are generally less trusted, to include source links. Beyond that, some participants also thought media content producers should be more transparent about what they know to be fact and what not in cases where information cannot be independently verified. Together, these steps could help restore trust and expose dis/misinformation.
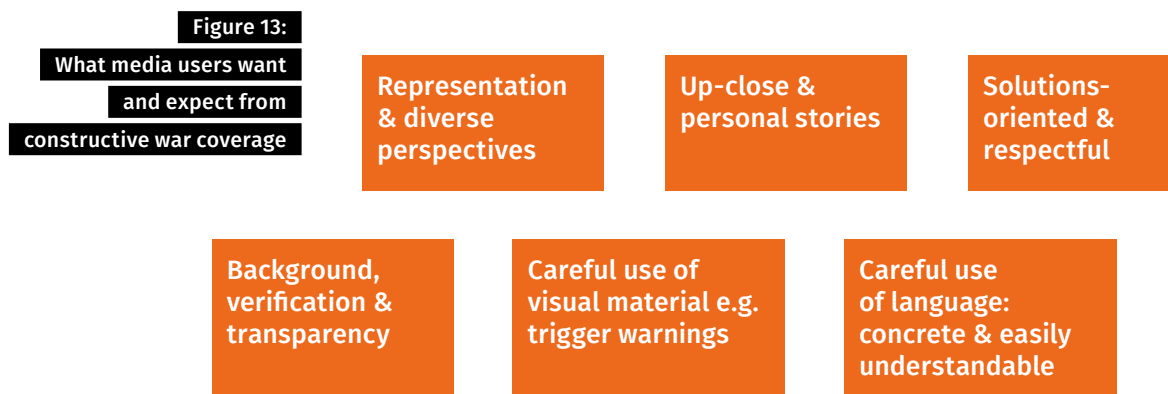
Trigger Warnings

Several interview partners said they would like to see warnings before being exposed to explicit war imagery. They say people should be able to choose what they want to see. One participant suggested blurring or pixelating potentially disturbing images as a rule and only making them clear upon active user request.

Nevertheless, there were contrary opinions. Some participants said it was very important that nothing be hidden so as not to downplay "what war really means." To do so, you "have to show it directly." One participant said he knew people who didn't believe civilians were being killed in Ukraine: "And for that reason those images should be shown, so people will finally see what is going on there."

Careful Use of Language

Individual participants said they would like to see journalists be more careful when it comes to language, for instance by critically questioning the use of military jargon. Moreover, it is important to explain foreign terms and use language that is easily understandable. Ultimately, precise word choice is key: "How are they describing the situation: Is it a war? A revolution? A civil war?"

Summary

Figure 13:
What media users want and expect from constructive war coverage

| Representation & diverse perspectives | Up-close & personal stories | Solutions-oriented & respectful |

| Background, verification & transparency | Careful use of visual material e.g. trigger warnings | Careful use of language: concrete & easily understandable |

Overall, we found that participants in our study maintained a basic trust in German media coverage, including reports on the war in Ukraine. Diversity and breadth of offer are appreciated, as well as the variety of platforms and modes of access to information.

Almost all our participants described themselves as "very interested" in news and current events. Still, due to the stressful experience of news develop-ments, a number of them have initiated targeted news routines that allow them to consume less news overall. One of the biggest drivers of this trend is individual psychological stress, especially that triggered by reporting on the current war in Ukraine. Such stress is felt very intensely among individuals who have experienced war and displacement firsthand.

Our interviews also made clear that each participant drew different conclusi-ons from their own personal experience of psychological stress. These ranged from the idea that the horrors of war need to be shown in full to the expres-sed desire for trigger warnings before media users are exposed to potentially disturbing content.

A number of our interview partners said they did not see their opinions or life situations reflected in the media. They want more diversity in newsrooms and hope that this will expand the range of perspectives, leading to a rejection of stereotypes and more background information produced in language that is simple and easy to understand. Participants agreed on the need for reports to go beyond the course of fighting and include more motivating personal stories and unfiltered insight into the realities of those impacted by the war. They also wanted reports on what is being done to end the conflict.

6.

Media Content Producer Assessments of Constructive War Coverage

b

6. Media Content Producer Assessments of Constructive War Coverage

In conducting expansive interviews with the journalists in our group, we sought to understand their assessments of constructive journalism's possibilities and limits with respect to war coverage, what they imagined the needs of their audiences to be and what they are perhaps already doing to take these into account, as well as the obstacles that potentially stand in their way.

6.1 Understanding of Constructive Journalism

All of the media content producers in our study had prior knowledge of constructive journalism. Overall, each said they engaged constructive approaches with varying degrees of intensity and differentiation, placing different aspects in the foreground.

Investigating Solutions

Most participants said a key characteristic of constructive journalism was its solutions-oriented approach. Some believe this includes the conscious decision to spread "good news," but others distanced themselves from the term. One editor-in-chief said constructive journalism is often seen as "nothing more than harmony sauce, to be poured all over everything." She said she sees it differently, however, namely as a way to show, "This news is relevant, and to tell us why it makes sense to get out of bed in the morning." One freelance journalist feels solutions-oriented journalism is often misunderstood to mean, "Now we're just going to show you that everything's fine, and how great everything is going." But that's not what it is about: "That would somehow be positive journalism. That exists, too, and it is also valid. But that's an entirely different approach."

Investigative research is often cited as an example of the practical application of constructive journalistic approaches. Audiences often rightly ask what consequences such research has, says a leading editor-in-chief: "We've had that with a number of really big research projects, whether it be the Panama Papers, Paradise Papers, etc., where we go back and ask: What has come of it? What has happened? Have laws been changed? Have people been arrested? That is a point that ultimately leads toward something constructive."

Present a Wealth of Perspectives and Offer Context

A majority of participants said they continue to believe that constructive journalism is characterized by a wealth of perspectives: "Moving away from 'black and white,' 'good and evil,' toward perspectives and nuance." One interview partner said this kind of approach can also challenge audiences to recognize things "are a lot more complicated" than one might first think.

Another emphasized that journalism must be accessible to all and therefore has to draw on many perspectives: "Even those that can't be easily reached—they still have the right to have their voices heard." Reporting, especially from poorer countries, still operates with far too many stereotypes, explains one journalist who lives and works in the Philippines: "Poverty is part of society, it's part of the problem. It's also part of the reason this country is drowning in populism, but it's not everything. It services clichés and is a sign of intellectual laziness in its exploitation of shocking images of destitute poverty."

To counter such stereotypes, it is imperative to provide real knowledge about context and thoroughly and clearly explain connections. One correspondent says the minimum aim of his work is for users to have learned something from it: "At the most basic level, media users have to understand what is happening." That takes more than "bits of information."

Initiate Constructive Debate

Several in the group also assigned great value to constructive debate in journalism. The dialogue character, according to one top editor-in-chief, offers "orientation and stability, in that you can ask questions and get answers." Another participant explained that in his view, constructive debate "is not about listing what the other is doing wrong, but rather saying, 'OK, how can we get together to solve this problem we have?'"

Overall, our participants' understanding of constructive journalism were clearly in step with the previously mentioned three-element framework that guides the approach: 1) solutions-oriented journalism that asks how things can be improved; 2) a wealth of perspectives that helps to understand connections and avoid stereotypes; and 3) constructive dialogue that seeks common ground and focuses on a shared path.

It was also striking just how clearly media content producers' understanding of constructive journalism aligned with the criteria for good journalism expressed by media users.

6.2 Possibilities and Limits of Constructive
Journalism in War Coverage

Another finding was that nearly all the group participants are already integrating constructive journalistic approaches into their reporting, primarily by focusing on solutions. When asked if and how such approaches could be integrated into war coverage, they gave very mixed responses.

Roughly half of participants believed that constructive journalistic approaches could be used in any situation. The remaining participants said they felt there were situations in which it would be impossible, as well as inappropriate, to use them, for instance when the primary aim of a report is simply to convey the news.

Furthermore, some participants expressed a general skepticism as to whether colleagues would recognize such constructive elements as appropriate for war coverage: "The combination of the words 'constructive war reporting' is incredibly disturbing for some. In their eyes there is something cynical about it." Another journalist agreed: He said it is wrong to take an intentionally nuanced approach that presents gray areas and refuses to make decisions at a time of "moral crisis." Those who don't take a clear stance destroy or hinder groups engaged in doing "the right thing," he added.

Focus on Solutions

One interview partner saw little feasibility in using solutions-oriented approaches in a war context. He said war "is the end of good," where solutions are "negotiated on the battlefield or at the conference table." However, another correspondent saw the structured analysis of historically comparable cases and successful peace initiatives as a constructive opportunity.

One experienced war correspondent said that despite the horrors of the current war in Ukraine, it was still constructive to report on resistance movements or civil engagement on both sides because that makes concrete actions and hope visible, for instance in the form of "the unbelievable willingness of volunteers to risk their own lives to help others."

Personal stories from people surviving, even mastering the dilemmas of being in harm's way are also constructive in the eyes of many participants: "When people perhaps reopen a shop … or when cities like Kyiv or Kharkiv reopen their theaters and people get dressed up and go out—there is power and meaning to that."

Another experienced war correspondent agreed with that assessment but warned about the danger of romanticizing events on the ground. From her perspective, war reporting has nothing to do with finding solutions but rather providing people with something more through journalism: "Our target audience is ultimately always the viewer and the reader. And when readers can find out more about the war, then we have found a constructive approach."

Nuance and Wealth of Perspective

Despite the broadly expressed critical opinion of participants regarding solutions-oriented approaches to war coverage, several participants cited numerous concrete ways in which one could constructively report on war. For instance, one could bring more nuance to reporting on the historical background and developments of the involved countries. An experienced war correspondent suggested that one could "start by describing things that went wrong along the road to war, what led to the conflict, so that future wars may be avoided."

Most of our interview partners said it was not only possible but also important to include various different perspectives in their work, even when reporting on war. One journalist called for expanding representations of actual life situations: "Those things exist, for instance when speaking with the mothers of Russian soldiers who don't know where their sons are....Really getting away from the black and white—these are the aggressors, these are the victims—towards more nuance. Showing both sides."

Within this context several participants pointed to the importance of exact knowledge of the situation on the ground: "You have to deal with the situation at hand or need to have been there a few times before you can operate in a solutions-oriented way." "Parachute journalism," or the short-term deployment of a correspondent who lacks local knowledge, is not really equipped to explain the complexity and background of events. And even if a person has lived in a country for a long time and speaks the language, solutions-oriented reports are only possible if that person has a deep understanding of the issues.

Constructive Dialog and Exchange with Affected Persons

In the eyes of many participants, direct exchange with affected persons is a key aspect of dealing with complexity. One reporter suggested directly approaching people on the ground to seek constructive feedback that can shine a light on one's own blind spots and skewed assumptions. Ask them, "What are we doing wrong in terms of reporting?" Their evaluation of such a question could take place over a special e-mail address with help from local colleagues, she said, "And then you do it better."

Another participant recognized yet unused potential at regional German newspapers as a path to positioning oneself as a trustworthy partner of the people. The journalist said it would be in the spirit of constructive dialog for regional media houses to invite readers to speak with experts about what is happening in the war, to pose questions, get answers and rid themselves of fears.

The overall societal debate on how to deal with the impact of the war here in Germany could also profit from constructive approaches, explained one participant: "If we don't say 'good' or 'bad' [in reference to the introduction of fuel rebates], all of the sudden we are having an entirely different debate." Public discussion also becomes far more profound when journalists can put research into what other financial or political levers might produce greater relief and why.

Empowerment Over Victimization

Several participants called for portraying those affected by war as capable of acting for themselves and emphasized that this is about choosing to empower perspectives rather than engage in disrespectful victimization. Moreover, one dampens the general feeling of powerlessness on all sides by not permanently portraying people in the area as helpless victims, one participant said: "Since I started doing that, I have the feeling, even if we cannot help directly, that at least I am not leaving anybody in Germany with the impression: 'The world is bad, everything is stupid, and there is nothing we can do.'"

Constructive Language in War

A number of participants found it important to underscore the fact that journalistic language can perpetuate or even contribute to escalating a conflict, especially in the context of war and crisis reporting. They explained that sometimes military language is used that scandalizes or downplays events, potentially leading to inappropriate simplifications or generalizations. One respondent said she actively tries to avoid that by seeking, for instance, "less drama, less escalation, more diplomacy, more objectivity."
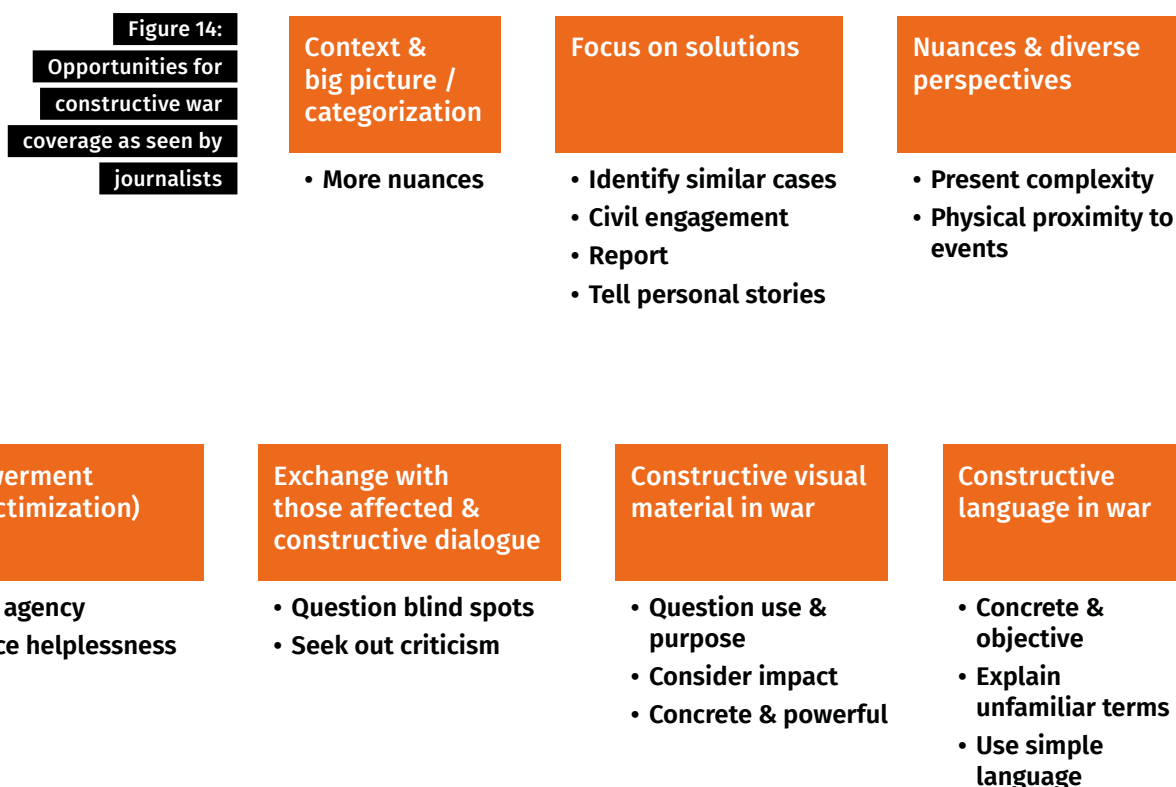
One participant, who herself was displaced by war, recalled that in the first weeks of the Russian invasion in 2022, much of the reporting from Ukraine "ran under the motto: 'This guy and that guy are going off to war, and they are really brave and courageous,' and so on. Or: 'This couple wed in military fatigues.' For me that's just super sad, and not beautiful at all … I think you have to be careful not to romanticize the war."

Another complained she felt journalists "often tend to write 'against' something rather than 'for' something, because I believe we just don't have the eye for it, or the fantasy, or the courage." From her point of view, journalists should be more thoughtful about how they formulate their words, to make clear where possibilities or potential lie.

Constructive Visual Material in War

Roughly half of those participating in our group felt that images showing human bodies and explicit violence should be the exception rather than the rule in war coverage. Yet others in the group said it was important to show the horrors of war, even if this shocks some, to make clear what exactly is happening. All participants agreed that the goal of presenting visual images should also be to give a realistic representation of war.

Most participants said that this fine line is best navigated by questioning the intent and purpose of an image: "I feel it's important to only publish a violent image after spending a good long time contemplating whether it has a specific purpose and whether or not other, perhaps similar images might not fulfill the same task." But journalists warned about using generically representative images as stand-ins, too. Participants said these carry the risk of "reinforcing lots of stereotypes, strengthening them, establishing them in the first place."

Figure 14: Opportunities for constructive war coverage as seen by journalists

Context & big picture / categorization
- More nuances

Focus on solutions
- Identify similar cases
- Civil engagement
- Report
- Tell personal stories

Nuances & diverse perspectives
- Present complexity
- Physical proximity to events

Empowerment (not victimization)
- Show agency
- Reduce helplessness

Exchange with those affected & constructive dialogue
- Question blind spots
- Seek out criticism

Constructive visual material in war
- Question use & purpose
- Consider impact
- Concrete & powerful

Constructive language in war
- Concrete & objective
- Explain unfamiliar terms
- Use simple language

6.3 Editorial Framework and Challenges

When wars break out, newsrooms and desks are quickly yanked from their daily routines. Nevertheless, in the medium and long-term, the structure and processes of normal reporting operations set the tone. We asked participants about their own experiences working within this framework.

Psychological Stress

Roughly half of the media content creators we interviewed said they had experienced stress within the context of covering war, and two said they have cut down on private news consumption as a way to manage fear.

In particular, those participants who frequently work as war correspondents said the situation changes one's own psyche. Constant confrontation with the suffering of others made them more "serious." Personally distancing oneself is not always easy: "You can't just walk away and say: 'My work is done here. Now I've finished my report. You are stuck here in the freezing cold, but I am heading back to my hotel.' You can't always do that. You just can't keep it up," said one veteran war reporter.

Another participant explained: "I used to be able to keep a distance. But to now see children forced to wait with their mothers in freezing temperatures in the middle of the night at the train station in Lviv, hoping that another train will come, and having no idea where their fathers are—that fate, the fact that families are being torn apart, really touched me.... That was the first time that I was sent to work in a war situation since becoming a father myself. That changes you."

Time Pressure and Research Effort

Nearly all participants spoke of time pressure in their daily work that extends beyond that of breaking news situations. Moreover, some said that they had experienced fatigue due to numerous change processes being initiated in newsrooms. Many content-producing teams have little desire to become involved in such changes. One individual responsible for programming said: "The flood of news tends to push innovation into the background of everyday business. It's not the case that ideas don't garner support, but that the number of news events or the number of tasks that are tied to them leads us to push what we call innovation or change off to the side."

Participants said time pressure in the face of a flood of news makes it more difficult to question traditional journalistic practices and experiment with constructive journalism approaches, especially as most respondents agreed that constructive journalism is more time consuming in its implementation.

One participant was more differentiated. Drawing on 10 years of professional experience, she sees constructive journalistic approaches as an entirely different way of working, one that demands time, especially during the "transitioning" phase: "Yes, it's true, sometimes researching solutions is really cumbersome. But sometimes it's just a matter of getting used to asking different, constructive questions." The freelance journalist says that over time she has attained a certain "basic knowledge" that makes constructive journalistic research easier.

A programming director pointed out that news journalists are often very dependent on what agencies publish on the wires, meaning agency focus on negative news events strongly influences coverage: "It's just that we are often triggered and driven by that, so crises dominate the news."

Journalistic Self-perception and Departmental Culture

More than half the interview participants said their journalistic self-image is largely characterized by a belief that "objective journalism and neutral reporting" really are possible and that "one can be a super neutral observer." Journalists with long-term experience using constructive journalistic approaches find this increasingly frustrating: "I don't want any more of those conversations that always end with someone saying, 'The world is just a bad place, and you can't package that constructively.' As far as I'm concerned that is a debate from 2018, and it's kind of over."

Overall, our participants said that basic knowledge of constructive approaches and practice in newsrooms was either not widespread or included a lot of baseless misconceptions. Constructive journalism, they said, was often mistaken for positive "Good News" or "Happy End" journalism. Reporters who pitched constructive topics, they said, often faced reservations, including accusations of "looking through rose-colored glasses and not really dealing with the problem" or of being "naive." Assertions of activism are also leveled once journalists start looking at solutions as critically as they do problems. Moreover, participants reported that many colleagues think they "first need to find the right topic" before they can report constructively: "That's a trap. Some people think, 'Yeah, I report on war, I can't approach that constructively,'" said one interview partner.
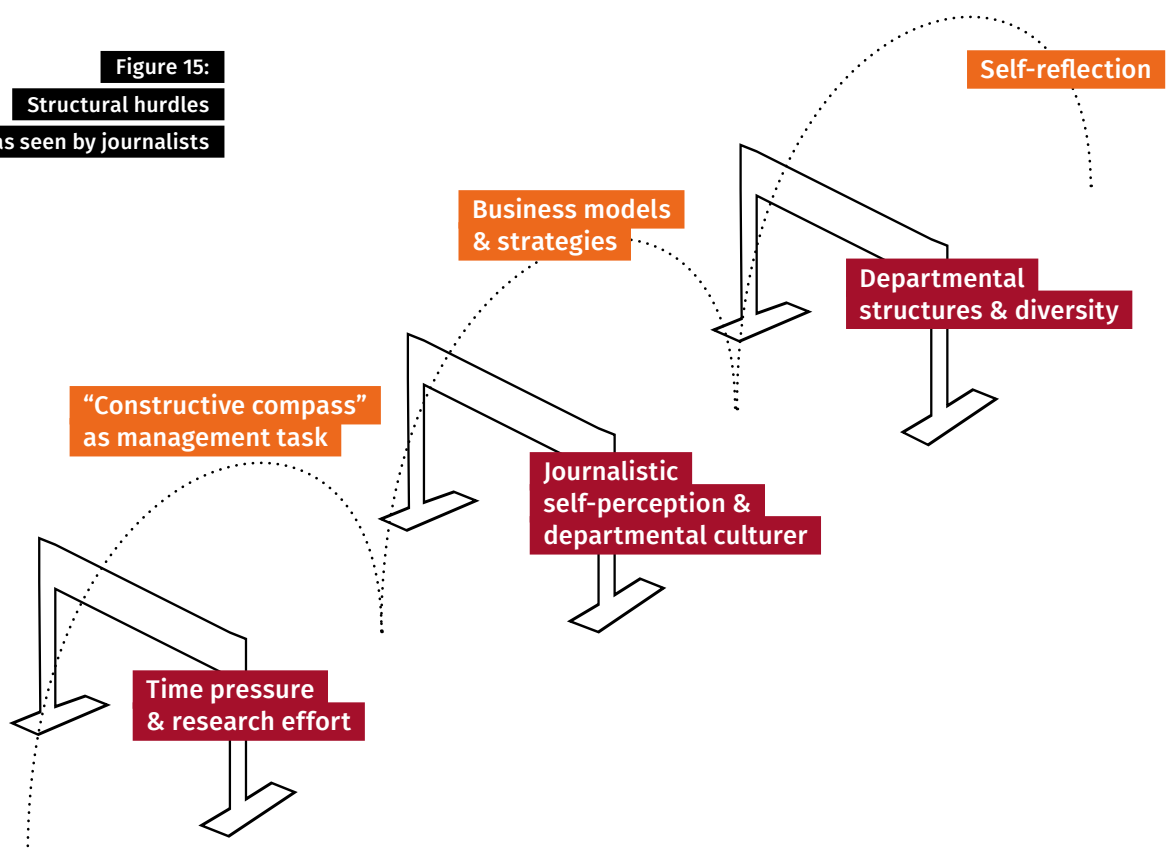
Another reservation is exemplified by the fact that editors are more likely to reject constructive approaches not necessarily aimed at making a subject less complex, said one respondent: "Nah, that's too complicated. Nobody will get it; it'll just confuse people. You're better off starting again, but a little simpler, less multi-layered." She says her readers never wrote to tell her, "That was too complex for me or too multifaceted." Instead, it was the opposite: "Many of them have a great need for complexity and contradictions, too."

To heighten editorial knowledge of the opportunities and limits of constructive approaches, numerous interview partners expressed the desire for more constructive journalism education and training, as well as opportunities for personal exchange. Offers designed to stimulate reflection on one's own socialization and personal views and how these shape the way one sees the world are also highly regarded. Moreover, several participants wanted training opportunities that offered practical tools and guidelines for constructive journalism: "Workshops and internal guidelines on how we can make a better, more constructive journalism possible," said one.

Departmental Structures and Diversity

Several interview partners said they wanted more diversity at the departmental level, in those key positions currently dominated by "men, older, mostly white." "I find desk and departmental teams are generally very old and are guided by a very outdated understanding of journalism…. Only certain people are allowed to speak on certain subjects, and you have to have attained a certain status before you can say anything," bemoaned one participant. A veteran war correspondent remarked: "The seats in our decision-making posts at foreign bureaus are occupied by people who were in Washington, in Paris, maybe in Beijing. And that was it. It's a bubble that leads to a privileged and distorted perception in terms of topics and their relevance."

Figure 15:
Structural hurdles
as seen by journalists

Self-reflection

Business models
& strategies

Departmental
structures & diversity

"Constructive compass"
as management task

Journalistic
self-perception &
departmental culturer

Time pressure
& research effort

Constructive Compass as Management Task

The introduction of constructive approaches in journalism is an example of digital transformation at the product level, for their use helps media content producers focus their sights on the needs of users more consistently than ever before. According to participants, responsibility for implementing such change at the work level lies primarily with management. Most say company leadership must establish favorable conditions and more training opportunities for constructive reporting, as well as making adequate resources available. For instance, some respondents said it is important to know whether the extra effort that goes into solutions-oriented research will in fact be compensated and whether management follows a "constructive compass"—a value and orientation system centered on constructive approaches—and honors such work. It was in this context that one editor suggested people like her could become "agents of change." Still, she said, individual editors only have limited impact "if editors-in-chief don't want this."

Business Models and Strategies

The success of constructive strategies in terms of relevance and media industry business models was not the subject of our interviews. Nevertheless, participants often broached this subject on their own, saying that business considerations above all else influenced the decision-making process of editors, ultimately guaranteeing that negative news events were consistently seen as the most relevant and newsworthy.

One freelance journalist said editors still assume people want to read traditional news ("the worse the event, the more news relevant it is"). Another, referring to publishers, said: "I think the main reason is that most say it [constructive journalism] doesn't sell subscriptions." A television colleague had a similar take: "The negative stories or the reports on problems or crises sell extremely well. So there isn't much pressure, neither economically nor from the content-producing staff, to do things differently." In his view, "The key is simple: It has to be successful. In the end, that's what counts. When someone responsible for programming sees that it works, that it is popular and is a USP [Unique Selling Point], then, I think, then it becomes a surefire success."

None of our respondents pointed to contemporary research showing how successful constructive journalism can be in terms of relevance and the monetization of media businesses. However, one did note: "There is a gap between what we know today because of research and what editors have been thinking about on this topic…. And I really believe what helps us, helps journalism as a whole, is concentrating on data, studies, demonstrability, comprehensibility."

7.
Conclusion

7. Conclusion

The overall trend that both media consumers and producers increasingly avoid the news as a result of intense personal stress is reflected in this qualitative analysis and can be seen as a healthy human self-defense mechanism against recurring experiences of stress due to media use. Psychological stress resulting from war coverage is particularly significant for those who have personally experienced war and displacement.

Regardless of the question of news avoidance, all media users with whom we spoke said they were generally interested in current coverage of the war in Ukraine. Most use and trust established media outlets and value the variety thereof. Those who expressed clear media skepticism based this largely on how little they felt their own life situation was represented.

The desire for coverage to include broader societal representations and additional perspectives was among the most-cited wishes expressed by media users. Some of those interviewed also want to hear more about possible solutions and concrete initiatives to ease the suffering of those people affected on the ground. Some want a more direct view of what is happening as well as more personal stories. Almost all voiced great interest in context and background information in order to better understand the news. Respondents also want news to be presented in easily understandable language. However, opinions differed on the use of explicit imagery: Some called for trigger warnings so as not to be unexpectedly exposed to the horrors of war, while others said it was important to show as clearly as possible what war really means.

Media content producers also see opportunity in solutions-oriented war coverage that incorporates a wealth of perspectives, but they point to impediments in the practical application. They also say not every topic can be approached constructively in the context of a war. Moreover, constant editorial deadlines, a traditional self-understanding of journalism and a hierarchically organized editorial culture hardly afford space for self-reflection and change. They say a rethinking is called for, as well as more training and networking, but they also demand proof that constructive strategies that align with user interests enjoy measurable public success.

Overall, the results of this analysis offer media content producers and journalists who report on war the chance to question traditional reporting templates in order to meet the information needs of today's media consumers and counter news avoidance. Constructive journalistic approaches provide a suitable framework for which to do so, as was made clear in our interviews with media consumers.

8.
Good Practices

8. Good Practices

In our study on constructive journalism in times of war, we have attempted to gain a deeper understanding of what media users want from war coverage through qualitative and guideline-based interviews. We aim to provide media professionals with practical insights into how they can shape their reporting on war according to user needs. To this end, we have compiled a "good practice collection". Find out which of the media users' needs are fulfilled and why we regard them as good practice example for constructive war reporting.

Medium

TEXT

How you can help Ukrainians – Vox

Which media user needs are met	Examining possible solutions
What it's about	This service article shows how citizens can help provide aid to Ukraine.
What we think works well	Good intent and good deeds are not one and the same, but articles like this one can help people make informed decisions.
By	Kelsey Piper
Publication date	March 1, 2022

Through Online Platforms, Thousands Open Their Homes to Ukraine's Refugees – Reasons to be Cheerful

Which media user needs are met	Examining possible solutions
What it's about	Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, online platforms like Host a Sister made it possible for thousands of people around the world to provide temporary housing to those forced to flee. Host a Sister primarily aims to provide women with safe accommodations, making it a valuable resource for women and children who had to flee while men stayed behind to fight.
What we think works well	The piece has many hallmarks of solutions journalism. The article was also featured in the Solutions Story Tracker by the Solutions Journalism Network.
By	Michaela Haas
Publication date	March 10, 2022

TEXT

The hospital train helping Ukraine's sick and wounded – Al Jazeera

Which media user needs are met

Examining possible solutions

What it's about

In Ukraine, Doctors Without Borders is using a special train to bring hospital patients from areas of active fighting to medical facilities in safer regions. The train, which is equipped with beds, generators for medical devices and an intensive care station, has already evacuated more than 1,000 people with acute treatment needs, including war-related injuries and chronic health problems.

What we think works well

The piece has many hallmarks of solutions journalism. The article was also featured in the Solutions Story Tracker by the Solutions Journalism Network.

By

Amandas Ong

Publication date

April 4, 2022

Ukrainian publisher makes books to survive – DW

Which media user needs are met

Which media user needs are met: Getting up close and examining possible solutions

What it's about

Despite bombing and shelling, the Kharkiv-based Vivat publishing house never stopped producing books. It even opened a new bookstore.

What we think works well

The piece uses a solutions-oriented approach to describe how a publishing house managed to continue its work during war while managing not to ignore problems and challenges. It includes powerful photos of a new everyday reality.

By

Anastassia Boutsko

Publication date

May 24, 2022

VIDEO

Migration: Spain's "Little Odesa" – DW

Which media user needs are met

Providing diverse perspectives and examining possible solutions

What it's about

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, nearly 100 refugees have settled in the Spanish town of Cariño. Some of them hope to expand their online business for spare car parts to Cariño, bringing both work and life to the community.

What we think works well

The video shares a perspective of refugees that is not often seen: the contributions they can make to a community.

Publication date

June 10, 2022

Length

5 minutes 30 seconds

MULTI-MEDIA

The 90 km journey that changed the course of the war in Ukraine – Financial Times

Which media user needs are met
Providing background information

What it's about
This multimedia page-scroll piece provides a visual representation of the Ukrainian counteroffensive using maps, videos, sound bites and accompanying text.

What we think works well
The piece uses interactive maps to show how the Russian occupation evolved between July and September, making the positions of Ukrainian and Russian troops easier for the user to understand.

By
Eleftheria Kousta

Publication date
September 28, 2022

Medium
Video, text, audio & interactive maps

AUDIO

One man flees Putin's Draft – New York Times

Which media user needs are met
Providing a wide range of perspectives

What it's about
The podcast episode presents a perspective that is rarely heard – that of a Russian who went into hiding to avoid having to go to war.

What we think works well
The host's Russian-language skills contribute to an intimate interview with the subject. The New York Times complements its Ukraine war-related pieces with two info boxes: One provides further background reading on the war, while the other explains how the company verifies information and analyses things like photos and social media posts. Communicating openly about what media content producers know, what they don't know and how they go about their work can help build trust among media users.

By
Henry Foy, Sam Joiner, Sam Learner, Caroline Nevitt

Publication date
September 29, 2022

Length
40 minutes

TEXT

'A flame was lit in our hearts' — How Ukrainians are building online networks for resistance and mutual aid – Waging Nonviolence – DW

Which media user needs are met

Examining possible solutions

What it's about

With little more than a desire to help and an internet connection, some Ukrainians are finding creative ways to resist the Russian invasion and fight for their future.

What we think works well

The piece identifies success factors that show why these approaches work.

By

Eleftheria Kousta

Publication date

August 15, 2022

VIDEO

Ukrainian postal workers brave danger – DW

Which media user needs are met

Getting up close and examining possible solutions

What it's about

Risking their lives, Ukrainian postal workers are delivering much more than mail and pensions. In areas previously occupied by Russian forces or places where infrastructure has been destroyed, residents need these and other deliveries more than ever.

What we think works well

Without leaving out the difficulties, the article shows how people in Ukraine do not give up and try to find solutions to the problems caused by the war.

By

Birgitta Schülke

Publication date

October 29, 2022

Length

3 Minutes 41 Seconds

9.
Appendix

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Figures

Figure 1: Social media interaction with stories on Ukraine from the start of Russia's invasion in February through May 2022

Figure 2: Interest in the news

Figure 3: Trust in the news

Figure 4: News avoidance

Figure 5: Reasons for news avoidance in all surveyed countries

Figures 6 a) and b): Increase in news avoidance due to the Russion Invasion of Ukraine

Figure 7: Reactions caused by psychological stress: Flight, Freeze, Fight, Tend-and-befriend

Figure 8: The three elements of constructive journalism

Figure 9: People like to read negative news, but they are more prepared to pay for positive/constructive news

Figure 10: Media companies

Figures 11 a), b), c): Sex, age, place of residence of media users

Figures 12 a), b), c): Sex, area of work, positions in media organizations

Figure 13: What media users want and expect from constructive war coverage

Figure 14: Opportunities for constructive war coverage as seen by media content producers

Figure 15: Departmental challenges and possible solutions as seen by media content producers

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Acknowledgements

The Bonn Institute

Through practice-oriented research, publications, events and trainings, the Bonn Institute serves the media industry's increased need for networking and knowledge exchange on constructive and user-oriented journalism. By working at the intersection of research and practice, the institute provides media professionals with empirically proven tools that can be used every day.

Our goal is to help journalism develop so that it is centered on peoples' interests, which is especially important given growing social challenges. An internationally connected non-profit, the Bonn Institute combines journalistic expertise with insight from media studies, user research, psychology and mediation.

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