CONSTRUCTIVE RESTORATIVE JOURNALISM:

A FRAMEWORK FOR PEACEBUILDING AND NARRATIVE TRANSFORMATION

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Abstract

Contemporary journalism occupies a critical nexus where the imperatives of conflict reporting intersect with the normative demands of democratic governance and social cohesion. This article introduces and theorizes Constructive Restorative Journalism (CRJ) as an integrative framework synthesizing constructive journalism, restorative justice theory, peacebuilding practice, and narrative transformation methodology. Drawing on empirical evidence from post-conflict societies, media ecology research, and transitional justice scholarship, the article argues that conventional journalism's preoccupation with conflict, crisis, and contestation — while epistemically indispensable — systematically marginalizes the reparative, reconciliatory, and solution-oriented dimensions of public life. CRJ proposes a paradigm shift that reconfigures the journalist not merely as witness or adversary but as a deliberate co-architect of civic meaning. The framework is organized around five operational pillars: narrative rehumanization, trauma-informed reporting, structural empathy, solution-space amplification, and participatory truth-building. Through critical discourse analysis, comparative case studies from Rwanda, Northern Ireland, South Africa, Colombia, and Nigeria, and an interrogation of existing media interventions, this article evaluates both the theoretical coherence and practical viability of CRJ. It further addresses the tensions between journalistic objectivity and normative engagement, between institutional independence and community embeddedness, and between the imperatives of democratic accountability and narrative repair. The article concludes by proposing a curriculum architecture and a professional ethics orientation for training journalists in the CRJ tradition, with implications for media policy, international development programming, and democratic theory.

Keywords: *constructive journalism; restorative justice; peacebuilding; narrative transformation; post-conflict media; transitional journalism; trauma-informed reporting; media ethics; reconciliation; conflict journalism*

1. INTRODUCTION: THE JOURNALISM OF WOUNDS AND THE JOURNALISM OF HEALING

In the vast archive of twentieth- and twenty-first-century journalism, one encounters an enduring and troubling paradox: the very institutions charged with informing the public — with sustaining the informational infrastructure of democratic life — have often, by structural habit and professional culture, become the most faithful chroniclers of rupture, division, and despair. From the sensationalized coverage of ethnic conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa to the algorithmic amplification of polarizing narratives across digital platforms in the Global North, journalism has frequently operated as a mirror of society's deepest fractures — a mirror that, by reflecting those fractures relentlessly and almost exclusively, may simultaneously reproduce and deepen them (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Hanitzsch, 2007). This observation is not a critique of journalistic incompetence or moral failure. Rather, it identifies a structural feature of the professional epistemology that has governed mainstream journalism since the consolidation of the commercial press and the normalization of objectivity as a professional ideal in the early twentieth century (Schudson, 2001; Tuchman, 1972).

This structural orientation toward conflict, negativity, and crisis is neither accidental nor immutable. It is the product of specific professional conventions, commercial incentive structures, and historical power relations — all of which can, in principle, be interrogated, challenged, and transformed. The question this article poses is therefore both diagnostic and prescriptive: if journalism holds a constitutive role in shaping the narratives through which communities understand themselves and their conflicts, can that same constitutive power be deliberately redirected toward healing, reconciliation, and structural transformation? Can journalism, in other words, be restorative?

To address this question, this article introduces the concept of Constructive Restorative Journalism (CRJ) — a theoretical and practical framework that integrates insights from constructive journalism (Haagerup, 2014; McIntyre, 2015; Hermans & Gyldensted, 2019),

restorative justice theory (Braithwaite, 1989; Zehr, 2002; Van Ness & Strong, 2010), peace journalism (Galtung, 1998; Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005; Keeble et al., 2010), trauma-informed communication (Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, 2020), and narrative transformation theory (Bruner, 1986; Fisher, 1987; Cobb, 2013). CRJ is not offered as a repudiation of adversarial journalism or investigative reporting — both of which remain indispensable to democratic accountability — but as a complementary epistemological tradition that enriches the journalistic repertoire with tools for narrative repair and civic reconstruction.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 establishes the theoretical genealogy of CRJ by tracing the four intellectual traditions from which it draws. Section 3 articulates the five operational pillars of the framework. Section 4 interrogates the empirical landscape through comparative case studies of post-conflict journalism in Rwanda, Northern Ireland, South Africa, Colombia, and Nigeria. Section 5 engages the principal critiques and structural tensions inherent in any normative journalism paradigm. Section 6 proposes implications for media education, institutional design, and public policy. Section 7 concludes with a reflection on journalism's democratic vocation in an age of narrative crisis and institutional delegitimization.

2. THEORETICAL GENEALOGY: INTELLECTUAL TRADITIONS AND CONVERGENCES

CRJ does not emerge from a single intellectual lineage. It is, rather, a deliberately synthetic framework — one that draws from four distinct but partially overlapping scholarly and professional traditions, each of which supplies indispensable conceptual resources while also exhibiting limitations that the others help to address. This section traces those traditions in turn, identifying both their contributions and the theoretical gaps that motivate the CRJ synthesis.

2.1 Constructive Journalism: From Problem-Orientation to Solution-Framing

Constructive journalism, as a formally theorized movement, emerged most prominently from Nordic media scholarship and practice in the early 2010s, though its conceptual antecedents include earlier discussions of civic journalism (Rosen, 1996), development journalism (Mody, 2003), and solutions journalism (Bornstein & Davis, 2010). Ulrik Haagerup (2014), then Head of News at the Danish Broadcasting Corporation, and communication scholars Karen McIntyre (2015) and Cathrine Gyldensted (2011) articulated a sustained critique of negativity bias in mainstream journalism — the structural tendency to emphasize conflict, failure, and threat over progress, cooperation, and resolution — arguing that such bias produces corrosive effects on public trust, democratic participation, and collective psychological well-being.

Constructive journalism does not advocate for naive optimism or the institutional suppression of uncomfortable truths. Rather, it insists on what Hermans and Gyldensted (2019) characterize as rigorous reporting on solutions, systemic responses, and social possibilities — a methodological commitment to representing not only what is broken but what is being repaired, by whom, and through what mechanisms. The approach draws on positive psychology (Seligman, 2011), solution-focused communication theory (de Shazer, 1985), and strength-based organizational discourse to reframe journalistic practice around forward-facing inquiry: not only 'what went wrong?' but 'what can be done?' and 'what is already working?' (McIntyre & Gyldensted, 2018).

Empirical studies have begun to validate constructive journalism's civic effects. Research conducted through the Reuters Institute and Scandinavian universities has found that constructive news frames increase reader engagement, reduce news fatigue and avoidance behavior, stimulate heightened civic agency, and do not significantly diminish the perceived credibility of reporting (Schafraad et al., 2019; McIntyre & Sobel, 2019; Aitamurto & Varma, 2018). These findings challenge the long-held editorial assumption — institutionalized as

professional common sense — that negativity is a prerequisite for newsworthiness and audience attention.

The primary limitation of constructive journalism as a standalone framework is its relative inattention to the structural dimensions of media production — the political economy of news organizations, the power dynamics embedded in source relationships, and the colonial inheritances that shape global news flows. CRJ incorporates these dimensions through its engagement with restorative justice theory and peace journalism scholarship.

2.2 Restorative Justice Theory: From Punitive Logic to Relational Repair

The second major tributary feeding the CRJ framework is restorative justice theory, a tradition that has profoundly reshaped criminology, transitional justice scholarship, and community conflict resolution practice over the past four decades. Rooted in indigenous community practices of harm-repair and in Judeo-Christian theological ethics — particularly the Hebrew concept of shalom (Zehr, 2002) — restorative justice reframes the central question of justice from 'What law was broken and how shall the offender be punished?' to 'Who has been harmed, what are their needs, and how can relationships and community structures be repaired?' (Van Ness & Strong, 2010, p. 43).

John Braithwaite's (1989) foundational concept of reintegrative shaming, Howard Zehr's (2002) systematic articulation of restorative principles, and the extensive empirical literature documenting the effectiveness of victim-offender mediation, circle sentencing, and truth-and-reconciliation processes have collectively established restorative justice as among the most generative social theories of the late twentieth century. Its application has extended beyond criminal courts to encompass educational institutions, corporate governance, and international post-conflict frameworks, including South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1995–2002), Rwanda's gacaca community courts, and Colombia's Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz (2017–present).

The relevance of restorative justice theory to journalism lies in its conceptual architecture. Restorative processes center the experiences and voices of those harmed; privilege relational repair over abstract institutional judgment; insist on the genuine participation of all affected parties in determining outcomes; and understand harm as embedded within social structures rather than reducible to individual moral failures. These principles, transposed into journalistic practice, suggest a distinctly different approach to conflict coverage: one that foregrounds the humanity and agency of survivors, creates dialogic narrative space for perpetrators' accounts without thereby exculpating them, exposes the structural conditions that enabled harm, and actively envisions pathways toward accountability and civic repair.

2.3 Peace Journalism: Epistemologies of Non-Violence in Media

Johan Galtung's foundational articulation of peace journalism — developed across several decades of engagement with conflict analysis, nonviolent communication, and media critique (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Galtung, 1998) — provides a third intellectual foundation for CRJ. Galtung's enduring distinction between 'war/violence journalism' and 'peace journalism' identified the former as characteristically focused on visible actors, overt violence, elite propaganda, and the binary assignment of victimhood, and the latter as systematically attentive to the invisible effects of structural violence, active peace initiatives, and the irreducible complexity of all parties in conflict. This distinction opened a productive debate about the normative responsibilities of conflict journalism that continues across multiple scholarly communities (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005; Keeble et al., 2010; Shinar, 2007).

Critics of peace journalism have raised substantive concerns about its potential to produce advocacy-inflected reporting at the expense of professional independence (Loyn, 2007; Shaw, 2011). These critiques deserve serious engagement. They proceed, however, from a problematic premise: the assumption that conventional 'objective' war journalism is itself normatively neutral. As Robert Entman's (1993) framing theory, Stuart Hall's (1980)

encoding/decoding model, and four decades of critical media studies have collectively demonstrated, all journalism is interpretive, all selection is evaluative, and all framing is ideologically positioned. The choice to cover combatants rather than civilian peacebuilders, rupture rather than repair, elite voices rather than grassroots reconcilers, is itself a normative choice — one naturalized as 'objectivity' through professional convention rather than epistemological justification (Hackett & Zhao, 1998).

Peace journalism's most generative contribution to CRJ is its insistence on what Lynch and McGoldrick (2005) describe as mapping the conflict formation — attending not only to manifest episodes of violence but to the deeper structural and cultural violence (Galtung, 1990) that sustains those episodes, and to the equally real but systematically underreported initiatives for transformation. This cartographic sensibility — understanding conflict as a complex social ecosystem rather than a bilateral confrontation — is central to the CRJ orientation.

2.4 Narrative Theory and Trauma Studies: The Stories Communities Live and Break By

The fourth intellectual tradition informing CRJ is the intersection of narrative theory and trauma studies — an interdisciplinary space that illuminates both the psychological mechanisms through which conflict is experienced and the communicative processes through which it may be transformed. Jerome Bruner's (1986) foundational distinction between paradigmatic (logical-scientific) and narrative (storied) modes of cognition established the irreducibly narrative character of human meaning-making: individuals and communities do not primarily understand their lives through logical propositions but through stories — their characters, plotlines, attributed causalities, and moral resolutions. Walter Fisher's (1984, 1987) narrative paradigm extended this insight to public discourse, arguing that practical rationality in public life is constituted through narrative fidelity and probability: public arguments are

assessed not only through their logical coherence but through their resonance with the stories communities already inhabit.

Sara Cobb's (2013) narrative mediation theory adds a crucial political dimension to these insights. Dominant narratives in conflict situations are not merely descriptive but constitutive of the conflict itself: they assign moral positions (protagonist/antagonist), fix causality (who bears responsibility), define the stakes (what is at risk), and systematically open or close possibilities for resolution. Narrative transformation — the deliberate disruption and reconstructive reworking of conflict narratives to create new possibilities for relationship and meaning — is therefore simultaneously a communicative act, a political intervention, and a form of cultural work. For journalists, whose professional function is the large-scale production and distribution of socially significant narratives, these insights carry profound ethical implications.

Complementing narrative theory is the growing body of trauma-informed communication scholarship. Judith Herman's (1992) foundational clinical account of trauma and recovery, the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma's extensive practitioner guidance (2020), and Susan Sontag's (2003) critical examination of the ethics of representing suffering have collectively established that conflict journalism operates not merely as an information system but as a trauma system — one that can re-traumatize survivors through intrusive or dehumanizing coverage, or alternatively, one that can contribute to what Enright and North (1998) describe as narrative recovery: the reconstruction of a meaningful personal and collective story that honestly acknowledges suffering while preserving the dignity of those who endured it.

3. THE FIVE PILLARS OF CONSTRUCTIVE RESTORATIVE JOURNALISM

The CRJ framework synthesizes its four theoretical inheritances into five operational pillars that together define a coherent and distinctive journalistic practice. These pillars are not a procedural checklist or a supplementary style guide but a philosophical orientation — one that reshapes how journalists pose questions, select and engage sources, construct narrative frameworks, represent victims and perpetrators, theorize their relationship to the communities they cover, and understand their professional responsibility to democratic life. Each pillar addresses a specific dimension of the failure that CRJ seeks to remedy, while simultaneously contributing to the integrative logic of the framework as a whole.

3.1 Pillar One: Narrative Rehumanization

The first pillar of CRJ is narrative rehumanization: the deliberate journalistic practice of restoring the full human complexity of individuals and communities who have been reduced, through conflict narratives, to statistical abstractions, stereotypical representations, or dehumanizing tropes. Dehumanization is not merely a rhetorical failing or an aesthetic shortcoming; it is, as scholars of genocide and mass political violence have extensively documented (Zimbardo, 2007; Chirot & McCauley, 2006; Staub, 2003), one of the primary psychological and communicative mechanisms through which atrocity becomes thinkable, then possible, then organized. The systematic description of Tutsi Rwandans as inyenzi (cockroaches) in Radio Mille Collines broadcasts in 1994, the characterization of Bosnian Muslims as 'Turks' and 'fundamentalists' in Serbian nationalist media throughout the 1990s, and the persistent depiction of African and Middle Eastern migrants in European media discourse as a 'flood,' a 'wave,' or a 'crisis' are not incidental metaphors: they are narrative instruments with demonstrable material consequences (Malkki, 1996; Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017).

Narrative rehumanization in CRJ requires several concrete methodological practices. It means systematically resisting the reduction of sources to their functional roles within a conflict narrative — victim, perpetrator, official spokesperson — and attending, rather, to the biographical thickness: the complex histories, relationships, aspirations, contradictions, and social knowledge that constitute actual personhood. It means covering marginalized communities not through the pathologizing lens of their deficits but through the lens of their agency, creativity, and epistemological authority. It means enacting what anthropologist Philippe Bourgois (1995) describes as engaged neutrality — a disciplined willingness to enter deeply into the experiential world of research subjects without either idealizing or demonizing them. And it means interrogating the journalistic convention of 'balance' as a formal procedure — quote one side, quote the other — in favor of what Amartya Sen (2009) describes as positional objectivity: the rigorous attempt to understand how the same social reality appears from multiple, genuinely distinct social positions, each with its own partial validity.

3.2 Pillar Two: Trauma-Informed Reporting

The second pillar is trauma-informed reporting: a set of professional practices grounded in an understanding of how traumatic experience is encoded, expressed, and potentially re-activated through media representation. Trauma-informed practice, developed primarily within clinical psychology and social work (Harris & Fallot, 2001; SAMHSA, 2014), recognizes that individuals who have experienced significant harm carry embodied physiological and psychological responses to contextual reminders of that harm — responses that can be activated, sometimes involuntarily and with significant clinical consequences, by media representations encountered years or decades after the original traumatic event.

For journalism, trauma-informed practice involves methodological adaptations across three distinct phases of professional work. In the source engagement phase, it requires journalists to obtain genuine informed consent from trauma survivors — explaining the likely

uses, audiences, and temporal reach of testimony; offering meaningful opportunities to review representations before publication; and attending, during interviews, to signs of dissociation or re-traumatization rather than pursuing narrative at the cost of human welfare (Dart Center, 2020). In the narrative construction phase, it requires a principled distinction between testimony as evidence — the appropriate deployment of survivor accounts to establish facts and convey moral gravity — and testimony as spectacle — the gratuitous reproduction of suffering for emotional arousal without redemptive purpose or contextual framing. In the editorial and institutional phase, it requires sustained critical reflection on whose trauma is rendered visible and whose remains invisible; whose suffering provokes public empathy and whose does not; and how the asymmetries of media attention reproduce, legitimize, and thereby perpetuate the asymmetries of social power that generated the original harm.

Crucially, trauma-informed reporting does not imply the sanitization of conflict or the avoidance of morally difficult truths. It insists, rather, that the journalistic representation of human suffering be conducted with the same epistemic rigor — the same commitments to accuracy, proportionality, contextual adequacy, and awareness of consequence — that responsible journalism applies to every other domain of social reality. The Dart Center's practitioner guidelines (2020) and the growing literature on covering conflict, displacement, and atrocity (Tumber & Webster, 2006; Cottle, 2009) provide substantial resources for operationalizing this pillar across diverse professional contexts.

3.3 Pillar Three: Structural Empathy

The third pillar — structural empathy — may be the most theoretically distinctive contribution of CRJ. Structural empathy, as defined here, denotes the journalistic capacity to understand and represent not only the subjective emotional experiences of individuals living in or through conflict but the structural conditions — economic, historical, political, cultural, and ecological — that produced and continue to sustain those experiences. It is, in essence, the application of

what C. Wright Mills (1959) called the sociological imagination to journalistic craft: the ability to translate private troubles into public issues, and to understand individual suffering as the historically and structurally specific intersection of personal biography with social organization.

Conventional conflict journalism tends to operate at two epistemologically unsatisfying extremes. On one hand, it focuses on the immediate, dramatic, and singular event — the explosion, the massacre, the election result — stripped of the structural context that might render it meaningful beyond its immediacy. On the other hand, it produces context-heavy 'explainer' journalism that, while analytically valuable, frequently loses the human register entirely, substituting political analysis for moral witness. Structural empathy in CRJ seeks to hold both registers simultaneously — to narrate the specific experiences of identifiable individuals in their full human complexity while simultaneously illuminating the structural forces that bounded their possibilities, shaped their choices, and produced their suffering. This requires what Bourdieu (1998) describes as a double reading: engaging the social world both from inside (through the experiential categories of those who inhabit it) and from outside (through the structural analysis that those same experiential categories often obscure).

In practice, structural empathy demands that journalists acquire substantive knowledge of the historical, economic, and political contexts in which their subjects live — not as background color or supplementary annotation but as constitutive elements of the narrative itself. A journalist covering farmer-herder violence in Nigeria's Middle Belt who does not understand the structural dynamics of climate change, colonial land tenure systems, state fiscal federalism, and pastoralist livelihood pressures cannot practice structural empathy regardless of the sensitivity of their individual interviews. Structural knowledge is not optional for CRJ; it is the epistemological precondition for meaningful journalistic empathy.

3.4 Pillar Four: Solution-Space Amplification

The fourth pillar, solution-space amplification, draws most directly from the constructive journalism tradition. It refers to the systematic journalistic practice of identifying, critically investigating, and amplifying initiatives, actors, institutions, and approaches that are substantively addressing the structural and immediate causes of conflict — with the explicit purpose of making the 'solution space' legible, debatable, and accessible to public deliberation. This is emphatically not a call for uncritical celebration of peace initiatives: such initiatives can themselves be co-opted, politically captured, inadequately resourced, or counterproductive. The commitment is, rather, that the same degree of rigorous journalistic scrutiny applied to problems and failures be applied with equal systematic energy to proposed and actual responses.

The Solutions Journalism Network (2020) has identified four structural characteristics of meaningful solution-space reporting: it investigates a concrete response to a documented social problem; it presents credible evidence of the response's effectiveness; it explains the causal mechanism through which the response produces its effects; and it honestly addresses its limitations, failures, and contextual conditionalities. CRJ adopts and extends this methodology to the specific and demanding context of conflict and post-conflict environments, where the solution space encompasses not only technical and institutional interventions — ceasefire agreements, disarmament and reintegration programs, economic reconstruction initiatives — but also the deeply relational and cultural processes through which communities reconstruct shared meaning: reconciliation circles, intergenerational dialogue projects, collaborative memorialization, and the deliberate renegotiation of collective identity narratives.

One of the most significant implications of solution-space amplification for conflict journalism is its temporal reorientation. Conventional conflict journalism is organized predominantly around the past and present: what happened, what is happening. CRJ insists on

an equally rigorous engagement with the future: what transformations are already underway, what models of repair are being tested, what social possibilities are being imagined and organized. This future-orientation is not sentimentalism; it is profoundly democratic. The insistence that public imagination of social possibility is itself a form of political power — and that journalism has a corresponding responsibility to make that imagination substantively informed — is one of the most important normative claims of the CRJ framework.

3.5 Pillar Five: Participatory Truth-Building

The fifth and most epistemologically ambitious pillar of CRJ is participatory truth-building: the deliberate inclusion of affected communities not merely as sources of testimony or objects of journalistic investigation but as active, co-authoritative participants in the construction of the journalistic narrative itself. This pillar draws on the traditions of participatory action research (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Reason & Bradbury, 2008), community journalism (Reader & Hatcher, 2012), and dialogic communication theory (Bakhtin, 1981; Freire, 1970) to challenge the epistemological hierarchy embedded in conventional journalistic practice — the assumption that the journalist's analytical framework, narrative categories, and representational choices are inherently superior to, or more authoritative than, those of the communities being covered.

Participatory truth-building does not collapse the distinction between journalism and advocacy, nor does it presuppose that community voices are uniformly reliable, internally unified, or free from power dynamics of their own. Communities are heterogeneous, internally contested, and often organized around silences as well as articulations. Rather, this pillar insists that journalistic authority — the institutionalized power to determine what counts as news, which explanations are credible, which narrative frames are legitimate — should be held in productive, creative tension with community knowledge and community agency. This requires practical and structural innovations: community editorial advisory processes, collaborative

investigative methodologies, pre-publication engagement with directly affected communities, and what Nick Couldry (2010) terms media as practice — a sustained attention to how communities actually produce and consume media as part of their own meaning-making, rather than treating them as passive recipients of journalistic representation.

This pillar carries particular critical resonance in post-colonial and Global South contexts, where the institutional history of journalism is inseparable from the history of colonial knowledge production — where generations of foreign correspondents and metropolitan editors exercised the authority to name, explain, and frame African, Asian, and Latin American realities in ways that systematically privileged external over indigenous epistemologies (Mazrui, 1986; Thussu, 2007; Wasserman, 2010). CRJ's insistence on epistemic justice — on the right of communities to participate substantively in the public representation of their own experience — is simultaneously a methodological commitment and a political one, grounded in what Miranda Fricker (2007) has theorized as the ethics of epistemic equity.

4. EMPIRICAL LANDSCAPE: CASE STUDIES IN POST-CONFLICT JOURNALISM

The five pillars of CRJ gain analytical depth and practical credibility when examined against documented experiences of journalism in post-conflict and transitional contexts. The following case studies — drawn from Rwanda, Northern Ireland, South Africa, Colombia, and Nigeria — are not presented as straightforward validations of the framework. Each is selected for its capacity to illuminate both the possibilities and the limits of restorative media practice, and each reveals dimensions of the CRJ agenda that require contextualization, qualification, or extension.

4.1 Rwanda: The Radio that Killed and the Radio that Began to Heal

The Rwandan genocide of April–July 1994 represents the most extreme and thoroughly documented instance of journalism's lethal capacity. Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM), operating from January 1994 until the genocidal campaign had run its course, broadcast systematic dehumanization of Tutsi Rwandans, provided tactical coordination for killing, and named individuals and locations targeted for extermination (Des Forges, 1999; Li, 2004). Multiple tribunals, including the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, determined that RTLM's broadcasts constituted incitement to genocide — the most serious designation available under international law. The genocide's media dimension is not merely a historical footnote; it constitutes the most extreme empirical demonstration available of the proposition that journalism's narrative choices carry material consequences for human survival.

Rwanda's media history also offers a partial counter-narrative. The post-genocide reconstruction of media institutions — imperfect, politically constrained, and in important respects directed by the post-1994 Rwandan Patriotic Front government's authoritarian tendencies — nonetheless produced some of the most extensively evaluated experiments in restorative media practice on record (Thompson, 2007; Frère, 2007). Radio La Benevolencija, operating in collaboration with Dutch and Rwandan conflict transformation specialists, developed serialized radio drama programming — most notably Musekeweya ('New Dawn') — specifically designed to cultivate inter-group perspective-taking, critical listening competencies, and civic dialogue in communities fractured by genocidal violence. Elizabeth Paluck's (2009) randomized controlled field trial of Musekeweya's effects — one of the most methodologically rigorous experiments in media influence conducted in any national context — found that sustained exposure to narratives of intergroup cooperation produced measurable and persistent changes in community-level social norms even in the absence of corresponding

changes in individual explicit attitudes, suggesting the importance of public narrative environments that mainstream journalism theory has largely neglected.

The Rwandan case simultaneously illustrates the structural dangers of state-directed media reconciliation. Scholars including Buckley-Zistel (2006) and Burnet (2012) have documented how the Rwandan government's official reconciliation narrative — organized around the suppression of ethnic identification in favour of a unitary Rwandan national identity — imposed a form of narrative foreclosure that silenced the heterogeneous experiences of genocide survivors, constrained the development of complex public memory, and produced what Buckley-Zistel terms a 'chosen amnesia': a politically managed forgetting that serves social stability at the cost of genuine transitional justice. The CRJ principle of participatory truth-building provides an explicit critical counterweight to this tendency.

4.2 Northern Ireland: Entrenched Conventions and the Gradual Reconstruction of Narrative

The Northern Ireland peace process, formalized in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement of April 1998, offers a productive case study for examining the role of media in both sustaining violent conflict and, over time, facilitating its transformation. Across thirty years of what became institutionalized as 'the Troubles,' British and Irish media operated largely within the war journalism paradigm: focusing on episodes of dramatic violence, elite political actors, entrenched nationalist/unionist binary framings, and the terrorist/security forces dichotomy, while systematically marginalizing the complex civil society initiatives, cross-community relationships, and incremental structural political changes that eventually made the Agreement possible (McLaughlin & Baker, 2010; Rolston, 2001).

The post-Agreement period produced a gradual, uneven, and institutionally contested shift in Northern Irish media practice. Researchers including McLaughlin and Baker (2010) have documented both the remarkable persistence of conflict-era news conventions — in

particular, the tendency to return to sectarian framing at moments of political tension — and the emergence of new approaches to covering the ongoing challenges of legacy investigations, community reconciliation, and power-sharing governance. Organizations including Co-operation Ireland, the Community Relations Council, and various peace education NGOs developed media-focused initiatives that embody elements recognizable within the CRJ framework, including solution-space reporting on cross-community projects and participatory media programming involving former combatants and victims' families. Northern Ireland demonstrates both the possibility of incremental professional culture change and the extraordinary tenacity of established narrative conventions in the face of changed political circumstances.

4.3 South Africa: National Witnessing, Media Complicity, and the Limits of Restorative Spectacle

South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), convened between 1995 and 2002 under the chairmanship of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, remains the most extensively studied national-scale restorative justice process and the one most directly implicated in questions of media representation. The Commission's public victim hearings — broadcast live on national television and radio through the South African Broadcasting Corporation — created what Antjie Krog (1998) described as an unprecedented form of national witnessing: a public and collective encounter with the testimonies of apartheid's victims, made available to the nation that had, in widely varying but rarely innocent ways, perpetrated, enabled, or ignored their suffering.

Detailed studies of TRC media coverage reveal the profound structural difficulties of translating restorative justice processes into dominant journalistic formats (Posel & Simpson, 2002; Buur, 2001). Media outlets across the political spectrum tended to cover the Commission through the same drama-seeking, spectacle-oriented, and elite-focused lens they applied to

conventional political events — foregrounding the high-profile amnesty hearings of prominent perpetrators, moments of emotional intensity, and political controversies surrounding the Commission's mandate, while systematically underreporting the thousands of ordinary victim testimonies that constituted the Commission's most historically significant contribution to the formation of post-apartheid public memory. This pattern of coverage is analytically important: it demonstrates that the mere existence of a restorative justice process does not automatically generate restorative journalism. The structural incentives of commercial and state media must themselves be actively reconfigured if restorative processes are to receive coverage commensurate with their democratic significance.

The South African case also raises the question of media complicity with the antecedent harm. The role of mainstream Afrikaner- and English-language press in legitimizing, naturalizing, and occasionally actively promoting apartheid policies has been examined at length by Wasserman (2010) and Tomaselli (1997), among others. Post-apartheid debates about media accountability for this institutional history provide important precedent for the CRJ principle of institutional self-reflection: the recognition that journalism's capacity to contribute to peace and reconciliation requires honest and public accounting for its own historical contributions to the conditions requiring repair.

4.4 Colombia: Peace Journalism Under Conditions of Danger and Polarization

Colombia's protracted internal armed conflict — involving the state, FARC-EP guerrillas, ELN, and successive generations of paramilitary organizations — and the peace process that culminated in the 2016 Havana Final Agreement represent one of the most complex and intractable environments for constructive restorative journalism anywhere in the world. Colombian media has operated under conditions of extreme physical danger — Colombia has consistently ranked among the world's most dangerous countries for journalists across multiple reporting periods (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2023; Reporters Without Borders, 2023)

— as well as profound political polarization, acute regional fragmentation, and the pervasive structural influence of narco-trafficking capital on patterns of media ownership and the exercise of editorial independence.

Against this exceptionally challenging backdrop, organizations including Consejo de Redacción and the Medios para la Paz network have worked across multiple decades to develop peace-sensitive journalism practices adapted to Colombian contextual realities (Bonilla Vélez & Tamayo Gómez, 2007; García-Mingo, 2018). These initiatives represent some of the most sustained and locally grounded practical experiments in what CRJ theorizes at a more abstract level: the institutionalization of professional norms, editorial frameworks, and practitioner networks systematically oriented toward conflict-sensitive and solution-focused reporting. The ongoing implementation of the Final Agreement — with the Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz providing a contextually innovative restorative justice framework for accountability regarding crimes committed during the conflict — creates new institutional opportunities for media organizations to engage substantively with transitional justice processes in ways that align with CRJ's participatory and solution-oriented commitments.

4.5 Nigeria: Ethno-Religious Conflict and the Structural Promise of Community Media

Nigeria's complex and multi-layered landscape of ethno-religious conflict — encompassing the structural resource-governance tensions of the Niger Delta, the protracted armed insurgency in the northeast associated with Boko Haram and its factions, and the pervasive and increasingly lethal patterns of farmer-herder violence across the Middle Belt — constitutes a critical and undertheorized context for evaluating CRJ's practical implications within an African developmental democracy. Nigerian mainstream journalism has been extensively critiqued for its role in inflaming rather than mitigating ethno-religious tensions: through the sensationalization of communal violence, the uncritical reproduction of elite political and

religious framings, and the systematic institutional failure to report substantively on the community-based reconciliation and interreligious dialogue initiatives that operate, often with considerable practical effect, below the horizon of metropolitan news attention (Otite, 2000; Abdulkadir, 2014).

Essentially, Nigeria's media landscape also contains rich and institutionally significant examples of alternative practice that anticipate and partially instantiate CRJ principles. Community radio stations in Kwara, Benue, Plateau, and Rivers States have developed locally embedded programming covering farmer-herder dialogues, interfaith reconciliation initiatives, and community-led dispute resolution processes with a depth and sustained attention that Abuja- and Lagos-based national media consistently fails to provide. The Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution's media training initiatives, the long-standing work of the Interfaith Mediation Centre in Kaduna, and the media components of various civil society peacebuilding programs represent a practical infrastructure of institutional knowledge on which a more systematically developed CRJ approach could be built. The principal challenge — and it is a structurally serious one — is developing pathways through which these community-level practices might influence mainstream professional norms without losing the contextual embeddedness and participatory character that constitutes their most significant practical virtue.

5. CRITICAL TENSIONS AND THEORETICAL CHALLENGES

Any normative framework for journalistic practice must account for the structural tensions, internal contradictions, and principled objections it inevitably generates. CRJ is no exception. Three critical challenges — concerning objectivity, the political economy of peace narratives, and the structural environment of commercial media — deserve sustained and honest engagement rather than rhetorical dismissal.

5.1 The Objectivity Question: Normative Engagement and Professional Independence

The most persistent and institutionally powerful objection to any normative journalism paradigm — peace journalism, constructive journalism, development journalism, and now CRJ — is that its normative commitments necessarily compromise the foundational professional value of journalistic objectivity. This objection is not without intellectual force: it touches on genuinely complex epistemological and political questions about the relationship between journalistic knowledge, institutional independence, and democratic accountability that cannot be resolved by definitional fiat.

The objection rests, however, on a historically selective and philosophically underexamined reading of the objectivity norm. Media historians including Schudson (2001) and Hallin (1986) have demonstrated that journalistic objectivity emerged as a professional ideology not through philosophical argument but through a historically specific convergence of commercial incentives (the commercial press's need to address diverse audiences without alienating segments), technological developments (the telegraph and wire services requiring politically neutral copy usable across different editorial contexts), and professional status claims (journalism's desire to distinguish itself from partisan advocacy and establish a claim to expertise). The objectivity norm, in other words, was never a neutral epistemological achievement; it was, from its inception, a social construction shot through with particular ideological commitments — most consequentially, a naturalized deference to liberal democratic institutions, existing power arrangements, and elite epistemological authority (Hackett & Zhao, 1998).

CRJ does not propose the abandonment of journalism's epistemic standards — accuracy, independent verification, proportionality of evidence, and systematic transparency about methods and sources. These commitments are essential and non-negotiable. What CRJ challenges is the historically contingent conflation of those epistemic standards with a specific,

historically particular set of narrative conventions — conflict framing, elite-sourcing hierarchies, event-orientation, negativity bias — that have been invested with the mystique of epistemological neutrality without philosophical justification. The claim that reporting on a peace initiative constitutes advocacy while reporting on a military offensive constitutes neutral coverage is not a principled epistemological distinction; it is a convention that naturalizes the primacy of conflict over cooperation as the default lens for social reality, and thereby enacts a specific, consequential, ideological choice while disavowing its ideological character.

5.2 The Power Question: Who Defines 'Peace,' 'Restoration,' and 'Reconciliation'?

A second critical challenge for CRJ concerns the political economy of peace narratives. 'Peace,' 'reconciliation,' and 'restoration' are not politically neutral concepts. They are semantically open terms that can be deployed — and have been systematically deployed — in the service of elite settlements that impose the silencing of grievance on those with least power, foreclose genuine structural justice, and present the perpetuation of existing inequalities as the moral achievement of reconciliation. The critical literature on 'liberal peacebuilding' (Richmond, 2011; Mac Ginty, 2006; Pugh et al., 2008) has extensively documented how internationally brokered peace processes frequently reproduce existing power asymmetries under the ideological cover of stability, normalcy, and the 'restoration' of pre-conflict social arrangements — arrangements that may themselves have constituted the structural violence that made violent conflict possible.

This critique applies with equal force to journalism. A journalism that uncritically amplifies official peace narratives, frames elite-negotiated settlements as popular reconciliation, or treats the institutional performance of transitional justice as equivalent to the substantive repair of structural harm is not practicing CRJ — it is practicing the journalistic equivalent of what Galtung (1990) calls structural violence: the normalization of arrangements

that systematically deny life possibilities to the vulnerable while protecting the interests of the powerful.

CRJ must therefore be organized around what scholars of transitional justice describe as a critical peace orientation (Gready & Robins, 2014): a sustained analytical awareness that 'peace' itself is contested terrain, that settlements favored by powerful actors may entrench rather than resolve structural injustices, and that the voices most systematically excluded from official peace and reconciliation narratives — women, youth, indigenous communities, the rural and urban poor, the diaspora — are precisely those whose substantive inclusion is most essential for the construction of durable peace. The participatory truth-building pillar is the primary structural mechanism through which CRJ addresses this challenge, but its implementation requires genuine institutional commitment and reflexive self-scrutiny rather than tokenistic consultation.

5.3 The Commercial Media Challenge: Political Economy and Structural Constraints on Constructive Practice

A third major challenge for CRJ is the structural environment of commercial media. The political economy of contemporary news production — advertising dependency, ratings competition, the commodification of audience attention, the accelerating consolidation of media ownership, and the increasingly extreme commercial pressures generated by digital platform economics — creates powerful and systemic incentives for precisely the kind of conflict-amplifying, negativity-biased, spectacle-oriented journalism that CRJ seeks to transform. Research on news consumption consistently demonstrates that negative, conflict-laden, and emotionally arousing content generates higher engagement metrics — clicks, shares, time-on-page — than constructive or solution-oriented content, at least in the short term (Soroka, 2014; Baumeister et al., 2001; Robertson et al., 2023). These structural realities cannot

be addressed by professional ethics codes, academic frameworks, or individual acts of journalistic virtue alone.

CRJ must therefore engage seriously and analytically with the political economy of media production, recognizing that professional culture change is insufficient without complementary structural changes in media ownership arrangements, regulatory frameworks, public media funding levels, and the measurement and evaluation regimes that determine what counts as journalistic success. This is a long-term structural project that requires engagement with media economics, communications regulation, and democratic governance simultaneously. The institutional environments most conducive to CRJ practice are likely — though not exclusively — those in which the immediate commercial incentive for conflict amplification is structurally attenuated: non-profit and reader-funded media outlets, adequately resourced public service broadcasters, community media with genuine community governance, and internationally funded development journalism initiatives with clearly specified peacebuilding mandates.

6. IMPLICATIONS FOR MEDIA EDUCATION, INSTITUTIONAL DESIGN, AND POLICY

6.1 A Curriculum Architecture for Constructive Restorative Journalism

The translation of CRJ from theoretical framework to sustained professional practice requires substantial and systematic innovation in journalism education. Current curricula in most journalism schools — including leading programs in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and Europe — remain predominantly organized around the traditional competencies of news reporting, investigative technique, media law, digital production, and, increasingly, data journalism. These competencies remain important and should not be displaced. They constitute, however, an insufficient educational foundation for the kind of practice CRJ envisions: journalism that operates in profoundly conflicted, traumatized, structurally unequal,

and narratively complex social environments requires a significantly broader, deeper, and more reflexively interdisciplinary intellectual formation.

A CRJ curriculum architecture would need to integrate, as core rather than elective competencies, at minimum the following intellectual domains: conflict and peace studies, including structural violence theory, nonviolent communication practice, and comparative transitional justice processes; trauma psychology and trauma-informed communication methodology; narrative theory, story transformation practice, and conflict narrative analysis; restorative justice principles, processes, and evaluative criteria; cross-cultural competence and postcolonial media criticism; community journalism and participatory research methods; the political economy of media systems; and solutions journalism methodology and ethics. These are not supplementary additions to an existing curriculum but constitutive reorientations of the intellectual formation journalism education provides.

At STEMDUP Institute's Center for Research, Media and Curriculum Development, we are actively developing a modular CRJ curriculum designed for adaptation across diverse educational contexts — from accredited journalism schools in the Global North to in-service professional development programs for journalists in conflict-affected regions of the Global South. This curriculum is organized around the five CRJ pillars and integrates both rigorous theoretical grounding and structured experiential learning: field placements with conflict transformation organizations, supervised community media practice, collaborative projects with transitional justice institutions, and systematic reflective practice components designed to develop the professional self-awareness that CRJ requires. Pilot programs are in development for deployment in partnership with universities and civil society organizations in Nigeria, Colombia, and the United Kingdom.

6.2 Institutional Design: Creating Organizational Conditions for CRJ Practice

Professional education alone cannot transform journalistic practice without complementary and structural changes in the organizational environments in which journalists actually work. CRJ requires media organizations willing to make and sustain institutional commitments that extend well beyond the hiring of individual practitioners with appropriate skills and orientations. These commitments include: editorial policies that explicitly value and systematically evaluate solution-oriented and conflict-sensitive reporting; beat and assignment structures that normalize 'peace and reconciliation' coverage as an ongoing institutional responsibility rather than an occasional special-interest feature; performance evaluation frameworks that assess impact on public understanding, civic agency, and community trust rather than click-through rates and comment volume; robust psychological support and supervision structures for journalists covering traumatic material; and sustained institutional partnerships with conflict transformation organizations, transitional justice bodies, and community media.

Several existing media organizations provide instructive institutional models. De Correspondent in the Netherlands, a reader-supported digital newsroom, has built its editorial culture around the principle of journalism of what matters rather than journalism of what happens — explicitly decentering event-driven, negativity-biased news conventions in favor of structural, contextual, and solution-oriented analysis. The New Humanitarian (formerly IRIN News) has developed distinctive expertise in humanitarian crisis reporting that integrates many elements of trauma-informed and solution-oriented practice. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism's long-form accountability journalism model demonstrates that rigorously investigative and normatively committed practices are not inherently incompatible. The Constructive Institute at Aarhus University in Denmark provides a model of academic-professional partnership for the systematic development of constructive journalism practice.

6.3 Policy Implications: Media Systems, Regulatory Frameworks, and Peacebuilding Infrastructure

CRJ carries implications for media regulation, public media funding policy, international development programming, and the integrated design of peacebuilding programs. National media regulatory bodies in conflict-affected and post-conflict societies should consider developing explicit provisions for conflict-sensitive journalism within broadcasting licensing and content standards frameworks — provisions designed to incentivize, rather than mandate, the kind of pluralistic, solution-oriented, and community-embedded coverage that CRJ advocates. Public service media institutions, funded by public resources and accountable to democratic mandates rather than commercial imperatives, carry particular obligations in this regard; the CRJ framework provides a principled basis for defining and evaluating those obligations.

International development organizations — including the United Nations Development Programme, Internews, International Media Support, Deutsche Welle Akademie, and bilateral development agencies — have long recognized the relationship between media systems and conflict dynamics (UNDP, 2013; International Media Support, 2019). CRJ provides a more theoretically coherent, empirically grounded, and operationally specific framework for structuring media development investments than the broadly defined 'media freedom' and 'professional capacity-building' approaches that have historically dominated development journalism programming. Specifically, CRJ suggests prioritizing curriculum reform in journalism schools; the development and institutionalization of peace-sensitive editorial standards; structural and financial support for community and non-profit media in conflict-affected and post-conflict environments; and the systematic integration of media practice into the design and evaluation of transitional justice and peacebuilding programs.

7. CONCLUSION: TOWARD A JOURNALISM OF DEMOCRATIC RENEWAL

The proposition animating this article — that journalism bears a constitutive responsibility not only to describe the world but to actively and deliberately create conditions for its transformation toward greater justice, dignity, and peace — will be met by some readers with skepticism, others with principled objection, and others still with the charge that it confuses journalism with advocacy or social work. These responses deserve acknowledgment rather than dismissal. The history of normatively 'engaged' journalism includes significant cautionary episodes: the Soviet model of party journalism instrumentalized in the service of totalitarian power; the nationalist press of newly independent post-colonial states deployed to build authoritarian legitimacy; the evangelical fervor of various 'civic journalism' movements that ultimately produced greater self-congratulation than structural change. These failures matter and cannot be explained away.

The alternative, however — a journalism that performs epistemic neutrality while systematically amplifying conflict, dehumanizing marginalized communities, rendering invisible the human capacities for repair and cooperation, and providing insufficient cover to the structural conditions that generate and perpetuate harm — is not neutrality. It is a specific ideological disposition, dressed in the language of professionalism and protected by institutional convention. The normative poverty of this choice becomes most starkly evident in precisely those moments of acute social crisis — genocide, civil war, mass displacement, democratic breakdown — when journalism's constitutive power over public meaning is most consequential and its inherited professional conventions most visibly inadequate to the demands of democratic responsibility.

Constructive Restorative Journalism offers a framework for a different kind of journalistic practice: one that maintains and deepens the epistemic commitments that define responsible journalism — accuracy, independent verification, transparency about evidence and

method, accountability to democratic publics — while enriching those commitments with an ethical orientation toward human dignity, relational repair, structural justice, narrative equity, and the possibility of democratic renewal. It does not promise that journalism can resolve conflicts that politics, economics, history, and entrenched power have made intractable. It insists only that journalism need not make those conflicts worse, and that a journalism genuinely animated by democratic principles has an obligation — institutional, professional, and moral — to make them better where it can.

The five pillars — narrative rehumanization, trauma-informed reporting, structural empathy, solution-space amplification, and participatory truth-building — are not a procedural formula but a moral compass: orienting professional practice rather than determining its every move, establishing a direction of democratic travel rather than a predetermined destination. Their specific application will vary substantially across contexts and cultures: the journalism required in post-genocide Rwanda carries different emphases and faces different structural constraints than the journalism required in post-Brexit Britain, post-conflict Colombia, or fragile-state Nigeria. What remains constant, across all of these diverse contexts, is the fundamental commitment: journalism as a practice of democratic renewal, constituted by an honest acknowledgment of its power to shape the narratives through which human communities understand themselves and their possibilities, and by a sustained willingness to accept the ethical responsibilities that such power entails.

The present moment — marked by simultaneous global crises of media credibility, democratic governance, and escalating violent conflict — makes the development of a journalism capable of contributing to peace, rather than merely chronicling its absence, not an academic luxury but a democratic necessity. The field of CRJ is, of course, emergent and incomplete; the framework advanced in this article will require empirical testing, critical refinement, and continuous engagement with the practical wisdom of journalists and

communities working in the most demanding conflict environments. That engagement is not incidental to the CRJ project. It is, in the deepest sense, constitutive of it.

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