

Building a Solutions Culture: Lessons from 5 Newsrooms

Most journalists today embrace the idea of solutions journalism because they know their communities want information that can help solve problems, not just stories telling them that problems exist. Embedding solutions journalism into newsrooms, however, is not always easy for all the reasons that change is hard. Making solutions part of day-to-day coverage requires rethinking priorities — and long-held views and habits. It means supporting staffers who are wary, and sometimes a little apprehensive. It means letting go of lower-value stories to make room for something new.

This past year, five newsrooms from across the nation tackled these challenges, broadening and deepening their solutions journalism and helping their audiences understand and support it. We called this small, pilot effort the “beacon cohort” because we knew these newsrooms would forge paths that others would want to follow.

What each of the newsrooms accomplished was transformational — and while they’re not done by any means, they’ve all made true progress.

Below is a sampling of their successes and insights, as well as their challenges and what they’re planning to do next on their solutions journeys.

Corpus Christi Caller Times: From hiring to performance reviews

WHO WE ARE

[A midsize print and online newsroom](#) in South Texas that's part of The USA Today Network. Our past solutions work includes projects on domestic violence and elections issues.

ONE KEY SUCCESS/ INSIGHT

We incorporated solutions journalism into everything from hiring to onboarding new staff to performance reviews and editorial meetings. We updated our mission to better explain why we do this kind of coverage. And we took it slow — working first with staff members who had the most interest, then supporting others inspired by that work. We did all this because we wanted to do something that would last more than a few months. We also wanted staff to see they all could do solutions journalism — that it isn't this special thing on the top of the shelf that gets dusty because only some people know where the ladder is.

HOW WE DID IT

We made sure everyone in the newsroom understood solutions journalism. Reporters and editors were expected to talk about solutions story ideas in their weekly conversations. We set deadlines for publishing at least one solutions story per month. After each solutions story published, we celebrated. Reporters who wrote the stories shared that they weren't as hard as they had thought, which led more reporters to pitch solutions stories.

WHAT WE LEARNED

In past years, our leadership supported solutions work, but it was mostly considered a special project. Reporters got that into their heads ... and it became intimidating. We learned how much it helps to have examples our newsroom has done so everyone can see just how reporters crafted those stories.

STORY WE'RE MOST PROUD OF AND WHY

Our story about [illegal game rooms](#). While it was an "instructive failure" story — showing why a proposed ordinance to regulate game rooms wasn't working in other municipalities — it moved the conversation forward.

WHAT'S NEXT

Our executive editor (one of our biggest solutions champions) left for another job a few months ago, and we're still in a transition to new leadership. Still, reporters continue to pitch solutions stories. We also continue to include solutions journalism goals in all employees' annual reviews and to track metrics on the performance of solutions stories.

TO FIND OUT MORE, CONTACT: Vicky Camarillo, vicky.camarillo@caller.com

Dallas Morning News: Interest from new readers

WHO WE ARE

[Large digital-first newsroom](#) in Texas with 170 journalists and several community-funded journalism initiatives and partnerships.

ONE KEY SUCCESS/ INSIGHT

Solutions journalism appears to attract new readers. On average, new visitors spent 2½ minutes with our solutions stories, compared with about 30 seconds for our typical coverage. We need more data from more stories to be confident in those results, but they show that solutions stories may be bringing in an audience that we now don't have.

HOW WE DID IT

Our hypothesis was that we could spread solutions journalism through a large legacy newsroom by beginning with a few centers of innovation, and we started in two of those — our [Education Lab](#) and [Arts Access](#) teams. We wanted them to incubate the practice first. In addition, Tom Huang, assistant managing editor for journalism initiatives, worked with the audience engagement team to track the performance of solutions stories.

WHAT WE LEARNED

While those two centers have produced strong solutions journalism, we haven't yet reached widespread adoption. Still, a number of reporters outside those teams wrote their first solutions stories and the paper also published some as part of a new media collaborative in the Dallas area. One challenge was getting the attention of editors who have a lot competing for their time. Building an infrastructure for solutions journalism is also key — and we put some of those pieces in place, including signposting on the top of every solutions story, plus [a page where readers can find all our solutions work](#). While solutions stories aren't often in the top ranks for page views, they are evergreen pieces that continue to pick up views and shares months after publication.

STORY WE'RE MOST PROUD OF AND WHY

[U.S. orchestras are still mostly white. Here's how to change that.](#) Tim Diovanni's piece showed how to craft a strong solutions story on a beat that isn't top of mind when it comes to solutions journalism.

WHAT'S NEXT

We will continue to analyze readership patterns, in part to help us identify best practices for distributing and marketing solutions journalism. We plan to add specific calls to action on solutions stories. We also hope to offer a pop-up solutions newsletter.

TO FIND OUT MORE, CONTACT: Tom Huang at thuang@dallasnews.com



Flint Beat: Solutions stories are worth the effort

WHO WE ARE

A hyperlocal digital newsroom with five full-time staff and two contractors. Prior solutions projects focused on gun violence, opioid epidemic responses, and economic development and social initiatives.

ONE KEY SUCCESS/ INSIGHT

Our commitment to SoJo work was hindered by our self-imposed reporting pace — which was too fast and tied to breaking news. To change that, we established a slower, more deliberate editorial process.

HOW WE DID IT

We required fewer weekly pitches from each reporter. One-week turnaround times turned into two- or three-week turnarounds. Although staff worried that fewer stories would lead to declines in readership, we found that at times our audience was larger in the weeks we published a solutions story yet had fewer stories overall. We also promoted a reporter with strong knowledge and skills in solutions journalism; as an editor, she's helped create a learning environment in which people stopped worrying they would do solutions journalism "wrong," and became more open to experimentation. To help raise awareness of our solutions stories, we created a vertical called "[A Fix for Flint.](#)"

WHAT WE LEARNED

Leaders can't make SoJo happen on their own; they need team buy-in at every level, which requires training and time. Small teams can do SoJo, but setting realistic goals and expectations is key. New staff need training as they arrive so as to develop strong habits from the start. Overall, we found that solutions journalism, while it takes time, is worth the effort. Our solutions coverage continues to help Flint Beat attract financial support from local organizations and businesses, most recently from [the Levin Center for Oversight and Democracy](#).

STORY WE'RE MOST PROUD OF AND WHY

We could never pick just one! We're proud of our first-ever SoJo story because it showed the value of such work to our community; we're proud of our gun violence work because it served as the impetus for town hall meetings; we're proud of tackling big concepts like hygiene poverty and harm reduction in ways others aren't.

WHAT'S NEXT

We continue to "right-size" our weekly news budget to create room for solutions reporting, and we're exploring partnerships with other newsrooms as well as with universities to enhance our education and training in SoJo overall.

TO FIND OUT MORE, CONTACT: Jiquanda Johnson at editor@flintbeat.com

Montana Free Press: Helping build local audiences

WHO WE ARE

Montana Free Press is a digital newsroom focused on in-depth, explanatory stories, including solutions journalism. Our staff includes 12 full-time and two part-time employees. Prior solutions work includes a series on regenerative agricultural practices.

ONE KEY SUCCESS/INSIGHT

In expanding into five new markets, we found that local-level solutions reporting has the potential to increase readership at a higher rate than traditional reporting. Locally based solutions stories published in those new markets attracted 53% more readers than the average local story (2,543 vs. 1,660). Those newer readers also read local solutions stories at triple the rate of our existing statewide coverage. Overall, we also found that our solutions stories garnered 40 percent more newsletter signups than other stories (1.07% conversion rate compared with 0.78%), and the number of people who reached the end of those stories was almost 50 percent higher. (This was a small sample of stories, so the results are preliminary.)

HOW WE DID IT

We ensured that solutions journalism was part of the coverage in our new markets, despite challenges in finding freelancers, which slowed us down. Our audience engagement manager dug into the metrics to see whether solutions stories led to more donations and newsletter subscriptions, and whether more people read those stories to the end.

WHAT WE LEARNED

SoJo reporting is an attention-grabber in communities with dwindling local news resources, and we believe that interest provides opportunities for community engagement. Along with the metrics, we knew from listening sessions in our target markets that attendees expressed interest in SoJo reporting, even if they were unaware of the term “solutions journalism.” We also learned that it’s critical to make this approach part of a newsroom’s regular process. We are all busy; if you don’t add this work to your list of priorities, it will likely keep getting pushed to the back burner.

STORY WE’RE MOST PROUD OF AND WHY

Missoula freelancer Cameron Evans filed [a fantastic solutions story](#) on local housing nonprofits converting modular homes intended for Bakken oil field workers into affordable housing.

WHAT’S NEXT

Solutions journalism will continue to be part of the coverage in our five new markets. This summer, we’re planning a solutions-focused project in one of those new markets.

TO FIND OUT MORE, CONTACT: Nate Schoenfelder, nschoenfelder@montanafreepress.org

Richland Source: Matching systems with vision

WHO WE ARE

An online news publication covering three counties in north central Ohio with eight full-time reporters. We have a full-time solutions and engagement editor, and our previous solutions work includes [a series on infant mortality rates](#).

ONE KEY SUCCESS/ INSIGHT

As we worked to expand and deepen our solutions reporting, we realized we had to make changes in our workflow and incentive systems to produce the kinds of stories we wanted. We also learned some reporters were intimidated by solutions journalism, which they mistakenly thought required enormous investment.

WHAT WE LEARNED— AND HOW

When we joined the beacon cohort, we thought our challenge was to help reporters invest more time in solutions stories. We thought the problem was too many competing priorities, which led to missed deadlines and uneven quality. We learned that the problems were actually deeper than that — that reporters didn't find solutions stories fun or rewarding. We also learned that reporters weren't getting the kind of editing and feedback needed to produce more meaningful solutions stories. We changed the scheduling of our all-staff meeting to make more time for talking about longer-range enterprise assignments, and also built more slack into the editing process, so reporters could act on editors' feedback.

Overall, we learned that to make progress, the key factors were:

- Staff understand the value of solutions journalism, and newsroom leaders keep it front and center.
- Reporters not only understand the principles of solutions journalism but also have concrete skills in reporting solutions stories and — even more important — bringing a solutions approach efficiently into the flow of their daily routines.
- The newsroom has strong institutional support for solutions reporting — with workflow, communications, incentives and staffing all aligned in ways that support consistent production of high-quality solutions coverage.

WHAT'S NEXT

We've built solutions journalism into our strategic plan with the goal of making solutions work fun and worthwhile. Despite the challenges we faced, the overwhelming sentiment from our team is that we're happy we dreamed big. Our participation showed us cracks in our processes, and we repaired them with something better. Solutions journalism is key to our mission and revenue model, and we want to eventually become a newsroom that trains others in the practice.

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