Combining Engagement and Solutions Reporting

Solutions journalism investigates and explains, in a critical and clear-eyed way, how people try to solve widely shared problems.

Engagement journalism involves the people it aims to serve in some aspects of the production and decision-making process of content creation and allows you to uncover the information needs of your audience.

It's been said before and we'll say it again: engagement journalism and solutions journalism go together [like peanut butter and jelly](#). They're each great on their own, but when combined with each other are so much more effective!

Studies show that the public responds very well to both solutions and engagement journalism, and is more likely to consume journalism that uses these techniques. After all, both approaches leave readers, viewers and listeners empowered with ideas for how to solve problems as well as experience in participation.

No matter how you start a story - with a problem or a solutions frame, engagement journalism can lead to more solutions stories and solutions stories can lead to more engagement.

Below are two checklists to help you get started in doing solid engagement work and solutions work. Once you've got the fundamentals down, there are a variety of ways to combine them. Inspiration provided below.

Engaged Journalism: The Feedback Loop
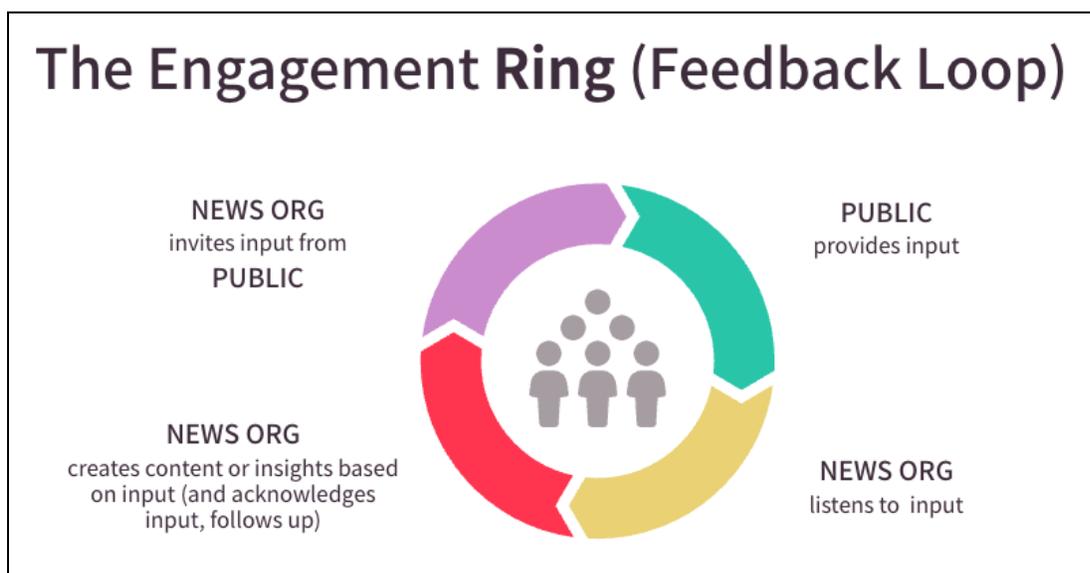
This checklist is designed to be recycled - use it for every engagement effort, because engagement done right is a feedback loop.

1.Invite feedback from the public. Have you...

☐ Made a network map of the groups you are currently reaching or would like to reach?

☐ Pinpointed the list of audiences you wish to engage right now based on your overall mission and goals for this effort?

☐ Listed initial platforms to reach out to this group? This can include digital spaces, potential collaborations with other organizations, physical outreach methods such as mailers, etc.

☐ Assigned staffers to manage this outreach and developed an accountability plan?

☐ Developed metrics you will regularly check to understand whether your outreach is working?

2. Public gives feedback. Have you...

☐ Regularly invited feedback across your outreach platforms, clearly explained what feedback you want and what participation will mean for audience members?

☐ Responded, when possible, to audience feedback? Let people know through individual responses and public credit in stories that their contributions matter.

☐ Created an easily accessible place for the newsroom to review audience feedback?

3. Listening to the feedback. Have you...

☐ Actually reviewed the feedback and had a conversation with colleagues about what you learned?

☐ Incorporated the feedback into some aspect of the reporting process? Has it shaped what you decided to do in some meaningful way? If not - you might be being an "askhole" :)

4. Using the feedback. Have you…

☐ Credited audience feedback in every story it informed, and invited further feedback to keep the loop going? Then go back to step 1!

☐ Reached out to the people who gave you feedback to let them know what they shared mattered? (This is what's needed to close the loop!)

☐ Invited more feedback and engagement on what you created? There may be opportunities for quick follow-up stories or entirely new storylines! (Opening up a new feedback loop)

Solutions: Six Steps to Help Your Community Move Forward

Once you've identified your community's questions and issues, what do you do with them?

We know it's not enough to simply publish their priorities. People in power can just throw up their hands and say, "We're doing all we can." Others might not know how to begin.

*There is a journalistic way to help your community move forward -- and, along the way, reduce the news fatigue that comes with problem-heavy coverage. It's called **solutions journalism**.*

Here's how to do it, in six steps, starting today:

☐ When looking at a problem facing your community or audience, ask **"Who's doing it better?"** Who's making significant improvement at a big or key piece of the problem — whether close to home or far away? *(You'll still be talking about the problem, but in a fresh way — about someone, somewhere making progress in ways your community can learn from.)*

☐ Once you have possible answers, ask: **"How do we know?"** Is there data and other evidence that shows the effort is making a difference? Is that evidence credible and is some of it independent — i.e., from sources other than the people leading the effort? If so, you've got yourself a solutions story.

☐ Interview sources about how they **pulled off their success,** what challenges they've overcome, and which ones they still face. This is the howdunnit — the narrative engine of your story.

☐ **Examine the limitations of the effort.** This is journalism, not advocacy, so you need to interrogate the data and other evidence you have. What are its strengths? What are its weaknesses? What does it tell us? What doesn't it tell us? Include all of this in the story.

☐ **Identify what can be learned from the effort,** especially for your community. Include that in the story, too.

☐ Finally, after the story is published or aired, **listen to how people respond** so you can answer questions, correct misconceptions and pick up ideas for your next story — maybe your next solutions story. In other words, you're now back to the beginning of the Audience Engagement Ring.

Combining Engagement + Solutions Journalism

Here are four winning approaches to combining the two techniques.

Approach 1: **From a Problem Story to Engaged Solutions**
If reporting a story through a problem frame, ask people at the end of the piece what solutions they may know of that exist! This could lead to a solutions follow-up story on the problem, and you can credit and engage your audience in the reporting of it.
- **Check out**: AZ Luminaria's approach to a prison problem story.

Approach 2: Follow-up Engagement on a solutions story
If you're already doing a solutions-based story, give people an opportunity to ask follow-up questions to yield follow-up reporting on that story.
- **Check out:** AZ Luminaria's engagement on a solutions story

Approach 3: From identifying top concerns, to helping communities solve them
When asking what issues worry your audience the most, use their answers to identify solutions stories. Stary by asking 'who's doing it better,' to bring your community new ideas and/or help them see what might be possible.
- **Check out:** Santa Cruz Local's solutions to homelessness series

Approach 4: From solutions coverage to community conversation
Remember that once a solutions story is published, it's fresh to your audiences even though you've been living with it for days or months – so think about following it with opportunities for people to meet and discuss the issue in more depth.
- **Check out:** Ed Lab's Road (Map) Show

Let us know how it goes! Reach out: wearehearken.com and solutionsjournalism.org