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Socially Responsible Journalism: Diverse Responses to Polarisation

We often talk about journalism in the singular, yet a global study indicates the existence of a variety of journalistic cultures all over the world (Hanitzsch et al., 2019). Accordingly, this chapter builds on the idea that instead of just one, there are many forms of journalism and that it is also possible to identify journalistic subcultures that orient and organise professionals beyond societal contexts. Such subcultures may be organised around publication platforms, topic areas or reformatory aims. In both academic and professional discourses, these are often called 'x journalisms' (Loosen et al., 2020), for instance, broadcast journalism, climate journalism or solutions journalism. However, such pluralities sometimes seem confusing, especially when there are many closely related, even overlapping journalisms.

My aim is to address a small segment of this plurality by reviewing the literature on six reformatory 'x journalisms': peace, public, constructive, solutions, slow and conciliatory journalism. I address them as forms of socially responsible journalism and focus particularly on how they propose to tackle the excessive polarisation of public discussion.

I refer to social responsibility as a normative ethos in journalism that places the social impact that the news media have on human life as the starting point of journalistic practice. For example, Christians and Nordenstreng (2004, p. 25) see social responsibility as a collection of norms for respecting human life that provide 'a frame of reference for critiquing news media practices'. Some journalists see social responsibility as a transgression of journalism's core, especially the objectivity norm, but there are journalistic subcultures that are appreciative of the responsibility role (Hanitzsch et al., 2019, p. 27), such as the six presented here¹.

As their names suggest, peace, public, constructive, solutions, slow and conciliatory journalism have slightly differing aims. They are also practiced in varied contexts. Therefore, studying them individually would make sense, but would it also risk portraying them as competitors and adding to the confusion? I argue that these journalisms can be analysed as complementary forms all seeking to enhance social responsibility in journalism.

This kind of analysis will unveil the values, objectives and practices that have in recent decades become central for the discussion about journalism's social responsibility in Western societies. This analysis also provides journalism researchers with material to update the social responsibility theory. For professional journalists, the joint examination offers a toolkit for responsible journalism practice without a restrictive commitment to any specific 'x journalism'.

In the first part of this chapter, I will discuss the notion of social responsibility in Western journalism criticism. Then I present the aforementioned ‘x journalisms’ to show how they convey the ethos of social responsibility from their particular perspectives. Then, I will identify polarisation of public debate—the heightened ‘us versus them’ positioning—as a current problem that has evoked journalists and academics to readdress journalism’s responsibility. Polarisation of public debate has been intensified by the hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013), where journalists and other content providers fight for the audiences’ attention with a mixture of journalistic and algorithmic logics. This has made polarised framing in journalism tempting but problematic: it provokes discussion but also portrays complicated problems as identity-based battles (Brandsma, 2017). Therefore, the last part of this chapter will illustrate the type of support the six journalism forms offer for journalists tackling excessive polarisation.

The Ethos of Social Responsibility in Journalism

Social responsibility has historically manifested in journalism as *self-regulation*. This dates to the press criticism against powerful publishers in the US in the 1940s. Criticism from government, the public and the courts pertained to the concentrated media ownership structure, content deficits and misrepresentation of the marginalised (Pickard, 2014). This drove the publishers to establish a body referred to as the Hutchins Commission (named after its chair, University of Chicago President Robert Maynard Hutchins) to provide assessments and recommendations.

The commission’s conclusion was that the news industry in the US should practice social responsibility and remain self-regulated to avoid state control (Pickard, 2010, p. 392). It also formulated what social responsibility should mean in journalism: (1) providing a truthful and comprehensive account of the day’s events in a context that gives them meaning; (2) acting as a forum for the exchange of comments and criticisms; (3) offering a means of projecting the opinions and attitudes of the groups in society to one another; and (4) providing a way of reaching every member of the society by the currents of information, thoughts and feelings that the press supplies (Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947).

The commission’s work was debated by the industry, but it remained influential since it was integrated into one of the famous *press theories* by Siebert, Schramm and Peterson in ‘Four Theories of the Press’ (1956), the authoritarian, libertarian, social responsibility, and Soviet communist. The influence of the book as a standard curriculum item was immense, but it remained debated whether the social responsibility theory was an actual theory, an extension of the Western libertarian paradigm or a *descriptive model* of a professionalised media in the cold war context (Nerone et al., 1995, pp. 18–21). However, the notion of social responsibility remained relevant in normative-theoretical discussions beyond the US. In Europe, the idea became influential, especially in the public broadcasting sector (Christians et al., 2009, pp. 4–5, 52–58).

The current manifestation of social responsibility has moved away from the above described regulatory and press model discourses. It is used by media scholars as a broader *ethical framework*: social responsibility ‘continues to provide a basic vocabulary for new ethical approaches’ (Ward, 2011, p. 312). Journalists are encouraged to be committed to

'master norms' such as respect for human dignity, truth-telling and non-violence (Christians & Nordenstreng, 2004).

Certain elements from all the manifestations are still evident in what I see as the *normative ethos* of socially responsible journalism in democratic societies (see Christians et al., 2009). For example, the commission's original formulations remain surprisingly valid, but the ethical discourse has broadened the register in which social responsibility is discussed. Hence, I summarise the ethos to comprise of (1) contextualised truth-telling; (2) access to information and action; as well as (3) dialogue that offers a place for critique—and all these resting on the (4) idea of human dignity. Next, I will look at the literature on six mentioned journalism forms to highlight how the ethos of social responsibility has been displayed in the past decades.

Social Responsibility of the Six 'X Journalisms'

Peace, public, constructive, solutions, slow and conciliatory journalisms have all been connected to the social responsibility ethos (e.g. Rosen, 2000; McIntyre & Gyldensted, 2017; Boyles, 2016; Lynch, 2014; Hautakangas & Ahva, 2018) but most often in terms of their historical positioning. However, they also contribute to the framework through critiquing certain weaknesses in contemporary journalism and providing their alternative approaches.

Tapping into the themes of non-violence and human dignity in social responsibility, I start with *peace journalism* that is a model of responsible media coverage of conflicts. It was sparked in the 1990s by Norwegian peace researchers Galtung's and Ruge's (1965) criticism of news selection routines in foreign coverage (Lynch, 2014, p. 36). These routines were regarded as harmful as they directed journalists to frame conflicts as violent and elite-oriented events, not as processes (Galtung, 2002).

In the literature, peace journalism's key criticism of conflict coverage is that war and violence are regarded as standard news frames, but non-violent responses to conflicts are disregarded (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005, 5). The central argument is that traditional coverage confuses conflict with violence, whereas conflicts should instead be understood as long-term processes that *might* burst into violent confrontations, but not always; hence, they should be reported in more detail and well before the possible outbreaks (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005; Galtung, 2002). Furthermore, the proponents argue that physical violence is only one manifestation of violence; attention to structural and cultural violence—long-term discrimination or subordination based on cultural identities or myths—should also be addressed in conflict coverage (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005, pp. 60–63).

Whereas peace journalism operates in the global framework, *public journalism* was developed in the early 1990s in the US with a more local focus (Rosen, 1993) and a connection to theme of access in social responsibility. It started out as a professional self-reflection over 'horse race'-style election coverage that focused on campaigns as a competition and disregarded policy issues and voter concerns (Haas, 2007). The first projects dealt with party politics, but later experimentation spread to other areas of domestic reporting, such as city budgeting, neighbourhood development or coverage of ethnic minorities (Nichols et al., 2006). The idea also gained substantial interest in the academia,

first in the US, followed by Japan, South Africa, Australia, Finland, Germany and others (Romano, 2010).

In public journalism literature, criticism of political journalism pertains to how public life is too often depicted as something occupied by the elite, namely, politicians, experts and officials, leaving the role of passive observers to the citizens. Public journalism as an ideal, wants to promote citizens' access to relevant knowledge and the public sphere through journalism. Hence, the main idea is to turn journalistic processes more diverse, participatory and deliberative for citizens to enhance community engagement (Rosen, 1993, p. 3). Theoretical inspiration is drawn from the public sphere theories of Dewey and Habermas (Haas, 2007; Ahva, 2010). In terms of news practices, the literature highlights citizen panels, deliberative forums, citizen–politician meetings and pop-up newsrooms for neglected areas (Ahva, 2010; Haas, 2007).

As a movement, public journalism is inactive, but a currently prominent and closely related form is *constructive journalism*. It has flourished especially in Denmark and Northern Europe after 2010. It is concerned with traditional journalism creating passiveness and hopelessness rather than engagement (Haagerup, 2014). Constructive journalism proponents draw from positive psychology and suggest reporting methods that do not leave audiences paralysed from all the negativity but emboldened with hope and a sense of agency (McIntyre & Gyldensted, 2016).

The advocates underline that journalism is an institution that actively *constructs* the world and does not merely *mirror* reality (Gyldensted, 2015)—and this is the key reason to act responsibly. They also propose that news coverage should orientate to the future more strongly. One of the tools offered for journalists in the literature is to remember to ask an additional w-question of 'what's next' on top of the classical what, who, where, when and why (Hermans & Gyldensted, 2019).

What the European context currently discusses as constructive journalism is often referred to as *solutions journalism* in the US (McIntyre et al., 2016, p. 1670). However, solutions journalism is not rooted in psychology and seems the most practice oriented among the forms. The Solutions Journalism Network (SJV) was established in 2013 by journalists in the US. It defines solutions journalism as 'rigorous and compelling reporting on responses to social problems'ⁱⁱ.

The SJV trains journalists and engages news organisations in solution-oriented projects in the US, but also in France, Great Britain, India, Nigeria, Kenya and Australia. The advice that solutions journalism literature gives to journalists is that the story should include more information about the response than about the problem (McIntyre & Lough, 2021). A difference to some of the previous approaches is that solutions journalism seems careful *not* to appear as a radical challenger of traditional journalism: the proponents often formulate that the same practices and norms that traditional journalism uses to expose problems are harnessed to cover solutions (Aitamurto & Varma, 2018, p. 704).

Slow journalism, in turn, emerged as a reaction to the increased emphasis on instantaneity in online journalism in 2010. According to slow journalism advocates, instantaneity can lead to the loss of context, understanding, and credibility in journalism (Le

Masurier, 2015). Many authors connect the roots of the approach to the slow food movement, in which consumers demand good, clean and fair food as a reaction to fast food. Gess (2012) argued that these same demands could be brought to journalism in the form of researched, ethical, and accessible journalism—a clear continuation of the responsibility ethos.

Among the forms discussed here, slow journalism appears least as a reform movement with identifiable leaders. Instead, it is a shorthand description of the variety of alternative approaches in journalism practice in relation to the criticism of speed (Neveu, 2016). Therefore, slowness has multiple meanings: it can refer to the slowness of investigation process (e.g. ethnographic methods), to news selection routines (e.g. ‘relevant’ instead of ‘recent’) or slowness of user experience (e.g. pleasure through long-form storytelling) (Le Masurier, 2015; Neveu, 2016). Overall, slowness is perceived as a virtue that can help to produce more explanatory, community oriented and engaging journalism (Neveu, 2016, p. 455).

Finally, based on my own involvement in an action research project whose aim was to develop depolarising journalism practices in Finland in 2016–2018, I would like to present *conciliatory journalism*. This approach was developed through workshops with journalists to co-design methods and principles for the responsible coverage of conflict-sensitive issues. The jointly developed idea took root and resulted in a recognition of the approach in Finland and other Nordic countries (Hautakangas & Ahva, 2018, p. 743).

The main point of critique deals with polarity as an over-emphasised frame in contemporary journalism. Theoretical and practical support is sought from conflict mediation and conciliation (Hautakangas & Ahva, 2018). The approach contributes to the theme of dialogue in social responsibility. Mediation is a process that seeks to prevent damage that conflicts may inflict on individuals, groups or the environment by facilitating dialogues between the involved parties with the help of a neutral mediator (Moore, 2014). A model that can best enrich journalism is transformative mediation, which does not strive for a solution but focuses on enabling all parties to better understand each other, themselves and the conflict at hand (Bush, 2005, pp. 13–22).

On top of transformative mediation, conciliatory journalism is inspired by all the discussed journalism forms (Ahva & Hautakangas, 2018). In fact, when we started to familiarise ourselves with other relevant ‘x journalisms’ during our project, we realised that they revolve around closely related questions of responsibility even if they were born out of specific critiques. The literature accentuates long-term processes, engagement, sense of agency, interpretation, and mutual exchange as contemporary themes in socially responsible journalism. Hence, these ‘x journalisms’ form a rich resource also for addressing present-day challenges, such as polarisation.

Responses to Polarisation

Polarisation herein is referred to as a social process by which people’s political attitudes and/or identity-based positions diverge into extremes to the extent that they view each other as a disliked outgroup, while the moderates in the middle lose ground (Kekkonen

& Ylä-Anttila, 2021; Kleiner, 2018, p. 943). Even if polarisation is beneficial for public life in that it ignites collective action (Kleiner, 2018, p. 957), it may be harmful if it impedes addressing differences as legitimate contradictions, scares away participants and circulates hateful claims (Brandsma, 2017). Some recent examples of overtly polarised public discussions feature immigration, climate change or vaccination. Thus, journalists work in a media environment where discussions polarise easily, and journalism can fan the flames further if it is not practiced responsibly (Hautakangas & Ahva, 2021). Covering polarised issues with care can help in managing conflicts as contradictions so their potential for social change is not lost.

The reviewed forms of journalism have addressed polarisation directly and indirectly. Peace journalism literature addresses polarisation explicitly by advocating for more nuanced ways to handle conflicts. Lynch and McGoldrick (2005, pp. 8, 28) argued that framing a conflict as a 'bipolar construct' with just two opposing parties (usually elites) is typical in mainstream journalism. Hence, it is also easy to slip into portraying the conflict as a situation where there are only winners or losers. This frame is bound to alienate actors, escalate conflicts and polarise the related public discourse further (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005, p. 43). The authors' advice is to pay attention to *all* the parties in a conflict and analyse their concrete demands, as well as their needs and fears, to be able to define what the conflict is about (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005, p. 43). If it is possible to define the issue of the conflict from multiple perspectives, such coverage can decrease oversimplified and identity-focused (vs. issue-focused) public discussions about them (see Brandsma, 2007).

Public journalism literature, in turn, addresses the problem of polarisation implicitly by committing to the ideals of diversity and dialogue (Ahva, 2010). Furthermore, keeping people connected to one another and to society (Rosen, 1993) is a useful starting point to prevent citizens from closing off to their private groups. Journalists are also encouraged in the literature to learn how to moderate, guide and facilitate news-based public debates in both offline and online environments (Rosenberry & St. John, 2010, pp. 183–185). This can help citizens – also the moderate middle – to address political issues as legitimate contradictions.

In constructive journalism, depolarisation is one of the goals. McIntyre and Gyldensted advise journalists: 'Work against polarising dynamics created by news media in order to strengthen inclusion and diversity' (2017, p. 668). For example, in heated topics, journalists are guided to include a wider range of voices and ask for their *experiences* instead of their *opinions* to lessen the hyperbole (McIntyre & Gyldensted, 2018, p. 668). Furthermore, the literature features examples of how journalists can organise and moderate face-to-face discussions between people using mediative techniques to help find solutions to problems (Haagerup, 2014, pp. 61–63).

Solutions journalism is also directly committed to depolarisation. The SJN website states that the approach can 'elevate public discourse, spur citizen agency and reduce polarisation'ⁱⁱⁱ. According to solutions journalism practitioners, such as The Atlantic editor Amanda Ripley, a concrete way to do this is 'complicate the narrative' in news stories^{iv}. Ripley suggests journalists to ask questions that expand the problem angle and listen to people more carefully. This would steer attention away from the most vocal extremes.

Research literature on slow journalism does not explicitly address polarisation. However, Michael Luo, the editor of *newyorker.com*, formulates: '[Slow] journalism that engages with complexity, examines the implications of proposed policies and offers the public rigorous analysis, can lead to a more informed—and less polarised—citizenry'.^v In addition, slow storytelling offers possibilities for providing multiple viewpoints in a single story. Furthermore, slow working methods of communal interviewing, patient listening, and journalist's emotional investment can lessen otherness (Thomas, 2016) and hence also the construction of stereotypical outgroups.

Lastly, conciliatory journalism specifically challenges polarity in news practice. We suggest journalists to offer help in conflict management by improving the dialogical co-presence of different voices and supporting people's right to be understood, not merely to be heard (Husband, 1996). The three main premises of conciliatory journalism are as follows: (1) critically examine and clarify tensions that are causing conflicts instead of reporting them as disputes; (2) encourage listening in and through journalism; and (3) create a trustful environment where all relevant actors can feel safe enough to address delicate or conflict-prone issues (Hautakangas & Ahva, 2018).

Conclusion: The Umbrella of Social Responsibility

Above, I have addressed six journalistic subcultures that are related to one another but are not precisely the same. As reformatory forms, they have been established at different points in time and are not all equally active at the moment (see Table 1). The argumentation around each form has also centred on slightly different key critiques—war, elite orientation, negativity, problem focus, fastness and polarity—thereby also providing their own 'x' to the pool of reformatory 'x journalisms' to mark distinction and novelty (Loosen et al., 2020). However, addressing them as a group of neighbouring 'x journalisms' can help us see *what* is being suggested by a particular form and identify its theoretical or practical foundation, determine *when* this happened and in which context, establish *who* is suggesting and addressing *whom* and, finally, find out where the journalisms *intersect* (Loosen et al., 2020).

These six forms intersect in how they are normatively supporting a vision of journalism as a constructive social force (see also, Hautakangas & Ahva 2018). Therefore, a fruitful way of conceptualising these six journalisms^{vi} is to view them as journalistic subcultures under the umbrella of social responsibility. For journalism practitioners, this makes it possible to address them as a *collection* of practices and methods, not as *competing* models that can cause confusion. For journalism researchers, such conceptualisation is an invitation to scrutinise more thoroughly the intersections (and contradictions) in the underlying theoretical foundations of the forms, as well as to contemplate the benefit of updating social responsibility as a theory for contemporary journalism research.

Table 1

Six Journalism Forms for Social Responsibility

Form	Emergence and Current Status	Critique to Existing Journalism	Theoretical Basis	Responses to Polarisation
Peace journalism	Started in the 1990s; academic institutes and practice-oriented courses; mainly in the US, Australia and Africa	War- and violence-focused coverage of conflicts is too bipolar and event focused	Peace research and conflict analysis	Relaying the claims and fears of all parties in the conflict to determine what the conflict is about; problematising winners and losers
Public journalism	First appeared in the 1990s; the movement is inactive, but legacy remains in the US, Europe and Asia	Lack of citizen perspective in current affairs coverage is disengaging	Public sphere theories	Engaging citizens in debates moderated by journalists to foster connectivity
Constructive journalism	Appeared around 2010; Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands; institute with fellowship programme and training	Negativity as a framework alienates news consumers and makes them passive	Positive psychology	Fostering inclusive sourcing; focusing on experiences instead of opinions; orientation towards the future
Solutions journalism	Emerged around 2010; active network based in the US; training courses and resources for journalists	Problem-focused news discourse hides progressive aspects	No coherent theoretical basis	Focusing on how problems have been solved; complicating the problem narrative
Slow journalism	Took shape around 2010; institute in Germany, active in the magazine scene in UK and US	Speed in news production results in lack of complexity	No coherent theoretical basis	Focusing on implications of problems; multiple perspectives; emotional investment
Conciliatory journalism	2016 onwards in Finland based on research project; collegial support and training administered by a professional association	Excessive focus on conflict and opposition feeds polarisation	Conflict mediation	Covering tensions instead of disputes; listening; creating safe environments

Notably, these forms augment how the elements of social responsibility ethos were summarised at the beginning of the chapter. Social responsibility in the reviewed literature consists of journalism practices that (1) place fact-based and truthful coverage in context by underlining slowness and listening. It also invites journalists (2) to pay attention to access, but not only in terms of receiving information but also in active citizen participation and solution finding, thereby providing ways of moving forward with solving problems. It encourages the idea of (3) respectful exchanges and dialogues across social boundaries by proposing that journalists actively initiate online or offline encounters and adopt the role of facilitators. Finally, social responsibility (4) rests on the principles of equality and human dignity by protecting diversity and inclusion. In such ways, these forms offer material for developing the social responsibility theory and updating it to include, for example, the neglected dimensions of race, class, gender and ethnicity (Nerone, 2018, pp. 9–10).

In addition, these forms do not have to be merely regraded as historical examples or context specific movements. The reviewed literature provides elements for addressing

current debates, too, which has been here exemplified by discussing responses to polarisation. It is suggested that journalism practitioners should be wary of adopting polarisation as the only possible frame when covering problems. Based on the literature (Table 1), journalists are encouraged to focus on citizens rather than on the most vocal of the elites, to listen to the experiences of the silent or silenced, to organise possibilities for dialogue, to practice inclusive sourcing and to avoid oversimplified narratives. Even if journalists are not proposed to act as the solver of conflicts, they can help by presenting the issues behind conflicts as something that can be acted upon, and not only as heated topics upon which people should express extreme opinions or base their group identities.

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ⁱ These journalism forms are interpreted differently in varying societal contexts. For example, in China, 'constructive journalism' has been adapted to the philosophical and political tradition of the society (Anbin, 2021). My discussion here is restricted to a Western perspective.

ⁱⁱ <https://thewholestory.solutionsjournalism.org/what-is-solutions-journalism-c050147bb1eb>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.solutionsjournalism.org/who-we-are/mission>

^{iv} <https://thewholestory.solutionsjournalism.org/complicating-the-narratives-b91ea06ddf63>,
<https://thewholestory.solutionsjournalism.org/22-questions-that-complicate-the-narrative-47f2649efa0e>

^v <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/annals-of-inquiry/the-urgent-quest-for-slower-better-news>

^{vi} In fact, there are even more approaches that could be grouped here, for instance, reciprocal (Lewis et al., 2014) or dialogic journalism (Heikka, 2017).