

Institution: University of Southampton		
Unit of Assessment: 17 Business and Management Studies		
Title of case study: 17-05 Constructive Journalism: using the psychology of business ethics to support the rise of a more positive, solutions-based approach to news reporting and storytelling.		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2013-2018		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Denise Baden	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Professor of Sustainable Business	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: May 2005 – present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: March 2015 – July 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Research into experiential learning at Southampton Business School found that positive solution-based news stories are more effective than catastrophic stories or cautionary tales at inspiring ethical/sustainable behaviour and mindsets. This research has had impacts in the news sector, raising public awareness of the adverse effect of the dominance of negative news and supporting the design of high-profile initiatives by leading media organisations (including BBC and The Guardian) that have engaged several million people in a more constructive, solutions-focused approach to journalism. The research has informed the content of ‘constructive journalism’ training in the UK and Europe. Sustained media engagement by Professor Denise Baden resulted in the research inspiring a best-selling book on news and mental health; supporting the evidence base for a constructive journalism project within the voluntary sector; and shaping a new approach to criminal justice reporting in England and Wales. The work also informed the design of projects that encourage writers to create positive visions of what a sustainable society might look like, in response to the climate crisis.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>The 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development published a commitment to embed ethics, corporate social responsibility and sustainability in business education curricula. Beginning in 2013, research by Baden set out to explore the most effective way to elicit a more ethical and sustainable mindset among students. An initial study drawing on learning and social psychology theories, posited that pedagogical methods exposing students to businesses that operated in an ethical manner would encourage them to follow their lead. Baden found that the opportunity to work with social entrepreneurs or ‘responsible’ business professionals provided students with inspirational role models and positive learning opportunities [3.1].</p> <p>Baden explored positive role models further through a study involving 96 undergraduates in business ethics at Southampton Business School. One group was exposed to positive role models of ethical leaders; the other was exposed to cautionary tales of business scandals. Halfway through the module, the classes were switched. The students were asked to reflect on their differing responses. Baden found that exposing students to positive role models elicited beliefs that business can be both ethical and successful, while stories of scandals had the opposite effect. Drawing on Ajzen’s theory of planned behaviour, it was argued that negative depictions of business can lead to less ethical behaviour and perpetuate descriptive norms of business as typically unethical, as cynicism correlated with less ethical intentions. Some students commented that the media’s focus on scandals had damaged their faith in business, and that positive role models were not sufficiently publicised [3.2].</p> <p>This inspired Baden to explore the effects of exposing 259 undergraduate students to positive and negative versions of similar news stories. Negative stories included the war in Syria and coral reef destruction. Positive stories included peace talks with Iran and oceans becoming cleaner. She found that positive news gave rise to significantly higher motivation to take positive actions, such as adopting pro-environment practices. Conversely, the more anxious or pessimistic the stories made participants feel, the less motivated they were to act [3.3, 3.4]. Baden interviewed news editors and journalists and found relatively little awareness of the consequences of the negative bias in the news. However, some did recognise that negative bias can create feelings of disengagement and powerlessness, and that a backlash against positive news as being fluffy or propaganda had gone too far [3.3, 3.4].</p>		

In a further study run with Karen McIntyre at Virginia Commonwealth University (US), 480 US participants were exposed to the same news story that had been manipulated to elicit positive, neutral or negative emotions. Findings revealed that catastrophe-framed stories reduced intentions to act to address issues. Solution-based stories resulted in greater intentions to take positive action and were still perceived as legitimate journalism [3.4]. Baden applied this concept to the challenge of communicating climate change in a way that engages the wider public in pro-environmental behaviours. She analysed readers' differing responses to climate-related short stories focused on solutions or catastrophes. Results indicated that stories with an emphasis on solutions were more effective in motivating pro-environmental intentions. Being able to identify with a positive role model, whose pro-environmental behaviours are easily imitable, was seen as inspirational, thus reaffirming findings from the earlier business education studies. Many reported feelings of futility and low self-efficacy when reading 'catastrophic' stories [3.5, 3.6].

3. References to the research

3.1 Baden, D.: 2013, 'Experiential learning: inspiring the business leaders of tomorrow', *Journal of Management Development*, Vol. 32, No. 3, pp 295-308.

<https://doi.org/10.1108/02621711311318283>

3.2 Baden, D.: 2014, 'Look on the bright side: a comparison of positive and negative role models in business ethics education', *Academy of Management Learning & Education* **13** (2), 154-170.

<https://doi.org/10.5465/amle.2012.0251>

3.3 Baden, D.: 2015. *Ethical issues in the news sector: Hidden from view*. European Business Ethics Network annual conference, Istanbul, Turkey. Available on request.

3.4 Baden, D., K. E. McIntyre and F. Homberg: 2018, 'The impact of constructive news on affective and behavioural responses', *Journalism Studies*, 1-20.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2018.1545599> **Covered by *The Guardian* twice, this paper's attention score is in the top 5% of all research outputs scored by Altmetric.**

3.5 Baden, D.: 2019, 'Solution focused stories are more effective than catastrophic stories in motivating pro-environmental intentions', *Ecopsychology* **11** (4), 254-263.

<https://doi.org/10.1089/eco.2019.0023>

3.6 Baden, D.: 2020, 'Which work best? Cautionary tales or positive role models?', In Molthanhill, P., H. Luna and D. Baden (Eds.), *Storytelling for Sustainability in Higher Education: An Educator's Handbook* (Routledge, Abingdon).

4. Details of the impact

Influencing news sector initiatives that seek to 'combat apathy and inspire people'

Having found, through her analysis of students' reflections, that positive news can be a significantly more effective motivator in spurring people into action, Baden communicated her research outcomes in 'The Conversation' in March 2015. It received 8,883 reads (as at 31/12/2020), was republished in a Hungarian newspaper, and attracted direct attention of journalists, leading ultimately to the adoption of more constructive journalism approaches by the Guardian and the BBC [5.1]. The Guardian confirms that Baden's research was one of the reasons it launched a new project *Half Full* in June 2016. According to an article by its head of special projects, the project sought to establish a 'middle ground' through 'constructive journalism, focused on solutions and answers, but not necessarily endorsing them'. It continued: 'If we publish more examples of people trying to do inspiring things, perhaps it can inspire us all to make our world a little better.'

The editor later wrote to Baden:

"The work you have done – particularly your papers and original research into the damaging effects of negative news – made a real impact on senior leaders in our newsroom at a time when we were discussing how to combat apathy and inspire people ... Your research became a real talking point among editors keen to change up our news mix – particularly the key findings of your research that positive news stories are more likely to spur people into actions to make the world a better place and negative news can lead to despair and helpless apathy." [5.2]

The Half Full project evolved into The Guardian's *The Upside* initiative, launched in February 2018, which 'comprises journalism that focuses on our capacity to act together to make positive change'. While readership figures are confidential, the Guardian editor said: "I could say

anecdotally that other departments (at The Guardian) have launched their own series of 'constructive journalism', having seen how well the Upside has been received".

The BBC's head of special projects also confirmed that Baden's research helped inform her approach to setting up the Solutions-Focused Journalism initiative, which she launched in August 2016 to 'help colleagues think about how they might broaden their understanding of what news is to also include a focus on solutions'. This included delivering workshops and developing resources for BBC staff and working with BBC Academy to incorporate the approach in their journalism training. This has been a successful approach for the BBC, reflected in audience engagement with its solutions-focused journalism season *Crossing Divides*, a series that sought solutions to 'a fragmented world' and aimed to uncover 'stories of how different individuals and communities are coming together across these lines to engage with one another, building on part of the BBC's public purpose to contribute to social cohesion'. The series generated 30,000,000 page views online and over 27,000,000 views on social media [5.3].

An article on journalism.co.uk in March 2019 quoted a senior BBC editor as saying that reaching larger numbers of younger people had 'been made simpler by the clever combination of solutions journalism and social media feeds', referring to a BBC video story on Norway's plastic waste solution that totalled more than 70,000,000 views, 50,000 comments and 239,000 Facebook shares - one of their most successful videos in 2018 [5.4].

Informing constructive journalism training at colleges in UK and internationally

Baden was awarded GBP10,000 from the University's ESRC Impact Acceleration Account to work with the Constructive Journalism Project to deliver 23 workshops to around 800 people (students) at journalism colleges and to media professionals in newsrooms in the UK, Germany, Ireland, Italy and the US in 2015-2016. Baden's research findings were a key component of the workshops that were designed to help participants develop a more balanced approach to news reporting. The Constructive Journalism Project was co-founded by Sean Dagan Wood, who is also the publisher of *Positive News*, which describes itself as 'the first media organisation in the world that is dedicated to quality, independent reporting about what's going right'. He commented that the workshops had 'been successful in raising the profile of constructive journalism over the past year and showing young journalists that there are other options outside of the existing culture of mainstream media'. [5.5]

From 503 feedback reports received across the 23 workshops, 92% strongly agreed or agreed the workshop had raised their awareness of constructive journalism; 90% strongly agreed or agreed they were better able to balance their news reporting; 80% strongly agreed or agreed their awareness of ethical issues had increased; 85% strongly agreed or agreed they had increased their knowledge; 88% strongly agreed or agreed the issues raised in the workshop were easy to understand [5.6]. Individual responses, reported in an article in *Positive News* [5.5], included a journalism student at Glasgow Caledonian University, who said the course "*rejuvenated my desire to do this job*", while a journalist who attended a session at Der Spiegel's Reporter Forum in Hamburg said: "*I'm tired of writing and filming bad news and people who, when you look closely, have nothing new to say: 'the world is evil, everything is getting worse, and we can't do anything about it'. Constructive journalism can change this!*" The workshop contributed to the introduction of constructive journalism modules to courses at University of Strathclyde, which in turn resulted in the launch, in 2018, of the student-led *Constructive News Scotland* and, in 2019, the *Glasgow Sloth*, which was nominated for the Scottish Student Journalism Awards. It helped inform a new constructive journalism module for the undergraduate course at University of Central Lancashire, with the course leader describing the workshop as "very practical and inspiring" [5.7].

Baden's research has also influenced training delivered by the Constructive Voices project, run by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), which represents the interests of the voluntary sector. The initiative 'flags up solutions-based stories sourced primarily from charities and social enterprises – and works with journalists to ensure those stories are heard'.

The editor of Constructive Voices confirms the impact the research has had on the project: *“As the editor of NCVO’s Constructive Voices project, my role involves delivering talks about constructive journalism to journalism students. Your research forms a vital part of my presentations. I also cite your work on the NCVO website in my express guide to constructive journalism and have links to it on our webpages for journalists and charities whom I connect with in order to encourage media coverage of solutions-focussed stories.”* [5.8]

The managing director of the French NGO *Reporters d’Espoirs* reports that he cited Baden’s research in several training courses run in France, for example in Lille, Paris and Toulouse, reaching over 100 people (students). Baden’s work was also cited in a book on solutions journalism that *Reporters d’Espoirs* published (in French) in January 2020 [5.9].

Stimulating public debate to raise awareness of solutions-focused journalism

Baden’s research received sustained media coverage between 2015 and 2019 [5.10]. She was interviewed for a BBC Radio 4 documentary *Good News Is No News*, in which former news editor Charlie Beckett asked why solutions-based ideas for news tend to be dismissed by the media. Baden’s 2015 article in *The Conversation* has been cited on the Constructive Journalism, Positive News and NCVO’s Constructive Voices websites, and in the Huffington Post. Baden was interviewed on LBC radio’s morning show in July 2016 about the effects of overly negative news. And in October 2016 she was on a panel of three experts, alongside a BBC editor and a BBC presenter, at a public event called *Hubbub of News* in London, organised by a group of scientists, artists, broadcasters and public health experts who were based at the Wellcome Collection. The event was recorded and published as an online podcast. Baden was also one of five panellists on a Guardian podcast *We need to talk about ... the power of positive news coverage*, published online in July 2018 for the Guardian’s 134,567 podcast subscribers. Baden’s paper in *Journalism Studies* [3.5] featured prominently in the Guardian’s *The Upside* column of recommended reads in October 2018, with the headline ‘Reading this article could seriously improve your health’ referring to the research. The paper was also cited in a further Guardian piece in January 2019. Altmetrics data show the paper’s attention score is in the top 5% of outputs.

The *Journalism Studies* paper [3.5] led directly to an invitation in June 2019 from the director of the Criminal Justice Alliance (CJA), a coalition of more than 90 organisations committed to improving the criminal justice system, for Baden to help reshape new criteria for its Media Awards. Baden was also asked to participate in an expert group tasked with developing good practice criteria for criminal justice reporting by ‘drawing on constructive journalism’. The CJA director wrote: *“Denise’s research in particular led to criteria 6 (‘influence and inspire people to think differently, care about the issue and take positive action’) and in turn the rest of the criteria. For example, it helped us to understand that showing solutions and what works (criteria 1) and reducing negativity (criteria 3) is more likely to inspire people to care about the issue and take positive action.”* [5.11]

Jodie Jackson, author of a book on the impact of the news cycle on mental health called *You Are What You Read*, said Baden’s research inspired her work [5.12]. Published in April 2019, the book was the number one best seller in Amazon’s media studies category and had an average rating of 4/5 from 87 global ratings.

While Baden’s research is one part of a wider constructive journalism movement, there is clear evidence that the concept has resonated within the media industry and beyond. In addition to the initiatives by media organisations, a 2018 journalism.co.uk article reporting on its own Newsrewired panel event said: *“Constructive journalism is experiencing a rise in engagement from both the public and the press, driven by a need for solutions to consumer news fatigue or outright rejection.”* The NCVO said its Constructive Voices project had engaged 200 charities, social enterprises and community interest companies, and secured extensive coverage across multiple BBC channels [5.8].

Encouraging climate action through environmental storytelling

Baden's research into ways to inspire pro-environmental behaviours through stories resulted in Baden launching the Green Stories writing competition in early 2018 [5.13]. It aims to engage the public in creating positive visions of a sustainable society via creative projects, including writing, film and stage plays. The Guardian's *The Upside* and BBC's *Writers Room* recommended the project to their readers. Short stories from the first writing competition were published in an anthology 'Resurrection Trust' with a foreword from Caroline Lucas MP and review by environmentalist and writer Jonathon Porritt: *"Most people find it very difficult indeed to imagine what 'living sustainably' might really mean – and neither dry facts nor hypothetical scenarios seem to help very much! The Editors of Resurrection Trust have set out to address that challenge through the power of the short story, with as diverse, surprising and hugely enjoyable a collection of entries as one might expect from an open competition of this kind."*

Royalties from over 100 sales were put towards prizes for future competitions. In 2019/2020, further competitions (novel, stage, play, radio play, interactive fiction, tv series, flash fiction, screenplay) were run to solicit positive visions of what a sustainable society might look, which received 1094 entries (as at 31/12/20). Numerous production companies (Red Production, Whistledown Productions, Planet Zero, BBC Writer's Room) and literary agencies (The Literary Consultancy, Daniel Goldsmith, Redhammer Literary Agents) support the project, agreeing to read and consider work from competition finalists.

Entrants and others involved (e.g. judges) were asked to give their feedback on any impact staking part had on them. Of 250 feedback respondents, including 219 writers, 83% said they had made use of information in the Green Stories website which lists transformative sustainable solutions. 89% agreed that participation increased their writing skills; 89% agreed it had increased knowledge; 80% agreed that it increased awareness of green policies; 81% agreed that it enabled deeper understanding of environmental issues and policies; 56% agreed that it affected what policies they would support; 74% agreed that it increased their engagement in pro-environmental behaviours; 80% agreed it made them more optimistic about the future and 84% agreed participation inspired them to be more pro-active about green issues. Qualitative data are available, and an example extract is: *"through this process I have evaluated our actions further and we have in my firm decided to alter our sustainability policies further."* [5.13]

The research has also informed the Global Action Plan's 'Flickers for the Future' competition, that calls on young filmmakers to tell a different story – one where humans and planet thrive together. Baden has been invited to serve as a member of the expert panel. As a result, her research and experience has informed the design of the competition and associated workshops [5.14].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- 5.1 Social media metrics for <https://theconversation.com/shock-horror-behind-the-ethics-and-evolution-of-the-bad-news-business-39211>
- 5.2 Letter of support from The Guardian's Head of Special Projects.
- 5.3 Letter of support and email from The BBC's Head of Special Projects.
- 5.4 <https://www.journalism.co.uk/news/bbc-news-shows-that-hard-hitting-solutions-journalism-can-thrive-on-social-media/s2/a735912>
- 5.5 <https://www.positive.news/society/media/constructive-journalism-inspires-next-generation-journalists>
- 5.6 Evaluation report from Constructive Journalism project workshops.
- 5.7 Emails from journalism course coordinators at UK universities.
- 5.8 Letter of support from the editor of NCVO's Constructive Voices project.
- 5.9 Email from the managing director of the French NGO Reporters d'Espoirs.
- 5.10 Media monitoring report for coverage received 2015-2019.
- 5.11 Letter of support from the director of the Criminal Justice Alliance.
- 5.12 Emails from author Jodie Jackson.
- 5.13 Impact evaluation report of the Green Stories project (survey results/website data).
- 5.14 Letter from Global Action Plan.