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Article

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Abstract

In this article, we explore how entrepreneurial journalists from a wide variety of national contexts present 'impact' as one of the aims in their work. By exploring the variety, incongruences, and strategic considerations in the discourse on impact of those at the forefront of journalistic innovation, we provide a much-needed empirical account of the changing conceptualisation of what journalism is and what it is for. Our data show how impact becomes an ideologically as well as strategically driven endeavour as the entrepreneurs try to carve out their niche and position themselves both in relation to traditional counterparts and other startups. Ultimately, we provide empirical insight into a number of tensions that remain underlying in the discourse on constructive journalism, an increasingly popular conceptualisation that refers to a future-oriented, solution-driven, active form of journalism. We show how our interviewees marry different, commonly-deemed incompatible practices and values, thus challenging binary distinctions at the heart of conceptualisations of journalism, also perpetuated in the discourse on constructive journalism. As pioneers in the field, startups can be argued to inspire journalistic as well as social innovation, and furthermore push for a more inclusive understanding of the divergent conceptualisations and practices that together make up the amalgam that we call 'journalism'.

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Introduction

In this article, we explore the central focus of entrepreneurial journalists from a wide variety of national contexts on impact, and we relate this to the idea of constructive journalism, defined as future-oriented, focusing on solutions, and inspiring change in society (Gyldensted, 2015; McIntyre, 2015). With the journalistic field facing many challenges, we find that emerging forms of journalism seek to set themselves apart from mainstream journalism in how they *define* and *do* journalism. The emerging forms reveal the 'tension between change and stasis among actors competing to define the journalistic field' (Carlson and Usher, 2016: 566): both the discourse on constructive journalism and the discourses of entrepreneurial journalists that we researched stress how what they do is different, while 'reinforcing existing journalistic modes and normative commitments' (p. 568). In both, the idea that journalism needs to have an impact is central to the journalistic self-understanding. In this article, we critically investigate how entrepreneurial journalists position themselves in relation to other journalists and society by exploring their understanding of journalism's impact in society.

In both the discourses on entrepreneurial and constructive journalism, the argument is that society needs a type of journalism that moves beyond 'mere' reporting, in which journalists assume a more active role in the development of events reported on. At the same time, there are interesting differences between their conceptualisations of journalism. Our data show that journalists' perceived role in society is complex and that the way the notion of impact is used is not straightforward. We provide a layered and in-depth account of their use of the notion of impact, showing it is not necessarily monolithic or congruous. Moreover, it shows that innovation in journalism entails an interesting interplay between traditional and alternative conceptualisations and practices. Diverging from the mainstream holds strategic value and innovative potential, yet at the same time we should not underestimate the influence of traditional conceptions of journalism, embodied in established and esteemed journalistic organisations and journalists that are part and parcel of its shared self-understanding.

Our research data draw from interviews with 129 entrepreneurial journalists on four continents in the period 2014–2017.[1] They stem from two different projects that consider journalistic startup culture in comparative perspective: The research project 'Beyond Journalism', led by Mark Deuze and Tamara Witschge, and the project 'Entrepreneurship at Work' led by Tamara Witschge.[2] As part of these projects, interviews have been conducted by graduate students and researchers with freelance and startup journalists, as well as designers and web developers at the journalistic startups where relevant, in different countries. These semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview guide that focused on the everyday practices, routines and experiences of these journalists in relation to their understanding of journalism and its societal role. The interviews had an average duration of one hour.

With this sample we have not sought representativity, but rather geographic and professional spread to explore diversity in practices and whether patterns can be found. To this end, data were coded using a qualitative coding scheme. We investigate how those journalists who arguably are at the forefront of journalistic innovation consider journalism's role in society. This allows us to respond to the need for analytical clarity. Providing this account of how these journalistic innovators perceive and imagine journalism's role in society, we show the diversity in conceptualisations of the impact and role of journalism. Moreover, we interrogate how these pioneers relate their strive for impact to values and practices of traditional journalism. Through this we provide insight into a number of tensions that remain underlying in the discourse on constructive journalism, as we will highlight below.

We start with a discussion of the discourse on constructive journalism. Second, we discuss our results detailing how entrepreneurial journalists aim to have impact on different levels: that of the individual, community and society. Third, we discuss how journalists consciously position themselves by advocating alternative conceptualisations of journalism. The data show how journalists do not necessarily aim to present a cohesive or comprehensive definition of journalism, nor do their conceptualisations radically overhaul existing ways of classifying journalism. In the conclusion, we theorise these journalists as pioneers that actively and consciously construct a particular role for themselves in society – thereby challenging not only other journalistic practices, but also, indirectly, our analytic concepts.

Constructive journalism

The notion of what constructive journalism entails has not fully crystallised yet (McIntyre, 2015: 7), and there are different proponents and closely related conceptualisations, such as constructive news (Haagerup, 2014), positive journalism (Dagan Wood, 2014), and solutions journalism (McIntyre and Sobel, 2017). Here, it is not our aim to trace its history or give a comprehensive account of all the actors currently active in this field, but rather to outline some of its main features as expressed in the discourse on constructive journalism. Commonly, the term is suggested to refer to quality journalism that is 'future-oriented', or in the words of its advocates: constructive journalists ask, next to the traditional journalistic questions 'who, what, where, when, why', the question 'what now?' (Gyldensted, 2015: 175–181). It aims to highlight inspiring examples of people or events, discuss solutions and contribute to solving certain societal issues (Gyldensted, 2015; McIntyre, 2015 see also Hermans and Gyldensted, this issue). At the same time, proponents stress that constructive journalism is more than just covering positive news stories or only integrating a discussion of possible solutions (for an overview of the differences between constructive journalism and related notions, see: McIntyre, 2015: 13–16). Influenced by civic and public journalism (Gyldensted, 2015; McIntyre, 2015), proponents of constructive journalism aim to empower the public, providing them with information and tools that either strengthen their belief in change or facilitate their actual potential to bring about change (Gyldensted, 2015; McIntyre, 2015).

Since 2015, when she published her book *From Mirrors to Movers*, Gyldensted has become one of the most visible advocates of constructive journalism. Gyldensted bases

herself on 'positive psychology', a sub discipline of psychology that according to McIntyre (2015) aims 'to find and foster the factors that allow individuals, communities, and societies to thrive' (p. 9). Starting point is that traditional journalism, adhering to the objectivity regime, focuses too much on negative news about what is wrong in the world (Gyldensted, 2015: 5–6). This has resulted, Gyldensted (2015) argues, in people's increasing disengagement from important societal issues as the news gives them 'a feeling of hopelessness' (p. 6). She envisions a more active and involved role for journalists where they not only point out the wrongs, but also show how to resolve these wrongs (Gyldensted, 2015).

Constructive journalism can be argued to be a response to a number of issues in journalism that have been highlighted more widely in recent years. It, for instance, fits with the idea that the crisis of journalism is not simply technological or economic, but ideological (Broersma and Peters, 2013). It responds to the declining authority of journalists in society that has been observed (see, for instance, Bogaerts and Carpentier, 2013; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2017). Advocating the re-engaging of the audience and rekindling of journalism's role in democratic society, proponents argue that constructive journalism addresses a number of factors in the so-called 'crisis' of traditional journalism (Gyldensted, 2015; McIntyre, 2015).

In aiming to rethink journalism's connection to the audience and journalists' role in society, constructive journalism has been met with different responses, two of which we would like to highlight here. First, the emphasis on the need to offer solutions and commitment to inspire change in society is seen as negating journalists' independence and critical stance (Van Genugten, 2015; Winterbauer, 2017). However, advocates emphasise that their practice is not a form of one-sided coverage or 'biased' journalism, and should not be mistaken for advocacy journalism or activism (McIntyre, 2015; see also: Verheyden, 2015). Moreover, they explicitly state that constructive journalism upholds 'journalism's core functions i.e.: Serving as a watchdog, alerting the public of potential threats, disseminating important information in order to create an informed electorate' (Gyldensted, 2015: 13; see also: McIntyre, 2015: 15).

Interestingly, the second response also relates to this emphasis on the importance of traditional values and functions for constructive journalism and questions the innovative nature of constructive journalism. Dutch journalist Ward Wijndelts, for example, asks 'whether constructive journalism isn't "just" what every serious journalists does' (quoted in Smouter, 2017). Similarly, though generally positive about constructive journalism, Verheyden (2015) asks: adding the question 'What Now?' as proposed by its proponents, 'isn't that just journalism?' (similar questions are raised more implicitly in: Winterbauer, 2017). As these responses suggest, advocates of constructive journalism carefully position themselves between adhering to and diverging from 'traditional' journalism practices and values.

In this balancing act, this notion has gained considerable traction: journalism curricula and journalistic networks,[3] research centres,[4] faculty chairs,[5] and symposia and conferences on constructive journalism[6] suggest a growing popularity of this answer to the so-called crisis in journalism. However, focusing on the success of this new conceptualisation may conceal a number of important things. Let us highlight two: One, it seems that the popularity and attention is limited to specific regions, most prominently North-West

Europe. Second, though practitioners have been active in the development and promotion of the idea, constructive journalism, at least for now, seems to be much more a discourse than a set of coherent and identifiable practices. The question remains: how are values put into practice? This is particularly interesting given the balancing of tradition and innovation that constructive journalism proposes. Rather than accepting and reproducing the discourse on constructive journalism as if this is something that exists unproblematically, we need to critically explore this phenomenon empirically. Given the strategic positioning within the field by its proponents vis-à-vis other actors in the field, it is especially important to examine how constructive journalism's core features get translated into practice and explore its place in the field of journalism.

Doing so, we see that the core features proposed by advocates of constructive journalism are not exclusively reserved for the denominator 'constructive journalism', but are appropriated and practised more widely. Though the specific terms that the interviewees use to describe it vary, our data show a clear indication of the importance of the impact-driven conceptualisation of journalism among new forms of journalism beyond 'constructive journalism'. More importantly, our research allows us insight into the complex interplay of traditional and alternative values in journalistic understanding and practice: they show how the notion of 'impact' is multi-layered, and that the emerging forms of journalism both converge and diverge from traditional conceptualisations.

Aiming for impact in entrepreneurial journalism

As indicated, impact is a central theme in our interviews with 129 entrepreneurial journalists from various continents. It is important to note here that impact is not a monolithic concept: There are varying ways in which the interviewees refer to impact as main driver for their work. Interviewees use different phrasings, such as 'making a difference', 'doing something that matters', 'changing people's lives for the better', 'driving social change', 'causing a chain reaction', 'enabling people', and 'educating people'. While a clear way to differentiate, this is certainly not the only means by which they position themselves vis-à-vis established media and other startup media, but we focus on this here, as it provides an interesting starting point in relation to the recent popularity of the discourse on 'constructive journalism' (for a discussion of other ways in which startup journalists position themselves in the field, see, for instance, Carlson and Usher, 2016; Harbers, 2016; Wagemans et al., 2016).

The wish to create a form of journalism that is useful for their audiences and has an impact on society is a recurrent theme in the interviews. However, where the discourse on 'constructive journalism' suggests impact to be an unambiguous or simple concept, our data show it to encompass a variety of meanings; there are differences in the types of impact that the interviewees seek or say to aspire. Here, we identify three levels, which we map onto the data: the level of the individual, of the community and of society as a whole. This is not to suggest a hierarchy or that these are all the ways in which impact is relevant to our interviewees. However, there was a striking difference in the foci that journalists had when talking about the type of impact they aimed for, which shows that impact is not necessarily a straightforward concept. The discussion here about the levels of impact that interviewees aspire to, is thus not to suggest a neat distinction, but rather to show the diversity present.

The many faces of impact

Our data show that impact comes in many forms and guises. First, journalists aim to be helpful for people on a very concrete level. Journalists strive to produce stories that are directly relevant for their audience. This means that audience members need to be able to recognise how a story relates or influences their own everyday lives. As the following quote shows, this goal of impacting their audiences directly affects the selection of their stories, making it an important consideration in determining what is worthy of coverage and what is not:

> I think that our goal is to say: 'Here's a story, and here's how it directly impacts you'. And if it doesn't impact our readers, if it's not something tangible, that makes them say: 'Okay, this is how it's going to affect me', then it's not really for us [to cover]. (Editor,[7] Corner Media, USA, 2016)

Impact at the individual level refers to journalists' desire to help people in their day-to-day lives by giving information about such things as traffic in town or upcoming events (see Eldridge and Steel, 2016 on user's perspectives on this). Such information is provided through short announcements or listicles, which enable people to anticipate these events and structure their everyday lives on a practical level: 'It's having useful, just the most useful tangible things, like event listings that are accurate that actually tell people what is going on in town tonight' (Editor, Alaska Dispatch News, USA, 2016).

Impact on the individual level, however, also involves startups helping to equip individuals to deal with bigger problems, whether by offering advice, such as on how to prevent soil erosion, or by providing tools that people can use to improve their daily lives, such as the Medicine Price Comparison Tool and the Domestic Workers Tool developed by *C4SA*. Startups aim to provoke social change by presenting information in new ways, and making existing information more accessible, including through databases and tools. Impact on the individual level is aimed at *empowering* individual people by providing useful information, not only so they can improve their living conditions, but also to strengthen their position as citizens (see also Baack, 2015). This focus on strengthening the individual's capacity as citizens shows how even impact at the individual level spills over into the other levels, and how it is intertwined with impact at the community and societal level.

Second, we identify a community level: startups aspire to have impact on the people journalists see and interact with, who are close to them either geographically or 'digitally'. The following quote of this New York–based local editor illustrates nicely at which level they are seeking to have an impact:

> You won't bring down Nixon or anything like that. But it looks like there's going to be a new traffic safety light going up in the community that's going to make a dangerous intersection safer, partly because of an article I wrote. (Editor, Corner Media, USA, 2016)

This type of community-oriented journalism includes a wide variety of activities, such as opening up possibilities for dialogue between the community and journalists or among different members of the community, connecting people, and sharing knowledge within the community, educating people in the community, bringing people in

the community closer together, learning about each other, but also doing journalism to prevent small businesses from closing or to get a dangerous playground sorted (see also Hess and Waller, 2017).

We see that at this level, impact refers both to journalism that is used to *solve concrete problems* and to *promote inclusiveness*, so as to strengthen the local community. This becomes clear from this quote of an Alaskan editor, who states he is 'happiest' when:

> Producing work that connects with the community, makes the community a better place, that pulls the community together, that is memorable for a lot of people, that is productive, that makes the community, that solves the problem. (Editor, Alaska Dispatch News, USA 2016)

In line with constructive journalism's aim to empower the public and facilitate and inspire citizens to solve issues they encounter (Gyldensted, 2015), journalists aim at bridging the divides they see in their communities, helping their communities overcome obstacles, giving voice to those who are not being heard and help making visible those who have been overlooked by existing media. As such, these startups seem to share a political agenda with community media, which also aspire to give voice to and strengthen the local community in which they are based (cf. Fenton et al., 2010).

Most of these journalists come from startups that differ in organisation from their community media colleagues, in terms of business model, which is much less based on public funding, and much less relying on the role played by amateurs and volunteers in the startups (cf. Fenton et al., 2010). Nevertheless, a number of these startups do involve community members in content creation, encouraging people to actively contribute to the content, so they feel part of the outlet as if it were a community itself. In addition, there seems to be a greater involvement of the journalists with the people in their community than is the case with traditional top-down legacy media (cf. Lewis et al., 2014). *MMU Radio*, for instance, wishes to disseminate the university's research for the benefit of that community, and aims to facilitate an exchange of information by allowing listeners, students and researchers to come to the studio and broadcast something themselves:

> If a villager here is able to come in the radio station, [he could] broadcast a program, or possibly teach the rest of the communities better methods of agriculture, or how to improve the agriculture in the vicinity here. (Radio host, MMU Radio, Uganda, 2016)

Where bigger newsrooms have moved out of the cities that they write about, and local news tends to be less and less locally produced (cf. Fenton et al., 2010), we see that the 'community' is a concept that is very much alive for these startup journalists, whether it relates to the group of people they want to belong to, connect to, give voice to or whose lives they seek to improve. Moreover, some of them explicitly state they are fulfilling a role in local journalism that has been neglected by large legacy outlets.

Third, we identify the aspiration to have impact at the societal level. This connects to the broader concept of the common good, where the startups' activities are seen as constructive for an abstract national or international community, or are conceived as a public service. What is of interest here is that though it touches upon a similar sentiment, it also

differs from the professional ideology of journalism, which traditionally includes a notion of safeguarding democracy and providing a public service (Deuze, 2005). Although the discourses that ideologically position journalism refer to keeping the powers in balance, or performing a watchdog role, here this political involvement takes on a new dimension for the journalistic startups in our data. In the interview material, this presents itself as advocacy for social causes, as activism against government policy, and the organisation of and participation in demonstrations.

We can see this, for example, when a *Radio Sagarmatha/Naya Pusta* editor from Nepal explains how they were involved in campaigns, demonstrations, and even lawsuits against non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the government, or corporations:

> We have fought with the government in the court of law, we have been against some hydro powers. If those were established then it could have harmed a very rich and diverse city in Eastern Nepal. (Editor, Radio Sagarmatha/Naya Pusta, Nepal, 2016)

And even if the journalists do not go as far as to involve themselves in a court of law, the French *Mediapart* articulated support for movements like the recent 'Nuit Debout',[8] and a campaign against the construction of a dam in an ecological area,[9] and co-organised an event to defend freedom of information in Greece.[10] These examples show how they combine activities that are traditionally labelled more journalistic with those more activist (see also Benkler, 2013 on the relation between these).

Understanding impact in context

Aiming to show the multi-layered and diverse nature of the concept of impact, we need to address the diversity in historical, social, political and economic contexts of journalists. As noted above, our research locates constructive journalism in a limited geographic scope, most notably Western and affluent democracies. Our interviews with entrepreneurial journalists worldwide show that when we want to understand the diversity of the conceptualisations of journalism, we need to situate the concept of impact in its contexts (see also Nerone, 2013). The journalists in our sample highlight the context from which they are working as an important conditioning factor in terms of the type of impact they can make.

In this light, we see that *MMU Radio* in Uganda primarily focuses on giving people basic information and educating them about essential needs, whether it is getting a fair price for their goods, achieving a successful harvest, or healthy sanitary conditions. *Code4SouthAfrica* (C4SA) in South Africa is creating tools to help citizens compare the different prices for medication and to decide on a fair remuneration for their domestic workers. *Mediapart* in France and *IRPI* in Italy also want to educate people, but are focused more on exposing and changing what they believe is a malfunctioning government system. For entrepreneurial journalists in Hungary, the belief in change is altogether more limited, and as such aspirations are adjusted accordingly. As a Hungarian journalist (anonymous) notes: 'if the situation doesn't worsen, we're apparently having an impact'. In Nepal, similarly the sentiment is that change is hard to establish. This

reflects the similar discursive repertoires invoked in talking about the aims and aspirations of emerging players in journalism.

If we take into account the diversity of national, economic, cultural, and political contexts that journalists work within, we see that we need to contextualise the main features identified in the discourse on 'constructive journalism': what is activism in one context, is not necessarily so in another, what is an act of protest or labelled as subjective reporting in one instance, may be conceptualised as empowering audiences and watchdog reporting in another. *C4SA*, for instance, defines being activist as having a social agenda and their members state that their goal is to achieve tangible change in society. In other instances, activism is defined as highlighting one side of a story, a view *Radio Sagarmatha/Naya Pusta* puts forward:

> In our part of the world the richer people have access to and they control the news. They control politics. And they control the information that should reach the people. And then we are the people who inform them: 'this is not true'; 'there is another part of the story'. (Editor, Radio Sagarmatha/Naya Pusta, Nepal, 2016)

Beyond the diversity of contexts, it becomes clear that the interviewed journalists do not see it as their task to 'simply' produce output, 'relaying' what is going on in the world; they want to make a difference, inspire change, leave a mark, and make their work matter. And yes, in some cases, the journalists state they do so as activists, doing activist work, or feeling involved in a 'movement' rather than journalism per se. Some use the term *subjective*, instead of activist, to refer to those instances where they give more attention to some angle in the story because they deem it important, but underrepresented in traditional outlets. They describe how they are trying to increase engagement, encourage dialogue or educate their audiences. They refer to caring about the subjects and the communities they cover as an important characteristic of a journalist. We argue here, that rather than understanding that as part of the age-old debate between subjective, biased and objective reporting, or labelling it as activism rather than journalism, we need to understand these within the contexts that journalists are working from.

Re-imagining journalism beyond dichotomies

We have shown in the above how journalistic entrepreneurs throughout the world focus on making a difference, having an impact. We have also shown that both the forms of making an impact as well as the contexts from which these actors are operating are diverse. These ways of viewing impact not only show diversity in the way in which impact is conceptualised, but also in the conceptualisation of what journalism is and what type of journalism is needed in society. There are interesting parallels with the way in which authors and practitioners of constructive journalism imagine the practice and aim of journalism. These parallels show the complexity that underlies the practices and understandings of journalism. As Ryfe (2006) states (p. 203), the rules or norms that guide production are in flux, and there is both 'great consistency and great variability', and this becomes clear from our research too.

Entrepreneurs combine and navigate between traditional and alternative values seemingly effortlessly. What is more, the interviewees show a reflexivity that indicates an awareness of the latitude available to them to re-imagine journalism and its societal role. Here, we address these in turn. First, in terms of the self-understanding, we see that in the discourses of entrepreneurial journalism, the distinction between doing activism and 'active' journalism is recognised but not necessarily experienced as tension. Whereas constructive journalism proponents highlight that what they do is not activism, our interviewees do not seem to have as much qualms with taking on the title of 'activist', as the following quote illustrates:

> In college I used to march with the student organisations before I turned into a student journalist. [...] Journalism affords you the opportunity to actually engage with leaders across the table, which is more civil. I'd say that I'm more of a sophisticated activist. I won't be on the streets, [...], I will not be jumping around, I will be in an office, but what I am doing is for the benefit of you. (Freelancer, C4SA, South Africa, 2014)

At the same time, our data show the multiformity of new journalistic endeavours, some of which focus on 'simply' providing 'facts':

> There will be a higher focus on just a factual education and then allowing the reader to make conclusions on their own. (Analyst, Inka Binka, USA, 2016)

What makes our data particularly interesting is that they show that we cannot simply continue the perceived dichotomy of 'active' versus 'passive' or 'neutral' versus 'activist' to analyse the startups as the interviewees' understandings and practices do not easily or necessarily fit only one of the two categories (see also Eldridge, 2018: 35–36). The journalists marry or navigate between these forms with a seeming ease and elegance. For them, journalists do not necessarily need to choose between 'stating facts' on the one end or actively proposing and pushing forward a solution on the other. Both have their place and are not necessarily conflicting for the interviewees. This is clearly illustrated by a senior editor at De Correspondent when he reflects on their campaign to get people to switch to a bank that focuses more on sustainability. For him pointing out 'what is going on in the world' and propagating a certain solution or line of action are not incompatible:

> Ultimately, it should remain journalism in essence as it is about gaining insight from the world. So that can also be 'these are the problems you will encounter, and this is what you have to take into account'. That is gaining insight from the world. And it is not a problem if that is related to 'do this [switch to a different bank]' (Senior editor of De Correspondent, Netherlands)

Interestingly, this editor's reference to the 'essence' of journalism that needs to be upheld suggests that there are limits to what can be considered journalism. At the same time, though, the quote shows what is more widespread in the interviews: the breaking away from the idea that certain practices are incompatible with each other (see also Benkler, 2013). In their discourses, interviewees combine what is commonly deemed to

be contrasting, such as well-known oppositions like 'objective' and 'subjective', 'neutral' and 'committed', or 'detached' and 'involved'.

What is more, the interviewees show a remarkable understanding of this:

> What also interests me is that journalists strive to be objective. It is never really the case, but you strive to tell an objective story and inform people. But if you combine journalism with activism, you've got a goal you want to achieve. That combination interests me. How to combine striving for a goal with striving for objectivity. (Developer, C4SA, South Africa, 2014)

In general, the data point to a conscious positioning within the field by the journalists. Their awareness of their own positioning, or their deliberate construction of what is journalism seems to provide the journalists with a certain leeway in their practices and self-understanding. They actively experiment and test the boundaries of what journalism is, and we could argue that this in a way 'liberates' the entrepreneurial journalists: It allows them to break free from the naturalised and static conception of journalism that has developed over time (cf. Deuze and Witschge, 2018). Though each startup needs to consider its niche, there seems to be much more space for alternative and rich conceptualisations:

> There are a hundred different definitions of it [strong journalism] as far as I'm concerned. It's being useful to the users, to the readers, it's explaining the world, it's accountability journalism that holds public institutions accountable, holding a mirror up to the community, it's providing strong breaking news coverage of events that are happening as they are happening. (Editor, Alaska Dispatch News, USA, 2016)

It is perhaps precisely the fact that these startups need to find a niche audience (Singer, 2017) – rather than cater to and compete for the general public – that makes them more open to alternative conceptualisations of what journalism is and what it is for. As such, we see that the definition of what journalism is, is connected to the actual audience they are targeting and this can vary even for different parts within the same company, as the case of *The Post Online* from the Netherlands illustrates: for their magazine, the niche is quality journalism 'for people who are willing to consume and pay for it', for their online free output it is the 'critical tone of the content', a freelancer explains (Interview conducted in 2015).

Such niche-driven understandings of journalism suggest that understandings and practices are not only ideologically driven but also influenced by strategic considerations. They involve conscious targeting and catering to particular audiences, setting themselves apart from competitors. This puts the traditional distinction between commercial and public interests served by journalistic organisations (Phillips and Witschge, 2012) in an interesting new light. It is important, though, to consider that this is very much context-dependent. Though the startups are all connected by their ideological stance to have impact in society, the economic, political, and journalistic contexts differ greatly and thus also their ability and desire to strategically and financially position their startups.

Conclusion

In this article, we have considered a specific type of journalists, entrepreneurs, to explore some of the strands in the discourse on constructive journalism. What makes this group of journalists particularly interesting is that they can be seen as pioneers in the field (see also Hepp and Loosen, 2017), thus shaping not only the content of media, but also its form and thus its role in society. Hepp defines pioneering communities as 'experimental groupings related to new forms of media-technology related change and collectivity formation' (Hepp, 2016: 920). They 'have a sense of mission' and have 'a sense that they are at the "forefront" of a media-related transformation of society as a whole' (Hepp, 2016: 924–925). This is very much the case with entrepreneurial journalists too. They see it as their mission to seek innovation, both technological as well as ideological, to further the societal role attributed to journalism (for a reflection on how entrepreneurial journalists explore the affordances of digital technologies and expand the definitions of what journalism is, see also: Witschge and Harbers, 2018). Furthermore, they are aware of the role that they play not only in society, but also in defining what is journalism. This reflexivity is characteristic of pioneering communities where knowledge is 'highly 'reflexive' given that the pioneers 'are engaged in a continual process of interpretation of themselves' (Hepp, 2016: 927).

Our exploration of how these pioneers understand and actively construct their role in society provides an important empirical counterpart to the discourse on constructive journalism. As we have discussed above, the discourse on constructive journalism suggests that impact is a straightforward notion that sets constructive journalism apart from traditional forms of journalism. Of course, strategically this makes sense, as traditional journalism provides a clear reference point against which constructive journalism can position itself, and, as all specific forms of journalism tries to, make its boundaries distinct (Eldridge, 2018: 50–53). Yet, if anything, our analysis shows how emerging players in the field combine, complement, and interweave seemingly opposing practices and values, moving beyond the traditional/alternative divide. Rather than seeing the marrying of seemingly opposing values and practices as necessarily problematic, such diversity and divergence in practices and values allow us to see the complexity and variety that is existent in the field (Deuze and Witschge, 2018).

Acknowledging that notions such as 'constructive journalism' are not neutral or unambiguous, we can start to see how they are used and appropriated by journalists to anchor, inspire and delimit practices. As eloquently expressed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), the concepts people refer to are informative about how they look at the world:

> The concepts that govern our thought are not just matters of the intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning, down to the most mundane details. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. (p. 3)

The discourses and practices employed by the journalists we interviewed here, as such do not only perform a strategic role in allowing them to find their niche, to gain cultural or economic capital, but also challenge us as researchers. Where we have the tendency to neatly categorise the tensions, trying to 'explain' contradictions, these

practices show us, or perhaps highlight and remind us of the complexity of the field (see also: Costera Meijer, 2016).

We have shown how the practices and discourses of entrepreneurial journalists both confirm and challenge traditional conceptualisations and delineations. This shows how neither the discourse on constructive journalism, nor the definitions that entrepreneurs hold of journalism provide any definitive answers to the long-lasting debate about what journalism is and what it should be. The interviewees remind us that the practice and conceptualisation of journalism is an on-going, context-specific, and diverse process, rather than a static and fixed project and that dichotomies long put at the centre of our understanding and analysis of journalism are not as informative as we consider them to be (see also Witschge e t al., 2018)– whether they relate to 'neutrality' versus 'engagement', 'subjectivity' versus 'objectivity' or 'informing' versus 'activating' the audience. Our challenge is to develop ways to theorise concurrent practices that we have previously labelled 'incompatible' or 'contradictory' and embrace the divergent conceptualisations and practices that together make up the amalgam that we call 'journalism'.

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3. See, for instance, Constructive Journalism Project aiming to provide journalists with knowledge and skills: https://www.constructivejournalism.org/about/; Windesheim University of Applied Sciences in Zwolle, features constructive journalism centrally: http://www.denieuwereporter.nl/2017/02/waarom-windesheim-heel-bewust-kiest-voor-constructieve-journalistiek/; Verspers is offering Masterclasses on the topic: http://www.verspers.nl/openeyes/
4. See, for instance, the Constructive Institute, Aarhus University, https://constructiveinstitute.org/The-Institute/About-the-Institute.

5. See, for instance, Windesheim University of Applied Sciences' appointment of a chair in constructive journalism: see https://constructievejournalistiek.nl/.

6. For instance, at Aarhus University, Denmark (October 2017)); Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), Brussels, Belgium (December 2016) and University of Applied Sciences, Zwolle, the Netherlands (December 2016).

7. Many of the interviewees do not refer to themselves using job titles typical for the journalistic profession, such as 'editor' or 'reporter'. Some of the interviewees do not recognise themselves as journalists at all or only partially. Moreover, even those who do have 'journalistic' job titles, often indicate that their actual work is not properly reflected by this job title, as they fulfil a variety of tasks within the startup.

8. 'How can the 'Nuit Debout' movement become bigger?', https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t2amNMI07Jk, and Edwy Plenel: 'nous sommes avec le 32 Mars et la Nuit Debout' [from 41'15] (accessed 3 July 2017). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lVtRSBAGPMk, consulted on 3 July 2017.

9. 'The reasons why we should question the utility of the Sivens Dam', https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1_U48cKLZLM, (consulted on 3 July 2017).

10. https://rsf.org/fr/actualites/appel-du-chatelet-pour-la-grece (accessed 3 July 2017).

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