Forging a path from solutions journalism to reader revenue

Why publishers can expect to attract loyal readers likely to pay with stories that go beyond problems and focus on responses
Introduction

With the decline of the advertising-dependent business model, journalistic endeavors are increasingly funded directly by consumers. This requires a realignment of editorial strategies; news organizations need to focus on what serves readers in distinctive and meaningful ways that justify a paid subscription or membership.

The Reuters Institute and the University of Oxford’s Digital News Report 2020 found that a majority of people who pay for news in the U.S. do so because they want to “help fund good journalism” and see high-quality, distinctive journalism as something worth paying for.

It’s difficult to define what readers deem “good journalism,” but we’re given a strong signal in the digital trails of readers we already know are more likely to pay: those who come to a news publication’s website often, and who read a lot.

Solutions Journalism Network’s previous research shows that stories that focus on responses can increase readers’ intention to become civically engaged and impact the public discourse.

While that alone may inspire newsrooms to adopt the approach, this study of a year’s worth of audience data from a dozen publishers shows that in addition to providing a democracy dividend, solutions journalism offers a high likelihood of increased reader revenue.

Our research suggests that solutions journalism appeals to the type of high-quality readers we know are more likely to provide financial support to newsrooms.

The data also shows that this approach to reporting provides publishers with a built-in opportunity to target messaging about newsletter subscriptions and reader revenue programs.
Authors

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Alec Saelens, SJN’s Revenue Project manager, produced the research, contributing to the analysis and writing of this study.
Key takeaways

Solutions journalism readers were more loyal.

- Readers of solutions journalism account for disproportionate return activity and engagement on news websites. Those who read solutions journalism averaged 9.4 times more sessions than those who did not, and accumulated more page views.

Readers spent more time on the site when a session included solutions journalism.

- Sessions in which audiences read solutions journalism showed a higher level of engagement than sessions without solutions journalism. Sessions with solutions journalism saw readers spend an average of 52 seconds longer on the website, for an average total of 103 seconds, as compared with 51 seconds without solutions journalism.

Readers who encountered solutions journalism on their first visit appeared more likely to return.

- For 10 of the 12 publications included in this study, solutions journalism helped attract an untapped audience. A majority of the traffic on pages that featured solutions journalism consisted of new readers coming to the publication’s website for the first time.
- These new readers were more likely to become returning users; audiences who read solutions journalism were, on average, 2.7 times more likely to return.
Solutions journalism readers were more likely to be newsletter subscribers.

- A greater percentage of those who read solutions journalism subscribed to the publication’s newsletter than those who did not read solutions journalism. On average, over 9% of solutions journalism readers subscribed to the publications’ newsletters, compared with 3.5% of all other readers.

The totality of the data implies solutions journalism offers an opportunity to effectively identify, attract and engage the highest-quality segments of an existing audience for sustainability initiatives. This shows its potential to grow and monetize audiences, provided newsrooms adopt strategies and infrastructure oriented toward these goals.

What types of publications participated in this research?

This study looked at solutions journalism-related data for 12 newsrooms over the 2020 calendar year. Each publication either had a depth of experience in producing solutions-oriented content, or received training from the Solutions Journalism Network; all had stories featured in the SJN Story Tracker in 2020.

The publishers were local, regional, statewide and national news publications. Some reported on general interest news, and some were single-topic publishers (e.g., education or environmental reporting). Ten of the 12 publications were registered nonprofits, and only two had a print product in addition to their website. All but one of the publications were based in the United States, with the outlier being a Canadian website.
The publications’ monthly audience ranged from approximately 5,500 to 1.6 million users, with the median being approximately 225,000 monthly users.

We analyzed traffic to these websites through two lenses: 1) overall traffic patterns for users who read solutions journalism in 2020 (including their activity during sessions that did not include solutions journalism); and 2) traffic patterns during only those sessions in which solutions journalism was viewed. (You can read more about the methodology below.)

**Solutions journalism readers were more loyal.**

According to the data collected from the 12 newsrooms, users who had read solutions journalism consistently accounted for more sessions and pageviews than non-solutions journalism readers relative to their share of the audience.

Readers of solutions journalism stories represented 2.1% of the overall audience on average across all publications, yet they accounted for an average of 5.7% of all sessions. This indicates that readers with an appetite for consuming solutions journalism have a higher propensity to engage with the publication.
This increased activity is underscored by the number of sessions per user over the one-year period. Across all publications, solutions journalism readers averaged 13.6 sessions per user, which is 9.4 times as many, on average, as those who had not read any solutions reporting.

Sessions per user is an important metric to gauge reader habit and/or loyalty, and a key indicator of a reader's likelihood of supporting a reader revenue publication.

Solutions journalism readers are not just visiting more often, but also reading more when they come. On average, across all newsrooms, individual readers of solutions journalism generated more than 18 times the number of pageviews than readers who did not visit solutions journalism. The 2.1% of readers who visited solutions journalism accounted for 7.8% of all pageviews.

See here for visualization of individual newsrooms’ data and here for the research dataset.
Readers spent more time on the site when a session included solutions journalism.

We now know readers of solutions journalism show high levels of engagement across all their activity, even when not strictly reading solutions journalism. By narrowing our lens to just the activity of the specific sessions in which solutions journalism was read, we can shed more light on the relationship between engagement and this category of content versus all others.

The outcome remains the same: Sessions that include solutions journalism foster a higher level of engagement than the overall engagement of all other sessions.

For all but one site in this study, sessions in which solutions journalism was read were longer. On average, readers spent 102% more time on the website, or an additional 52 seconds.

See here for visualization of individual newsrooms’ data and here for the research dataset.
Similarly, the number of pages per session was 24% higher, on average, when a solutions journalism article was read.

The same publisher that saw a decrease in session duration also saw a decrease in pages per session by 2.3%.

Readers who encountered solutions journalism on their first visit were more likely to return.

The data so far shows that solutions journalism readers are more engaged during the sessions when they read solutions journalism, and overall have a greater habit of reading more often and more of the content. One more data point has an important implication for solutions journalism’s ability to impact a reader’s decision to return to a website: Just as with traffic to other kinds of content, for 10 of the 12 publications, the majority of traffic to a solutions journalism article consisted of new visitors.
Without this data point, the improvements in traffic could potentially be explained by smaller audiences who might already be dedicated followers who read everything on the website. Put another way, these could be pre-existing die-hard readers who would come as reliably for solutions journalism as for rehashed press releases from the municipality’s sanitation service; solutions journalism isn’t engaging them more than anything else (although solutions journalism still helps in identifying these die-hards).

While sessions that did not include solutions journalism attracted 69.6% new readers (i.e., those categorized as new visitors) on average across the publishers, and sessions that did include solutions journalism had a slightly lower new user rate of 64.7%, readers of solutions journalism were 2.7 times more likely to return than those who were not reading solutions journalism.

This suggests solutions journalism is also good at attracting new readers, a trend we wouldn’t expect to see if it was being found only by existing die-hards. But, importantly, these new readers are more likely to become loyal, habitual readers who may financially support the publication’s journalism.

From this data, we can’t conclude that solutions journalism was the catalyst for their first visit, but we can say that when readers encounter solutions journalism during their first sessions, they are more likely to become loyal, habitual readers who demonstrate a higher likelihood of supporting the publication’s journalism.

**Solutions journalism readers were more likely to be newsletter subscribers.**

Consistent with their greater overall engagement, we found that solutions journalism readers were also 2.6 times more likely to have subscribed to the publication’s newsletter than the audience that had not read any solutions journalism.
We considered readers newsletter subscribers if, during any one of their sessions in 2020, they arrived from the publisher’s email newsletter (as demonstrated through Google’s campaign tracking parameters).

Two of our publishers did not have campaign tracking enabled, so were not included in this set. Nine of the remaining 10 had deeper newsletter penetration rates among solutions journalism readers, while one had a slightly better penetration rate among the audience that had not read solutions journalism.

This data tells us that solutions journalism readers are more likely to give a publisher their email address and stay connected with the news outlet, although we cannot say that this connection happens as a result of reading solutions journalism (or even during the same session).

What conclusions can we make about the influence of solutions journalism on revenue?

Due to our publishers’ Google Analytics configurations, we weren’t able to attribute specific milestones, such as subscribing to a newsletter or joining a reader revenue program, to content viewed. Without such tracking we cannot say, for instance, that readers are more likely to become paying supporters after reading solutions journalism, or that solutions journalism has a direct impact on their decision to sign up for the newsletter.
However, the overwhelming trend throughout the data set is that solutions journalism attracts the types of readers we know are more likely to support journalism through reader revenue programs.

We know that solutions journalism readers are more likely to visit the publishers’ website frequently; over 9 times more often on average, and 31.7 times more often in the case of the largest publisher in our set.

We also know that solutions journalism readers are more likely to subscribe to a newsletter at some point.

These two data points alone provide strong evidence that the solutions journalism readership would support a news publication’s sustainability efforts by joining a subscription or membership program.

A reader’s frequency of visits is one of the top indicators of a propensity to subscribe or join a reader revenue program, according to research by Mather Economics, FTI Consulting via the Google News Initiative, and others.

The Lenfest Institute found that the likelihood of readers’ converting to a paid subscription or membership program increases the most when they have read five or more articles per month or they subscribe to a newsletter. And several major news publications have shared data regarding the positive impact of newsletter sign-ups on paid subscription programs.

We can say with confidence that solutions journalism provides a useful lens for identifying an audience that is more likely to pay and gives publishers an opportunity to put strategic marketing infrastructure and messages in front of those readers.
Strategic implications for publishers

Equipped with this knowledge, publishers can embrace several steps to capitalize on the opportunity offered by solutions journalism.

- **Spotlight the solutions work.** Increase signposting and messaging so that solutions journalism is core to the publication’s brand. The goal here is twofold: to help readers of other content more easily find their way to solutions journalism, and to demonstrate that this kind of coverage is synonymous with the publication’s reputation and value proposition.

- **Put prominent messaging for your reader revenue program on solutions journalism stories.** For longer stories, consider multiple messages throughout the story — not just at the end of the article. Take the time to craft these messages to reflect what makes solutions journalism unique and how readers’ support can ensure more of it.

- **Create a newsletter list for solutions stories.** Providing solutions readers with an opportunity to identify themselves by sharing their email addresses will allow you to better target them even when they’re not reading solutions content. You can message this list for support.

- **Invest in social distribution for solutions journalism.** The data suggests that those who encounter solutions journalism in their first session are more likely to return. So take extra time to reach new audiences interested in this work. That could mean engaging more deeply in relevant Facebook groups or Reddit threads, for example, or using paid promotion to expand the reach of solutions journalism.

- **Invest in reader engagement opportunities around solutions journalism.** In-person and virtual events, crowdsourced reporting and topic-oriented digital communities are some of the types of programming
Prioritize topic-driven solutions reporting for fundraising initiatives. One-off fundraising campaigns around specific initiatives allow publishers to seek additional support from existing paying readers, and also raise funds from readers who are not interested in joining a monthly or annual reader revenue program. Solutions journalism around timely issues and news events is a strong calling card for such fundraising.

Send automated messaging to solutions readers. A series of well-crafted messages triggered by visits to a solutions URL can deepen audience engagement and should be a high priority for tailored messaging.

Closing thoughts

Our data shows that a specific, structured solutions journalism reporting focus can build a strong foundation for an engaged audience. With more research, we can learn which categories pair well with solutions journalism — either as the subject of that reporting, or as adjacent content in a broader editorial strategy to develop hyperengaged audiences that support journalism.

Producing solutions journalism helps ensure more sustainable audiences and opens up new potential revenue. To fully realize this potential, the data suggests newsrooms should ensure that solutions reporting initiatives are planned at least a few times a year, that the approach becomes central to their messaging, and that they have tactics in place to put solutions readers on a path to membership or paid subscription.

Methodology explainer

We used data pulled from Google Analytics spanning the year 2020. For each newsroom, we curated audience segments based on interactions with
solutions journalism stories; we then compared those stories' performance with metrics for all other content. Each story met the four criteria of solutions journalism to be included in the Solutions Story Tracker. The number of stories used to define the segments ranged from four to 20 stories, the maximum allowed for the creation of a segment in Google Analytics.

For most of the publishers, this segment reflected the totality of their solutions journalism published in 2020. However, some of the publishers produced more than could be included in the segment.

To explore the relationship between reader quality and content, we built a set of dashboards in Google Data Studio. These dashboards analyzed the traffic and audience to solutions journalism URLs. They compared the sessions and audience received in that same time frame with sessions and users that did not visit those URLs.

Essentially, we were given two sets of segments to analyze:

Set 1: Readers who read solutions journalism in the time period we analyzed, and readers who did not. The former included the whole year's session data for users who read solutions journalism, even sessions that did not include solutions journalism. This allowed us to look beyond their interactions with solutions journalism content to see broader trends in their behavior.
Set 2: Sessions in which solutions journalism was read, and sessions in which no solutions journalism was read. This allowed us to see whether solutions journalism had any relationship to the user’s behavior within the same session.

Two important caveats about the data:

1) While the solutions journalism segments are defined only by solutions journalism articles produced in 2020, the non-solutions journalism segments contain articles (including, potentially, other solutions journalism) published prior to 2020, as well as non-article content like homepages, landing pages, search results, etc.

2) Because of the size and time frame of our analysis and limitations in the free version of Google Analytics, Google Data Studio’s reports included data sampling. This sampling, which was more significant in the larger websites, causes some inconsistencies in the data when compared with unsampled data — although the broader trends appeared to remain consistent.