

Constructive Journalism and COVID-19 Safe Nation Narratives in *The Herald* Newspaper: Implications for Journalism Ethics in Zimbabwe



Thulani Tshabangu and Abiodun Salawu

Abstract The coverage of crises such as the global health pandemic, COVID-19, is to a large extent guided by national interest, journalistic culture, and editorial policies of media outlets. This chapter argues that the state-controlled newspaper, *The Herald*, in Zimbabwe deployed constructive journalism as an approach to report COVID-19. Constructive journalism is about injecting positive angles into news reports whilst abiding by the core news values of accuracy, impartiality, and balance. The findings reveal that constructive journalism elements of solutions orientation, future orientation, and explanation and contextualisation were frequently deployed by *The Herald* to advance a safe nation narrative whose objective was to prevent public hysteria in the face of a deadly COVID-19 outbreak in the country. The chapter concludes that the deployment of constructive journalism in less developed countries like Zimbabwe to inspire hope through positive psychology in the face of global crises does not always yield the intended outcomes.

Keywords Constructive journalism · COVID-19 · Zimbabwe · Critical discourse analysis · Moral panics · Health reporting

Background

COVID-19 is one of the most recent natural disasters and pandemics that have affected Zimbabwe in the last four years. In 2016, Zimbabwe was hit by an El Niño-induced drought that affected four million people. In 2017, Cyclone Dineo affected Tsholotsho district flooding more than 2000 people and causing 250 deaths. In 2018, a cholera outbreak had 10,421 cases and 69 deaths. In 2019, Cyclone Idai affected 270,000 people and caused 299 deaths (ReliefWeb 2020). The first COVID-19 case in Zimbabwe was reported on 20 March 2020. At the time of this study, 31 August 2020, Zimbabwe had 6497 confirmed coronavirus cases, 202 deaths, and 5221

T. Tshabangu (✉) · A. Salawu
North West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa
e-mail: abiodun.salawu@nwu.ac.za

recoveries. COVID-19, like previous disasters, found Zimbabwe in a crisis, ill-prepared to reduce the risk and to respond accordingly to save lives. President Emmerson Mnangagwa declared COVID-19 a national disaster, and a National Preparedness and Response Plan for COVID-19 was put in place. Zimbabwe's response to COVID-19 is founded on the principles of limiting human-to-human transmission; early identification, isolation, and care for patients; risk communication and community engagement; narrowing knowledge gaps in disease transmission, prevention, and treatment; and minimising social and economic impact. The role of the media during the COVID-19 crisis is to provide the public with clear, accurate, credible, and timely information. COVID-19 information must articulate the nature and extent of the pandemic in the country. It must include general information about the virus, provision of health services, and challenges in the health delivery system. The government's response to the pandemic should be clearly articulated and accessible to everyone.

The Media Landscape

Zimbabwe has a monolithic and repressive media system, which is largely owned and controlled by the state. The state-controlled print media comprises eleven newspaper titles and three magazines under the Zimbabwe Newspapers Group (1980) Ltd. (Zimpapers). Publications under the Zimpapers arguably have the largest readership and are the dominant voice of government that shapes public sphere discourses. Amongst the list of Zimpapers publications is the leading daily *The Herald*, founded in 1891. Unaudited results of the 2019 Zimbabwe All Media Products Survey estimate that 14% of the adult population in Zimbabwe read *The Herald*, hence its dominance of the print media market. *The Herald* was chosen for this study because it is a public medium with the widest reach. It has an outstanding health reporting beat and a Coronavirus Watch section on its website dedicated to bringing up-to-date news and information about the pandemic.

Research Questions

The goal of the study is to evaluate the applicability of constructive journalism in Zimbabwe in the context of *The Herald* coverage of COVID-19. The specific research questions are:

What are The Herald journalists' knowledge and attitudes towards constructive journalism?

What elements of constructive journalism can be identified in COVID-19 news by The Herald?

What are the main discourses and themes in COVID-19 news by The Herald?

What are the attitudes and emotions of readers towards COVID-19 news that use constructive journalism elements?

Constructive Journalism

The role of the media in the coverage of health pandemics can be explored from a variety of theoretical perspectives such as health reporting, development communication/journalism, social behavior change communication, risk communication, and moral panic. The theoretical point of departure in this study is constructive journalism. The motivation for using constructive journalism was to test the applicability of new journalism theories in Africa, thereby contributing to de-Westernised understanding of journalism. Constructive journalism is an emerging form of news reporting that distances itself from negativity bias in the news. It is being pioneered by two Danish journalists, Catherine Gyldensted and Ulrik Haagerup, who argue that negativity bias in news may lead to public frustration with journalism and societal developments in general (Bro 2019, p. 516). Constructive journalism draws from positive psychology and its assumption is that constructive news can lead to positive emotions. Although constructive journalism avoids negative news about death, destruction, and societal misery, negative journalism is not necessarily bad or unconstructive. Negative news may have positive intentions or outcomes such as revealing human rights atrocities and abuses of power that can lead to social justice. In crisis times, such as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the role of constructive journalism is to provide solutions and avoid scaremongering and pumping public fear and anxiety.

Constructive journalism has been likened to “solutions journalism,” “peace journalism,” and “development journalism.” From and Kristensen (2018, p. 717) observe that it shares traits with “solutions journalism,” which was introduced as a journalistic practice in America in the late 1990s, focusing, much like constructive journalism, on how journalism should not simply pinpoint problems but also provide alternative perspectives and solutions. Because constructive journalism has positive intentions, it is almost similar to peace journalism, which is concerned with media reportage of conflict and the creation of peaceful solutions (Galtung 2015). Constructive journalism also appears like a poorly named version of development journalism because both are concerned with the role of journalism in bringing positive change in society. The difference is that development journalism is hackneyed, rooted in development communication theories, and intent on nation building, whereas constructive journalism is recent and is rooted in behavioral sciences with the objective of promoting feel-good positive psychology. Constructive journalism can achieve effects at micro, meso, and macro levels (Meier 2018). At the micro level, readers, viewers, listeners, and users should feel better after being exposed to constructive news reports as opposed to being burdened with problems. At the meso level, media companies should achieve greater audience loyalty, thereby increasing reading times and reach such that the media brand should be regarded as

positive and helpful. At the macro level, it must proffer possible solutions and perspectives for social problems and bring about progress for society Meier 2018).

In Africa, constructive journalism is still relatively new with two pioneer studies worth mentioning. McIntyre and Sobel (2017, p. 8) established that Rwandan journalists contributed to the reconstruction and recovery of the country by practising constructive journalism. Their study revealed that Rwandan journalists feel a strong obligation to promote unity and reconciliation by employing constructive journalism techniques as a direct result of having survived the 1994 genocide and wanting to prevent a similar tragedy from reoccurring. Zhang and Matingwina (2016) applied constructive journalism theory to compare the BBC and China Daily's coverage of the 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa. They established that constructive journalism was emerging as an alternative narrative to tell the story of Ebola and Africa replacing negative narratives and enduring stereotypes about Africa.

Hermans and Gyldensted (2019, p. 539) propose a six-point model of constructive journalism: solutions orientation demands journalists to include solutions when covering problems; future orientation: a strong inclination to look further than the events of the day; inclusiveness and diversity: including more voices and perspectives in the news; empowering people: by including a variety of views that empower so-called victims; explanation and contextualisation of the news; and co-creation by engaging and empowering the public to participate in news production. Central to this study was an endeavour to evaluate the applicability and suitability of Hermans and Gyldensted's (2019) six-point model of constructive journalism in Zimbabwe with *The Herald* newspaper as a case study. It is imperative to study constructive journalism in Zimbabwe to appreciate its application and challenges it may have in de-Westernised contexts.

Methodology

The study was interested in three key issues of constructive journalism, these being the context of production, the news products, and reception of constructive journalism. This was achieved through a triangulated data collection strategy that utilised semi-structured interviews, critical discourse analysis (CDA) of news articles, and an analysis of selected reader feedback obtained from *The Herald* interactive webpage and Facebook page. Interviews were conducted with a senior health reporter and two health reporters to understand how institutional pressures and policies affected the journalists' choices and decisions and other subjective experiences that influenced the way how journalists framed COVID-19 news. To avoid easy identification of the research participants, all interview responses were coded Journ1, Journ2, and Journ3. CDA was used to determine the presence of constructive journalism elements in COVID-19 news articles. Van den Bulck defines discourse as "a language or system of representation that has developed socially in order to make and circulate a coherent set of meanings about an important topic area" (2002, p. 85). Discourses

are the story of reality as presented to us through media or other cultural texts. News articles on COVID-19 were analysed at the textual and contextual levels following the CDA model initially propounded by Van Dijk (1988) and varied in subsequent years. At the textual level, news articles were analysed to determine the extent to which they infused constructive journalism elements. At the contextual level, they were analysed to determine how they were constrained by institutional and structural factors. Data saturation strategies were used to identify and select 120 news articles published on the ‘Coronavirus Watch’ web section between 3 March and 30 August 2020 for analysis. Articles were selected on the basis of the rich information they yielded and their propensity to provide answers to research questions. Due to the fact that analysed articles did not vary in thematic content, only a few are selected to illuminate the findings. The second approach to data collection was the analysis of selected readers’ responses to news articles to determine if constructive journalism as deployed by *The Herald* journalists to report COVID-19 leads to positive or negative feelings. Readers’ feedback conveniently sampled from *The Herald*’s website and Facebook page was used as vox populi to measure audience emotions towards constructive journalism. The objective of data collection was to obtain rich qualitative data that aided the researcher’s understanding of the subject matter rather than generating survey data. CDA was the overarching research method that helped to produce succinct findings through a process of transcription of interviews, sorting, and categorisation of the data to discover patterns, concepts, themes, and meanings.

Constructive Journalism at The Herald

Unlike the HIV and AIDS pandemic, which already has media guidelines for reporting it, there are no policies yet to guide media reportage of COVID-19 in Zimbabwe. This means that journalists were learning about the pandemic inasmuch as they learnt to report it. The interviewees said they had no knowledge of constructive journalism and used basic journalistic skills and intuition to report COVID-19. They reiterated that media had a duty to combat the pandemic through dissemination of appropriate information and educating the public about its causes, symptoms, and prevention. This role of media during the COVID-19 crisis was summed by Journ2:

Imparting information on COVID-19 is priceless. I report on COVID-19 hoping to change health behaviors and to save lives. I want to empower people to make informed decisions and to take preventative measures. The role of the media is to inform and educate the public about COVID-19 using simplified writing. [Interview with Journ 2: 3 Aug, 2020]

The Herald health journalists were perhaps unconsciously knowledgeable about constructive journalism as they frequently mentioned phrases that were closely associated with it during interviews. Journ1 defined the role of the media during the pandemic using a constructive approach as follows:

Mainstream media must play a role to dispel rumours that come through social media. The role of media must be to calm the nation, so that people are not afraid. Fear of COVID-19

may lead to stigma and discrimination that can scuttle the government response effort. The media must give hope to the nation, especially to those who have tested positive for COVID-19 by profiling recoveries. It must put a human face to the recoveries so that those who are infected may also have hope that they will fight through. [Interview with Journ1: 30 July 2020]

Although *The Herald* did not explicitly refer to constructive journalism as the guiding philosophy for its COVID-19 news coverage, it often used some of the constructive elements proposed by Hermans and Gyldensted (2019) in its reportage of the pandemic. The frequently used constructive elements were solutions orientation, future orientation, and explanation and contextualisation. The solutions-oriented element was used to encourage local people to be responsible and play a role in fighting the pandemic. A solutions-oriented approach sees local people as empowered and capable of action because they can identify problems and provide solutions. Solutions-oriented reporting often documented the local actions of people individually or collectively providing solutions to the pandemic. Future orientation was used to pacify people, to restore hope, and to encourage them to comply with lockdown restrictions. It was also used to prepare readers for a new normal life during and after the COVID-19 crisis. Explanation and contextualisation were used to guide readers through the unfamiliar news topic of COVID-19. Explanation and contextualisation articles highlighted the meanings and implications of the pandemic for ordinary people through detailed information about how COVID-19 was transmitted, its symptoms, and how it could be prevented. News about new scientific findings and progress of research into vaccines was also framed using explanation and contextualisation elements.

The less used constructive elements were inclusiveness and diversity, empowerment, and co-creation. *The Herald's* use of official sources for COVID-19 news meant there was no inclusivity and diversity of voices in the news. Underrepresented and underprivileged segments of society rarely had their concerns about COVID-19 published because the newspaper was preoccupied with preserving the status quo. This was worsened by the fact that news and information about COVID-19 were part of government crisis communication. Consequently, media reportage of the pandemic was centred on government authorities who provided official information such as the number of cases in the country and policy pronouncements.

The media can play an empowerment role by incorporating the voices of ordinary people infected and affected by COVID-19. *The Herald* used the empowerment element less because COVID-19 discourses were centred on public officials as disseminators of news and information about the pandemic. Empowerment can be attained if *The Herald* opens news production to participation by ordinary citizens. Citizens can be empowered to participate in public sphere debates, expressing their fears and concerns about the pandemic. Co-creation was a less used element of constructive journalism because *The Herald* journalists regarded themselves as the legitimate creators and conveyors of COVID-19 news. The absence of co-created content indicates that *The Herald* is still rooted in traditional journalism and has a low uptake of participatory or citizen journalism. It is commendable that *The Herald* journalists engaged with readers on social media platforms to obtain feedback and

tips on new story ideas. Engagement with readers often led journalists to human interest stories about returnees escaping from quarantine centres and sneaky pre-views of life in quarantine centres.

The study was also concerned with how readers respond to COVID-19 news written using constructive journalism. Readers' feedback on *The Herald's* website and Facebook page was used as a proxy to gauge the acceptability of constructive journalism. The analysis revealed that the majority of the readers' comments were negative. This means that *The Herald's* use of constructive journalism elements in reporting COVID-19 did not lead to positive emotions as anticipated in theory. The negative readers' feedback can be attributed to the citizens' distrust of politicians and frustration with the country's ongoing crisis. Overall, readers had a negative disposition towards the nation's COVID-19 response plan since they regarded Zimbabwe as a failed state. The insignificant positive comments indicate that perhaps some news articles written using constructive journalism elements have an appeal to some readers. It is possible that positive comments to COVID-19 news articles mainly came from ruling party sympathisers and state propaganda armies who used the comments section on *The Herald* website to distract and influence the citizen discourses to favour the status quo.

COVID-19 Discourses and Themes in The Herald

COVID-19 and decoloniality The coverage of COVID-19 by *The Herald* revealed the public health and political dimension of the pandemic. News with a public health dimension had an informational and educational value aimed at creating COVID-19 awareness. News with a political dimension usually had a propaganda spin to reflect the dominant thought pattern of the ruling elites. Journalists at *The Herald* were under pressure to write articles that were biased towards government. This is confirmed by Kovacevic and Perisin (2018), who note that in some contexts constructive journalism connotes being in support of a certain regime or ideology. Journalist 2 attested that 'a good COVID-19 story is one that reflected the government position' [Interview with Journalist 2: 3 Aug, 2020]. Decoloniality is one of the political ideologies that were carried in the COVID-19 news. News with decolonial agenda promoted nationalistic, Pan African, and anti-Western solutions to the pandemic. A frequent argument in such articles was that Zimbabwe and the rest of the African continent could provide home-grown solutions to the pandemic without looking up to Western countries. The article "Could African indigenous knowledge hold answers to COVID-19?" (Ndhongo 2020), framed using the solutions-oriented element, argues that Africa could be the source of the elusive cure for COVID-19. This followed the discovery of an herbal remedy for COVID-19 in Madagascar. *The Herald* consistently pressed for the need to recognise African solutions to the pandemic lambasting Western countries for claiming to have "God-given power to research, find, produce and sell treatment for any ailment" (Ndhongo 2020). The decoloniality theme was also advanced to explain the strengthening of Sino-Zimbabwe

cooperation in the field of medicine and in the fight against the pandemic. As part of the solutions-oriented reportage, *The Herald* urged citizens to accept Chinese traditional medicine as cure for COVID-19. Later, China donated medical expertise, cash, equipment, and vaccines to Zimbabwe.

COVID-19, sanctions blame game, and opportunities *The Herald* frequently argued that sanctions imposed on Zimbabwe by some Western governments, mainly the USA, Britain, and the European Union in 2001, were impeding COVID-19 response efforts in the country. The newspaper also propounded the narrative that COVID-19, just like Western-imposed sanctions, was stalling economic progress in the country. ‘Coronavirus stalls progress at New Parly building’ in *The Herald*, 16 March 2020, reports that COVID-19 had slowed the construction of the New Parliament building after 100 Chinese technocrats failed to return from holidays. The article used explanation and contextualisation to elicit positive responses from readers who in this case were expected to commiserate with the government for failing to finish national projects on time due to the pandemic. However, the article received negative responses as some readers reasoned that the government was using COVID-19 as a scapegoat for its ineptitude. ‘Now Zanu Pf will blame everything on the twin evils, sanctions and Coronavirus’, lamented a reader by the pseudonym Aljezeera-Alshabab (Chidakwa and Zhakata 2020). As if to contradict itself, *The Herald* also presented COVID-19 as a blessing in disguise that would unlock economic opportunities by reviving industries and promoting research innovation. ‘Home-grown response to Covid-19 lauded’ in *The Herald*, 7 May 2020, encouraged Zimbabwe to go ‘overdrive in using home-grown solutions [...] to grow the economy’ (*The Herald*, 7 May 2020c), during the COVID-19 pandemic. Framed using the solutions-oriented approach, the article adds jingoism and optimism that are the characteristics of constructive journalism. Consistent with constructive journalism’s objective of creating positive psychology, *The Herald* focused on the bright side of COVID-19, in particular, how the enforcement of a lockdown was beneficial. ‘Harness positives from lockdown to spruce up city’ (Butaumocho 2020) encouraged the City of Harare to embrace the positive spin-offs of the lockdown such as reduced human traffic previously caused by illegal vendors and pirate taxis. The article says the lockdown had brought ‘a fresh look’ to Harare within a matter of days. Such positive frames were meant to encourage citizens to embrace the lockdown as a new normal and to allay concerns about their livelihoods and decreased income earning opportunities due to the lockdown.

COVID-19 response capacity and preparedness *The Herald*’s consistent messaging during the pandemic was that Zimbabwe had capacity and was prepared to respond to COVID-19 despite the country’s disadvantaged economic position caused by Western sanctions. Concurrent with this messaging was the safe nation narrative aimed at preventing public panic. In keeping with constructive journalism, *The Herald*’s main preoccupation was to reduce public anxiety, offer assurance, and keep its audiences calm during the public health crisis. One way of presenting Zimbabwe’s capacity to deal with COVID-19 was to use the flashback technique to remind the public that the country had in the past overcome colonialism, consecutive droughts, and busted Western sanctions. Citizens were encouraged not to fret

because the country was safe and in the capable hands of its leadership comprising President Emmerson Mnangagwa and his two Vice Presidents Constantine Chiwenga and Kembo Mohadi, who were all experienced war liberation heroes with the right determination and discipline to lead the country in overcoming the pandemic. *The Herald's* key message was that of hope and resilience during times of distress to build around positive frames of responsible leadership, national building, and unity of purpose.

In most narratives, the fight against COVID-19 was equated to a fight against a political opponent. This is seen in 'Covid-19 provides turning point for Zimbabwe: VP' (*The Herald*, 4 May, 2020b) which quotes Mohadi as saying:

I am sure we will conquer the current crisis just as we have done in the past. The 16 years of the brutal war towards independence taught us that no matter how hard and difficult a situation might be, there is light at the end of the tunnel. (*The Herald*, 4 May, 2020b)

Although government critics and private media were always sceptical of government's capacity to tackle the COVID-19 crisis, the death of prominent broadcaster Zororo Makamba on 23 March 2020 was a turning point. The state media for the first time exposed the government's lack of capacity to deal with COVID-19 as it emerged that Makamba died because he could not be put on a life-saving ventilator. Despite creating the impression that the nation was safe, *The Herald* was forced to reveal that the country's COVID-19 referral hospitals needed skilled personnel, equipment, and refurbishments to effectively manage infections and treat hospitalised patients.

The Herald sometimes overestimated the country's capacity to respond to the pandemic through constructive articles laden with puffery and patriotism. 'Coronavirus: Bringing the best out of nations' (Butaumocho 2020) stated that COVID-19 had brought out Zimbabwe's best capabilities. Another related article, 'Covid-19 could be catalyst for top-notch health delivery system' (Chikova 2020), reasons that Zimbabwe can achieve a top-notch health delivery system owing to improvements to be made to hospitals during the crisis. Articles that appeal to patriotism present a challenge to journalism ethics as journalists sometimes violate their duties of truth-telling for the sake of national fervour.

Despite continuously saying the nation had capacity to respond to the pandemic, *The Herald* often contradicted itself by openly celebrating COVID-19 donations from local and international funders. News that celebrated COVID-19 handouts from donors riled readers who were initially made to believe that the government was prepared to handle the pandemic. The article, 'Trust hands over ventilator to Wilkins' (Rupapa and Chidakwa 2020), framed using the constructive element of local solutions to COVID-19, disgusted readers after the newspaper celebrated the donation of a ventilator to Wilkins Clinic. One reader Manucho lashed out:

Idiots. You enjoy parading donations yet you spend millions buying cars for Zanu PF elite and ministers. When it comes to buying things that benefit the public you blame sanctions for not buying but when it comes to hiring private jets from Dubai and buying expensive cars you spend like billionaires. It took the death of Zororo for u to realise that a ventilator was needed at Wilkins seriously??? Fellow Zimbabweans we are alone in this battle. Reader's Comment. (Rupapa and Chidakwa 2020)

In general, readers did not respond positively to news about COVID-19 pledges and donations because they felt these were likely to be embezzled by corrupt politicians for selfish gains.

COVID-19 Othering and Blame Games

The media and politicians may seek conspiracy theories to ‘others’ or blame others when public health is at risk. Former US President Donald Trump called coronavirus a ‘Chinese virus’, blaming China for the global outbreak of the pandemic, adding to conspiracy theories that the virus was engineered by China as a bioweapon. *The Herald* often ‘othered’ Zimbabwean migrants, who returned home from the diaspora at the height of the pandemic, blaming them for an increase in COVID-19 cases in the country. This led to a moral panic that returnees were undesirable to society. The essence of a moral panic is that a situation, person, group, or setting is seen by the public as a threat to society. Returnees were cast as highly infectious, troublesome, and undesirable. ‘Border skipping returnees a risk to us all (Dzenga 2020) blames returnees for ‘threatening to dislodge Zimbabwe’s good standing against Covid-19 which had otherwise been well handled’. Returnees were also portrayed as failed economic migrants that were skipping borders into the country with petty criminal minds. ‘Quarantined returnees drinking sanitisers’ (Chipunza 2020) reports that some returnees in quarantine facilities were drinking liquid sanitisers that have a high percentage of alcohol as a way of mitigating boredom associated with staying in compulsory quarantine. This article, although intent on bringing out the human interest of the pandemic, leads to ‘othering’ of returnees as a nuisance to society.

COVID-19 deaths Although *The Herald* tried to avoid negative news about the pandemic, it found itself having to report inevitable COVID-19 deaths. As a matter of principle, the media must play a role in consoling the nation when it is grieving the death of its citizens, especially due to natural disasters. *The Herald* covered COVID-19 deaths using the constructive element of explanation and contextualisation. This was done to preserve public calm and create an understanding of the pandemic to prevent more deaths. As part of contextualisation, *The Herald* usually evoked patriotism to say Zimbabwe was faring better in terms of COVID-19 infections and deaths compared to neighbouring South Africa and Western countries.

The first Zimbabwean to die of COVID-19 was media personality Zororo Makamba on 23 March 2020 at 30 years of age. At that time, he and another unnamed compatriot were the only two known positive cases in the country. His death, due to COVID-19, attracted significant media coverage because he was the first Zimbabwean to die of the pandemic and due to his celebrity status. *The Herald*’s reportage of Makamba’s death exposed entrenched beliefs that COVID-19 was imported into the country by diaspora returnees and that people who had a history of foreign travel to Western capitals of affluence and close contacts of such people were more likely to be infected. This is revealed in the article ‘Broadcaster laid to rest’ (*The Herald*, 25 March 2020a), which says ‘it is not clear where he picked up

the infection from' but it was after his travel to New York and return to Harare via Johannesburg. In a show of patriotic superiority, the USA and South Africa are flagged out as COVID-19 hotspots and subtly blamed for Makamba's COVID-19 infection and subsequent death.

The obituary 'In Zororo's silence' (Sharuko 2020) reveals the beliefs of journalists regarding the pandemic. The author notes:

Until Zororo Makamba died on Monday, there was a feeling, among some of us, that coronavirus was some distant offshore pandemic. There was this myth, black people were immune to this virus and it could not survive in our hot conditions. We also told ourselves it only posed a danger for those above 70 years, and not the African youths, the ghetto youths. (Sharuko, 28 March, 2020)

It is apparent that *The Herald* journalists mystified COVID-19 as a disease that affected wealthy, elderly white people.

Another characteristic theme in *The Herald's* reportage of COVID-19 deaths was the use of Biblical parallelisms. Although this was not a consistent feature, Biblical verses were used to bring positive emotions of hope and grow readers' faith in the face of adversity as part of constructive journalism. Makamba's obituary stresses that he died at 30, 'the age David became King, the age Ezekiel began his ministry and the age our Lord Jesus Christ was baptised by John the Baptist' (Sharuko 2020). The age of 30 in the Bible symbolises the end of one cycle in a person's life and the beginning of another. The number 30 also signifies positivity and joy in life. To promote positive psychology, the obituary ends with the statement 'To God Be The Glory!' which gives hope for a better future post-COVID-19.

The Herald was not always successful in deploying constructive journalism to maintain public calm in the face of COVID-19 deaths. In some instances, it unintentionally created panic through sensational headlines and stories. The article 'Makamba contact web exceptionally complex' (Mugabe 2020) creates public hysteria by reporting that it was difficult to trace the web of people who had contact with the deceased for screening, testing, and possible quarantine. *The Herald* was sometimes caught in unnecessary scaremongering, saying Zimbabwe was headed towards mass deaths because citizens were failing to abide by lockdown restrictions. The use of scaremongering tactics to communicate health message led to unintended panic and fear. By the end of August 2020, over 200 Zimbabweans had died of COVID-19, including government ministers, but *The Herald* still reported COVID-19 deaths with stigma and sometimes in sensational ways that induced public fear.

COVIDgate: Corruption and misuse of public funds The watchdog role of the media implies that journalists must monitor and hold those in power accountable by exposing acts of abuse of power and corruption. During the COVID-19 crisis, the media must expose corruption scandals that relate to the pandemic and demand accountability of resources mobilised for the response effort. It is commendable that *The Herald* exposed various acts of petty corruption involving businesses that were overcharging COVID-19 test kits, fake public service exemption letters, and police officers extorting travellers without valid permits at lockdown roadblocks. However,

it ignored the biggest corruption scandal that involved the Minister of Health, also known as ‘COVIDgate’ or ‘Draxgate’. This was largely due to its deployment of constructive journalism, which led it to uncritical news. Therefore, the challenge with constructive journalism is that it can be reduced to ‘uncritical reporting’ or simply ‘happy news’ (Mast et al. 2019, p. 494). Institutional pressures are also to blame for *The Herald*’s sin of omitting the ‘COVIDgate’ scandal as journalists were forced to exercise self-censorship. This was revealed by Journ2:

We sometimes get reprimanded by news editors over stories that are problematic or don’t toe the line. As a result, we now know what stories to write. The objective of our reportage of the pandemic has always been not to cause fear, alarm and despondency, incite the public and expose government officials. [Interview with Journ2: 3 August, 2020]

The ‘COVIDgate’ scandal happened after government relaxed procurement rules to expedite purchase of supplies and to support local industries. This relaxation of procurement procedures during emergency mode bred corruption through price gouging, kickbacks, bribes, and favouritism. The Minister of Health, Obadiah Moyo, was arrested and subsequently fired from his position for alleged procedural misconduct after he allegedly allowed a dodgy company, Drax International, to get a USD 42 million tender to supply COVID-19 drugs and equipment at exorbitant prices without going to tender. *The Herald* initially ignored whistle-blowers and public outcry regarding the scandal in the spirit of constructive journalism which typically ‘avoids politically controversial articles’ (Rotmeijer 2019, p. 602). The president fired the health minister after the ‘COVIDgate’ scandal was exposed by independent journalist Hopewell Chin’ono and an online publication ZimLive. In response to this, the article ‘No sacred cows in fight against corruption’ (*The Herald*, 26 June 2020d) went into overdrive eulogising the state for fighting corruption. Instead of seeking to investigate more cases of corruption, *The Herald* dismissed corruption as a ‘hackneyed’ campaign trump card for the opposition and called on ‘the journalists who claim to have unearthed the alleged tender scandal’ to leave the case in the competent hands of the judiciary and stop making ‘needless hullabaloo’ (*The Herald*, 26 June 2020d).

Conclusion

Although constructive journalism is an emerging genre, *The Herald* is already embracing it albeit unknowingly. Constructive journalism was deployed to COVID-19 news to avoid public alarm and hysteria whilst creating calm and hope in the face of adversity. By using constructive elements, *The Herald* attempted to create public confidence in the country’s leadership and a false hope that Zimbabwe had capacity to respond to the pandemic. The use of constructive elements did not necessarily lead to positive emotions as anticipated. Instead, readers were in most instances furious about constructive news as it was perceived to be propagandistic and serving the interests of political elites. Crisis-ridden countries such as Zimbabwe

do not need constructive journalism because it may become a propaganda tool that perpetuates existing inequalities and the hegemonic order. Zimbabwe needs news media that are disruptive and unsettling and deconstruct the hegemonic power dynamics (Rotmeijer 2019). The news media in Zimbabwe must play the role of speaking truth to power thereby holding the authorities accountable and expose corruption and injustice.

References

- Bro P (2019) Constructive journalism: proponents, precedents, and principles. *Journalism* 20(4): 504–519
- Butaumocho R (2020) Coronavirus: bringing the best out of nations. *The Herald*, 9 April. <https://www.herald.co.zw/coronavirus-bringing-the-best-out-of-nations/>. Accessed 29 July, 2020
- Chidakwa B, Zhakata I (2020) Coronavirus stalls progress at New Parly building. *The Herald*, 16 March. <https://www.herald.co.zw/coronavirus-stalls-progress-at-new-parly-building/>. Accessed 15 July, 2020
- Chikova L (2020) Covid-19 could be catalyst for top-notch health delivery system. *The Herald*, 17 April. <https://www.herald.co.zw/covid-19-could-be-catalyst-for-top-notch-health-delivery-system/>. Accessed 10 August, 2020
- Chipunza P (2020) Quarantined returnees drinking sanitisers. *The Herald*, 20 June. <https://www.herald.co.zw/quarantined-returnees-drinking-sanitisers/>. Accessed 15 August, 2020
- Dzenga L (2020) Border skipping returnees a risk to us all. *The Herald*, 27 May. <https://www.herald.co.zw/border-skipping-returnees-a-risk-to-us-all/>. Accessed 9 August, 2020
- From U, Kristensen N (2018) Rethinking constructive journalism by means of service journalism. *Journal Pract* 12(6):714–729
- Galtung J (2015) Peace journalism and reporting on the United States. *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 22(1):1–13
- Hermans L, Gyldensted C (2019) Elements of constructive journalism: characteristics, practical application and audience valuation. *Journalism* 20(4):535–551
- Kovacevic P, Perisin T (2018) The potential of constructive journalism ideas in a Croatian context. *Journal Pract* 12(6):747–763
- Mast J, Coesemans R, Temmerman M (2019) Constructive journalism: concepts, practices, and discourses. *Journalism* 20(4):492–503
- McIntyre K, Sobel M (2017) Reconstructing Rwanda: how Rwandan reporters use constructive journalism to promote peace. *Journal Stud* 19(14):2126–2147. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2017.1326834>. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2017.1326834>
- Meier K (2018) How does the audience respond to constructive journalism? *Journal Pract* 12(6): 764–780. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2018.1470472>
- Mugabe T (2020) Makamba contact web exceptionally complex. *The Herald*, 24 March. <https://www.herald.co.zw/makambacontact-web-exceptionally-complex/>. Accessed 15 July 2020
- Ndhongo K (2020) Could African indigenous knowledge hold answers to COVID-19? *The Herald*, 28 May. <https://www.herald.co.zw/could-african-indigenous-knowledge-hold-answers-to-covid-19/>. Accessed 20 August 2020
- ReliefWeb (2020) Zimbabwe humanitarian response plan. [Online] ReliefWeb. <https://reliefweb.int/report/zimbabwe/zimbabwe-humanitarian-response-plan-2020-march-2020>. Accessed 7 July, 2020
- Rotmeijer S (2019) “Words that work?”. Practices of constructive journalism in a local Caribbean context. *Journalism* 20(4):600–616

- Rupapa T, Chidakwa B (2020) Trust hands over ventilator to Wilkins. *The Herald*, 27 March. <https://www.herald.co.zw/trusthands-over-ventilator-to-wilkins/>. Accessed 17 July 2020
- Sharuko R (2020) In Zororo's silence. *The Herald*, 28 March. <https://www.herald.co.zw/sharuko-on-saturday-40/>. Accessed 29 July 2020
- The Herald (2020a) Broadcaster laid to rest. *The Herald*, 25 March. <https://www.herald.co.zw/just-in-zororo-makamba-laid-to-rest/>. Accessed 15 July 2020
- The Herald (2020b) Covid-19 provides turning point for Zimbabwe: VP. *The Herald*, 4 May. <https://www.herald.co.zw/covid-19-provides-turning-point-for-zimbabwe-vp/>. Accessed 10 Aug 2020
- The Herald (2020c) Home-grown response to Covid-19 lauded. *The Herald*, 7 May. <https://www.herald.co.zw/home-grownresponse-to-covid-19-lauded/>. Accessed 10 June 2020
- The Herald (2020d) No sacred cows in fight against corruption. *The Herald*, 26 June. <https://www.herald.co.zw/no-sacred-cowsin-fight-against-corruption/>. Accessed 20 Aug 2020
- Van den Bulck H (2002) Tools for studying the media. In: Newbold C, Boyd-Barret O, Van den Bulck H (eds) *The media book*. Arnold, London, pp 55–100
- Van Dijk TA (1988) *News as discourse*. Lawrence Erlbaum, New Jersey
- Zhang Y, Matingwina S (2016) A new representation of Africa? The use of constructive journalism in the narration of Ebola by China daily and the BBC. *African Journalism Studies* 37(3):19–40

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

