

# **A Transformational Journey**

*Adopting solutions journalism at Utah's Deseret News*



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# Introduction

**P**aul Edwards had stepped into a battle zone. It was September 1, 2010, his first day as editorial page editor for The Deseret News. The day before, the News had laid off 43% of its staff, another casualty of the financial and technological maelstrom that had wreaked havoc across American newsrooms.

The cuts had hit hard at a newspaper with a rich history. The Deseret News was the first news organization and the longest continuously-operating business in the state of Utah. Owned by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, it offered news, information, commentary, and analysis from an award-winning and experienced team of reporters, editors, columnists and bloggers. Its mission was to be a leading news brand for faith and family oriented audiences in Utah and around the world.



Located in Salt Lake City, Utah, The Deseret News is one of two daily metro papers in the area.

For Edwards and the rest of the News team, the wrenching layoffs were the start of a journey—one aimed at achieving financial sustainability, to be sure, but also at creating a different sort of value for its readers. “The restructuring was not done just in the spirit of cost cutting,” Edwards says. “It was a restructuring that was very strategically created to generate greater opportunity for the growth of The Deseret News.” As difficult as it was to see dedicated staffers leave the paper, Edwards held hope for what lay ahead.

The vision that emerged was to continue providing high-quality metro coverage but also to explore topics of more national concern. The Deseret News formed six new areas of editorial emphasis: **faith, family, care for the poor, excellence in education, financial responsibility and values in the media.**

“We were discovering what readers were demanding and asking for,” Edwards says. “We had read some of this literature where people were tuning out from mainstream media in part because the message of doom and gloom that seemed to prevail. We knew that our voice needed to be different.” Editors and reporters discussed ideas as they

looked at other news organizations. They found a term for the kind of writing that would answer the concerns of citizens—“service journalism.” The Deseret News wanted to write for people, and they wanted people to feel empowered by turning to the news instead of away from it.

But “service journalism” didn’t seem to carry the same weight as investigative journalism; it didn’t quite grasp the vision The Deseret News was reaching toward. So staff and editors kept exploring options. Eventually, they discovered David Bornstein’s article “Why ‘Solutions Journalism’ Matters, Too” (The New York Times, December 20, 2011).

This was their answer: **“critical and clear-eyed reporting that investigates and explains credible responses to social problems.”**

Edwards, who by then had been named the paper’s editor-in-chief, arranged to meet Bornstein, in March, 2012. Bornstein had written several books about social change, including *How to Change the World*, and he was co-author, with Tina Rosenberg, of the “Fixes” column for the New York Times. He and Rosenberg were starting a new non-profit organization, the Solutions Journalism Network, aimed at codifying and spreading the practice of solutions reporting. Bornstein visited The Deseret News offices, and he and Edwards realized they had similar opinions on what the news should be like. “You empower your readers with information about potential solutions to the harsh problems that you’re encountering through your narrative,” Edwards says.

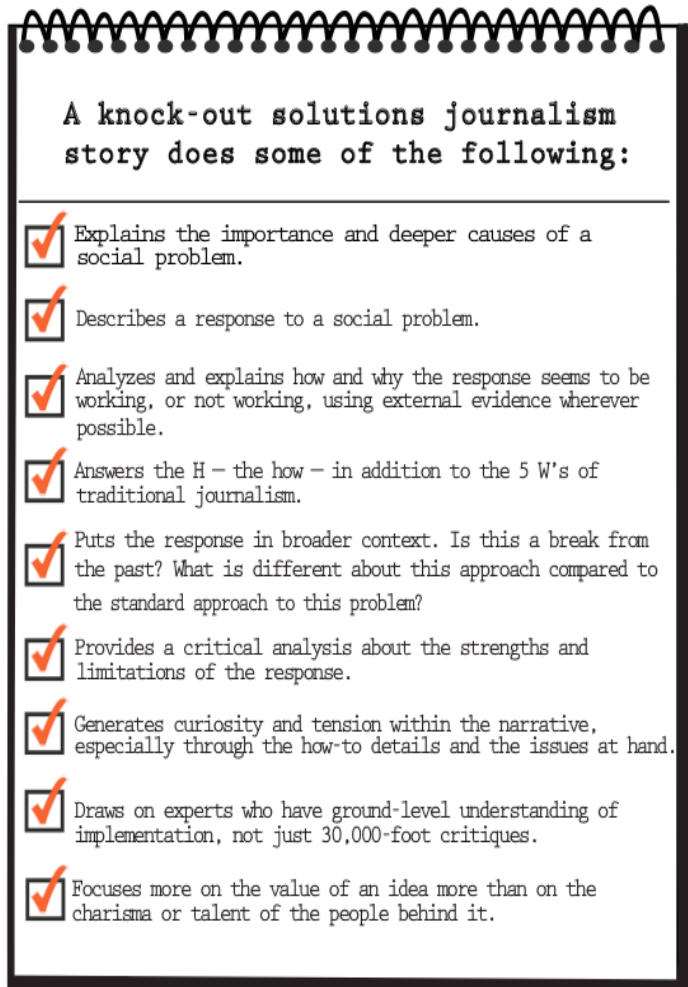
Solutions journalism, like all great journalism, is about story telling. Solutions stories have characters who are grappling with challenges, experimenting, succeeding, failing, learning. Solutions journalism reports on responses to social problems that may or may not be working. The key is to look at the whole picture, the problem and the response; journalism typically stops short of the latter. Solutions journalism is neither “good news” nor advocacy. It provides critical analysis built on credible evidence and top-notch sources.



David Bornstein, co-founder of the Solutions Journalism Network, visited The Deseret News in spring of 2012.

Bornstein's language resonated at the *News*. "We were yearning for a framework and a vocabulary to understand (how) to do solutions journalism," Edwards says. "Having David talk about this in those terms and add the rigor that was required made a big difference in our own team accepting this as worthwhile. This isn't service journalism in the traditional sense; it is rigorous and investigative journalism at its core."

## The elements of a solutions story



Bornstein challenged The Deseret News to adopt solutions journalism. A year later, The Deseret News has, in fact, changed the way it presents the news. Solutions-oriented stories are commonplace, and evidence suggests that they are popular among readers, helping to drive the paper's resurgence.

This case study is organized around several questions presented to The Deseret News team in order to assess their transition to a solutions-based news organization. It discusses the reasoning, the benefits, and the challenges in changing journalists' and readers' behavior—and a valuable framework for other news organizations.

# The Journey

## How was solutions journalism implemented at The Deseret News?

After meeting with Bornstein, Edwards knew it was fitting to integrate solutions journalism with the *News*' six areas of editorial emphasis. These were the topics citizens were concerned about, the topics they needed solutions for.

"The solutions journalism presentation that David Bornstein gave opened some of our minds to ways that you could still be rigorous (in reporting) but also have news that wasn't depressing," says Alison Pond, a Deseret News editor.

But Bornstein didn't provide a road map for the newsroom to become solutions-oriented. That was a task for Edwards and his leadership team to spearhead. So, how did they do it?

First, Edwards had to make sure the entire newsroom team was on board. Reporters and editors had read Bornstein's article, and had adopted his vocabulary. Meetings were held to further discuss what solutions stories looked like, and reporters began coming up with ideas that connected problems to responses.

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*-Paul Edwards, Editor-in-chief*

News editors introduced new interviewing skills. This entailed asking different questions: "What are the solutions? What do we know about them? Are they working?" Staffers were asked to challenge themselves as they applied their reporting to new topics with a new lens. And feedback from editors included an assessment of the solutions orientation.

Essentially, The Deseret News implemented this cultural shift by following these steps:

- Educating their staff about solutions journalism—what it is (and isn't), why it's needed and what it looks like.
- Taking reporting a step further by researching and then writing about what solutions exist for any given problem. This sometimes comes in the form of a follow-up for a story which highlights a problem.
- Changing the questions they ask and finding sources who can provide expert insight.
- Holding staff meetings to evaluate their progress and areas for improvement.

Edwards says two organizational mechanisms are especially important when making the switch to solutions journalism:

### Encourage dialogue between editors and writers

Bornstein's visit to the Deseret News provided a shared vocabulary. It elucidated what the news organization had spent more than a year searching for. With that vocabulary, the staff is now able to speak the same language; they understand what goes into a strong solutions story. With this established, editors and reporters are able to have meaningful and effective conversations about how stories can improve, how writers can improve, and what is already working well. The progress builds on itself while creating a bond of trust between editors and reporters. The reporter can trust the editor for help when needed, and the editor can trust the reporter to draft solutions stories which will benefit the community.

### Create opportunity for training and feedback

In the bustle of a newsroom, it's easy to get caught in deadlines and lose track of time. But for solutions journalism to flourish, editors and reporters must make time for an essential dialogue. Reporters and their stories need feedback and support, and staff goals need to be continually reinforced. Both needs can be addressed with brief occasional meetings, and with emails from the editor-in-chief that cite relevant news articles, reports, or musings. Article evaluations also provide an opportunity for reporters and editors to bond.

As essential as this process is, there is not always enough time for reporters to meet with editors and discuss their work. "Sometimes you just run out of time. That is a general challenge any newsroom faces," Edwards says. "(But) when there are key stories that are of particular importance to us, we kind of force our way into making sure we have this conversation.

### How long has implementation taken?

Solutions journalism at The Deseret News is a perpetual work in progress. Celia Baker, an education reporter, says,

"I feel like I am still getting my feet on the ground in solutions journalism." Other reporters shared this sentiment. Full implementation will take repeated training, practice, and feedback.

## Impact

### What is the upside of adopting solutions journalism?

The Deseret News has reported positive feedback from its readers. One manifestation of this response is seen in traffic data: Anecdotally, the *News* observes that solutions-oriented stories tend to drive more page views and shares than comparable non-solutions articles. (See graphic, Appendix A.)

That's not surprising. Journalists tend to dedicate more time to solutions stories, producing stories with more depth and better data that are targeted at urgent reader interests. "We really feel this kind of journalism is writing to our readers rather than writing to our sources," Edwards says.

As of February 2013, The Deseret News is the second fastest growing newspaper in the country in terms of circulation, according to a report from Alliance for Audited Media. "Our results over the past few years have been very strong," says Edwards, "We've seen the audited print circulation jump dramatically, with 15 percent growth in circulation year over year."

Additionally, the Sunday *National Edition* has aided the significant circulation increases.

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*-Paul Edwards, Editor-in-chief*

In an article on prweb.com, Edwards credited the increased circulation to the overall aims of Deseret News reporting. "The steady growth we have seen reinforces the pursuit of our unique brand of in-depth, long-form journalism, rigorously covering topics that resonate to family and faith oriented audiences across the country," he says. There's no evidence that solutions journalism, per se, has catalyzed readership growth, but it has been core to the *News'* overall editorial strategy.

### How have readers responded to solutions reporting?

The community response towards solutions journalism has been positive, indicating that readers are paying attention and participating in solutions themselves. “I did a story on a low-cost incubator,” says reporter Mercedes White, describing an article about Embrace, a non-profit organization that designs incubators for babies in poverty-stricken areas of the world. “I’ve had about eight women send me emails and letters asking ‘How can I participate? I’m really interested and want to be involved.’”

As people act on the solutions stories they read, reporters are held to an even higher standard of journalism. “(The reader response) makes me feel like I have to make sure that the things that I’m writing about are legitimately good causes,” says White, a care for the poor reporter. “This is how people are getting information about problems and (their solutions).”

## Do reporters change their interviewing strategy?

Reporters pursuing solutions stories often find it easy to secure interviews. People are eager to share the projects they are working on and the programs they are involved with. But solutions journalism is not good news; it is about critical analysis of programs and projects. Reporters must ask hard questions, and they must interview people other than those who run programs. This includes academic experts, competitors, critics, people affected by the program in both a good and bad way, and people who can give insight into how sustainable a solution is.

“We’re able to probe questions more deeply than they usually get,” Edwards says in reference to a story about a homeless clinic. “Our team is asking really systemic questions about root causes of poverty and homelessness (and) what models are being adopted from others places.” Doug Wilks, Managing Editor of the Deseret Media, says, “We challenge our reporters to ask these more compelling questions and to feature a different inquiry, a different level of understanding.”

## How has this changed the atmosphere in the newsroom?

Reporters mention they have enjoyed looking more closely into issues and the ways in which people are solving them. “Journalists are a cynical lot,” says Celia Baker, “But I do think that in our newsroom, the emphasis on solutions journalism helps us search for stories that rise above the gloom-and-doom portrayals so prevalent in the media.”

Reporters also mention the solutions approach takes more research and more digging than before. “We are seeking a better level of questioning to get at the heart of the story,” says Doug Wilks. “We’re going much deeper. That’s how it manifests itself in the news.” Wilks also says there is tremendous opportunity in the challenge of sharing resources and expertise from the 30 journalists in the newsroom.

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*-Celia Baker, Education reporter*

Other reporters say this approach makes their work more purposeful. “I feel like we have a bit of power to make change,” says Baker. “It’s exciting to think that maybe now and then you do something that makes a difference, and you have a platform to do that.”

### Follow-up Stories

In November 2012, Benjamin Wood reported on low high school graduation rates in Utah, with the key fact that Utah is the fourth worst in the country for graduating minority students. Wood visited a couple of the high schools in Ogden, Utah that had seen some of the worst graduation rates. These schools stood out as they had recently begun a turnaround in graduation trends by providing incentives for students with good attendance and reaching out to students who were steering away from graduation. He highlighted the successes of the high schools in his December article and discussed how this template might be successful for other schools across the nation.

## What are the challenges of implementing solutions journalism?

**In traditional newspapers, prominent community leaders (e.g. police chiefs, judges, mayors, etc.) are accustomed to seeing their names on the front page.** Most of the stories covered on The Deseret News’ front page now are solutions stories, unless there is a significant breaking news item. As a result, these prominent community leaders have contacted The Deseret News inquiring about the matter, saying, “You’re missing the story. You’re not covering me.” The stories instead feature ordinary citizens as well as business people seeking to solve social problems. People affected by the problem and professionals providing critique are also highlighted.

**Reporters who are assigned to write solutions stories produce two stories a week because the process of writing a solutions story naturally takes more time.** Solutions reporters have noted the process requires more research and critical thinking as well.

“You have to be careful that you highlight solutions that really are good or that really are working. You’re really honest about whether they’re working or how maybe they’re not,” Alison Pond says.

# Pressing Forward

## Many reporters express the challenge of writing about new solutions as there is not always evidence to suggest an innovative program or project is working.

Journalists want to write stories about programs they know will yield a favorable, sustainable result. This predicament means that if journalists report on new solutions, they require some follow-up stories about how effective the solutions are. “If you are looking for a new solution, there is a good chance you’ll have trouble even finding experts who know about it,” says White.

## Some Deseret News journalists also fear downplaying a problem by only highlighting its solutions.

“Sometimes I have felt like focusing on solutions trivializes really complex problems,” says White. “The issues people are facing are immense and intergenerational—they are huge!”

This leaves journalists wondering how much telling of the problem should be included in a solutions story — and how does one frame that problem?

“Doing the negative story gets you to the positive story,” Baker says, “And sometimes that’s really necessary. The change doesn’t happen until the problem is highlighted, so you sometimes have to do the negative one.”



The Deseret News has made an impact in the Salt Lake community since their adoption of solutions journalism.

Readers love a good anecdote; there’s something powerful about putting a human face on an issue. With solutions stories, telling how a program helps better people’s lives sometimes requires drawing on a difficult past. Contacting the right people with the desired personal accounts is essential. It’s also challenging.

“I think when we can’t find the right person, there’s a tendency to think that we can’t tell the story,” says Lois Collins, a health and family reporter. “It’s a really tough sell (to say to a potential interviewee), ‘I would like you to stand up and be a poster child who takes drugs, who drops out of school, who does crime, etc.’”

## What tips does The Deseret News have for other newsrooms?

A year after Bornstein’s visit, The Deseret News has learned much from their experience in adopting solutions journalism. Here are some tips they have for other reporters and news organizations:

- Don’t forget the big picture that you are writing to empower people through providing them a critical analysis of society’s problems **and** of responses to those problems.
- Remember that solutions journalism doesn’t include “puff pieces” or promotional stories for non-profit groups.
- If it’s difficult to tell how successful a program is at its current state, a follow-up story is necessary.
- Any negative situation can be viewed in the perspective of a possible solution.

In three years, The Deseret News has journeyed from massive layoffs to becoming the second fastest growing newspaper in the nation. Editor-in-chief Edwards credits the upturn to crossing paths with Bornstein and his solutions journalism approach at a moment when the *News* was searching for an innovative solution to their own problem.

When asked about the results of adopting solutions journalism, many *News* reporters say the jury is still out. “We’re still figuring out how to do it,” says Baker, “But I see myself looking for that angle.” What’s clear, though, is that the solutions focus connects powerfully to the *News*’ mission to truly serve its readers. Says Edwards, “We want our readers to come away saying they feel better informed, and as a result, they feel more confident in being able to make a difference in their communities.”

Although the implementation of solutions journalism is fairly new and is still underway, Edwards is excited and confident about the future. At one staff meeting, Edwards said, “By thinking intentionally about how we can interweave solutions into what we do, making sure that it’s data and evidence based, we’re doing really, really good work.”

Material for this case study is based on interviews with Deseret News leadership and staff. Photo credit: Deseret News, Solutions Journalism Network and Flickr. Published 2013 by Solutions Journalism Network.

# Appendix A

The following chart shows a comparison of page views and sharing for selected Deseret News stories. Each pair matches stories with similar subject matter and publication dates.

Stories in **bold** are solutions stories while those in regular, un-bolded font are not.

	Headline	Date of Publication	Page Views	Facebook Likes	Twitter Shares	Pinterest Shares	Number of Comments
Prison	Lower prison counts: Support private organizations who help the less fortunate	12/2/2012	700	24	23	1	5
	<b>From meth addict to businessman: bread maker's story highlights policy agenda aimed at changing lives</b>	<b>12/1/2012</b>	<b>15,321</b>	<b>413</b>	<b>392</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>12</b>
Student Literacy	Most secondary school students can't write well	9/22/2012	2,413	55	37	17	22
	<b>Why reading by third grade is critical, and what can be done to help children meet that deadline</b>	<b>9/18/2012</b>	<b>3,216</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>1</b>
Human Trafficking	In our opinion: Ending human trafficking is a group effort	10/18/2012	916	45	36	9	4
	<b>How flight attendants fight against human trafficking</b>	<b>10/31/2012</b>	<b>17,428</b>	<b>5K</b>	<b>5K</b>	<b>249</b>	<b>2</b>
Graduation Rates	Utah ranks 32nd in nation in overall high school graduation data	11/27/2012	2,302	32	20	12	13
	<b>Solving Utah's dismal graduation rate: Two schools may have the answer</b>	<b>12/8/2012</b>	<b>8,553</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>33</b>
Education in Africa	Africa's learning crisis: Increased spending on education yields poor results	9/21/2012	290	8	1	6	0
	<b>One tablet per child: Creating education opportunity in Africa</b>	<b>11/24/2012</b>	<b>3,421</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>15</b>