



Citizen Empowerment Through Journalism

... Sarah van Gelder
... YES! Magazine

What can we do as we face a perfect storm of climate crisis, joblessness, growing corporate power, and energy and food constraints? To take on these and the other crises of our times, we need journalism to rise to its fullest potential. High quality coverage of symptoms of the crises by responsible, mainstream journalists is important, but it isn't enough.

We need a new sort of journalism—let's call it constructive journalism. This is journalism that digs deeply and reveals the root causes of our problems. It also explores the emerging ideas and innovations that have the potential to shift our society in more just and sustainable directions. Constructive journalism shows that change is possible and highlights the role each person can play in bringing it about. This sort of journalism opens the door to real empowerment.

Shining the Light on Constructive Solutions

When people are losing their homes to foreclosure, constructive journalism shows that we have an alternative: community land trusts, which are experiencing almost no foreclosures among their modest-income homeowners. A reader of constructive journalism might learn about the Dudley Street Project in Boston, which succeeded in taking over large sections of abandoned inner-city land and transforming it into vibrant business districts and affordable housing.

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Constructive journalism not only warns of the possible consequences of unchecked global warming; it tells stories of the activists who have prevented dozens of new coal plants from being built. And readers will learn that California voters averted attempts by big-spending out-of-state energy corporations to overturn the state's landmark climate law.

At a time when protracted wars are devastating people's lives, constructive journalism explores ways people are building understanding across divides, helping veterans and civilian victims of war to heal, and countering the powerful military-industrial complex.

Constructive journalism is not only about big issues. In addition to empowering us as citizens—this form of journalism explores ways to live more meaningful, joy-filled lives that don't compromise the well being of the Earth and its other residents.

One writer explores her own choice to live simply in order to have time at home with her children. Another writes of raising bees, and a third describes building a small, simple home to avoid the debt and clutter of living in a sprawling house. These writers are redefining happiness, not allowing their values to be dictated by commercialism.

These examples are just a few of the thousands of stories published in *YES! Magazine*. For 15 years, *YES! Magazine* has pioneered constructive journalism with quarterly themes ranging from local food to alternatives to prison, from DIY education to a new economy. Each issue explores the powerful ideas and practical actions that make change possible.

A Growing Movement

The movement toward constructive journalism has been picking up steam in recent years. This is not surprising given complaints that traditional journalism often leaves readers discouraged and without a way to respond to bad news.



What does constructive journalism do?

- Digs deep to reveal the root causes of our problems
- Explores ideas and innovations emerging to shift our society in more just and sustainable directions
- Shows that change is possible and highlights the role each individual can play in bringing it about





Ashoka fellow Michael Gleich trains journalists to produce constructive coverage of social change.

With a background as a reporter, he has focused on the concept of constructive journalism, or news media that focuses on positive social change. That stands in contrast to the truism, “If it bleeds, it leads,” or the idea that violence and negative societal problems attract more readership and are easier to report.

Good magazine, founded in 2006, for example, describes itself as serving “the people, businesses, and NGOs moving the world forward.” Recent features include people doing polar bear plunges to raise money for the Maryland Special Olympics, and news of California’s first stretch of high-speed rail.

Greater Good magazine reports on the science of happiness and altruism, sharing research that improves quality of life and societal well being.

Even *The Nation* now features stories not only on the failings of the corporate-dominated economy, but also on the emergence of a new economy.

Building on the success of the print magazine, *YES!* is stepping up online coverage. New stories can be found daily on the *YES!* website, on the topics of peace and justice, planet, people power, new economy and happiness.

Some commentators mistake constructive journalism for feel-good fluff. But real constructive journalism doesn’t shy away from such difficult topics as the US prison system, which locks up more than 2 million Americans, or the mass extinction of species. But instead of stopping there, constructive journalism explores ways to address these tragedies at their roots, and features the people and stories that show the way. As mainstream news continues to evolve and change, we are

hopeful that it will incorporate more of the elements of constructive journalism.

Asking the Right Questions & Uncovering Practical Solutions

Instead of accepting without question the key assumptions that dominate popular media, constructive journalism holds them up to scrutiny. For example, most journalists assume that enhancing economic growth should be a principal aim of public policy—they question only how it might be accomplished. Constructive journalism asks whether economic growth can or should continue indefinitely given the resulting degradation of the natural systems on which human civilization depends. And it asks whether economic growth has, to date, enhanced human well being, or whether it’s done more to boost the wealth of the already fortunate at the expense of ordinary people.

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“All of us who professionally use the mass media are the shapers of society. We can vulgarize that society. We can brutalize it. Or we can help lift it onto a higher level.”

➤ William Bernbach

Constructive journalism isn’t afraid to reframe issues, to allow a different story to emerge. Instead of asking how we can maximize economic growth, for example, we ask what policies and practices help ordinary people enjoy a sustainable livelihood that doesn’t undercut the Earth’s carrying capacity.

Constructive journalism rejects the stale left-right debate. The point isn’t to play on fear and anger to win followers by repeating, without fact checking, preposterous claims about “death panels” in the healthcare reform bill or the claims of climate change deniers. Scapegoating the least powerful members of society, or sensationalizing human failings may win audiences. But these practices undercut our ability to build a more just and sustainable society.

Instead of turning to the politicians and experts who have repeatedly failed to address our crises, constructive journalism looks to visionaries with ideas responsive to the deep challenges of our times. Those who are telling new stories about what’s possible are featured, along with those doing the hard work of building a new society. Readers meet people like former pro basketball player and corporate executive Will Allen, who runs a thriving urban farm, aquaculture operation and compost facility in Milwaukee, providing fresh food and dignified jobs to people who need both.

Constructive journalism delves into the interrelated and mutually reinforcing systems that threaten economic ruin and ecological collapse, and explores how these systems could be transformed to contribute instead to lasting human and ecological well-being. Local, sustainable food, for example, will probably not

be a big story for journalists focused on Wall Street speculation. But in terms of the real economy of people and the planet, it’s a winner; it offers more jobs, reduces the distance our food travels, sequesters carbon in the soil, and cuts the massive application of chemicals. It reduces the power of agribusiness, oil, and chemical corporations, and distributes economic and political power instead of concentrating it in a few hands. And it uses less fossil fuel, so it helps extend the life of our current oil supplies.

These sorts of whole-systems solutions are neither liberal nor conservative. They are the way to build a world in which we honor and preserve life.

Constructive journalism goes to the very root of our role as individuals, and as members of families, communities, and cultures. It challenges us to do more than sit back and complain when things go wrong; it asks that each of us consider our own role in fixing our troubled world. Instead of seeing ourselves as the victims of wrongs, we are invited to be agents of history.

Our world is at a turning point. Of thousands of human generations, ours is the one that will determine if future generations will inhabit a livable world. Constructive journalism is one of the tools we can draw on to make change a living reality.

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Sarah van Gelder is a co-founder and executive editor of YES! Magazine (www.yesmagazine.org), a national media organization that combines powerful ideas with practical action for a more just and sustainable world.

