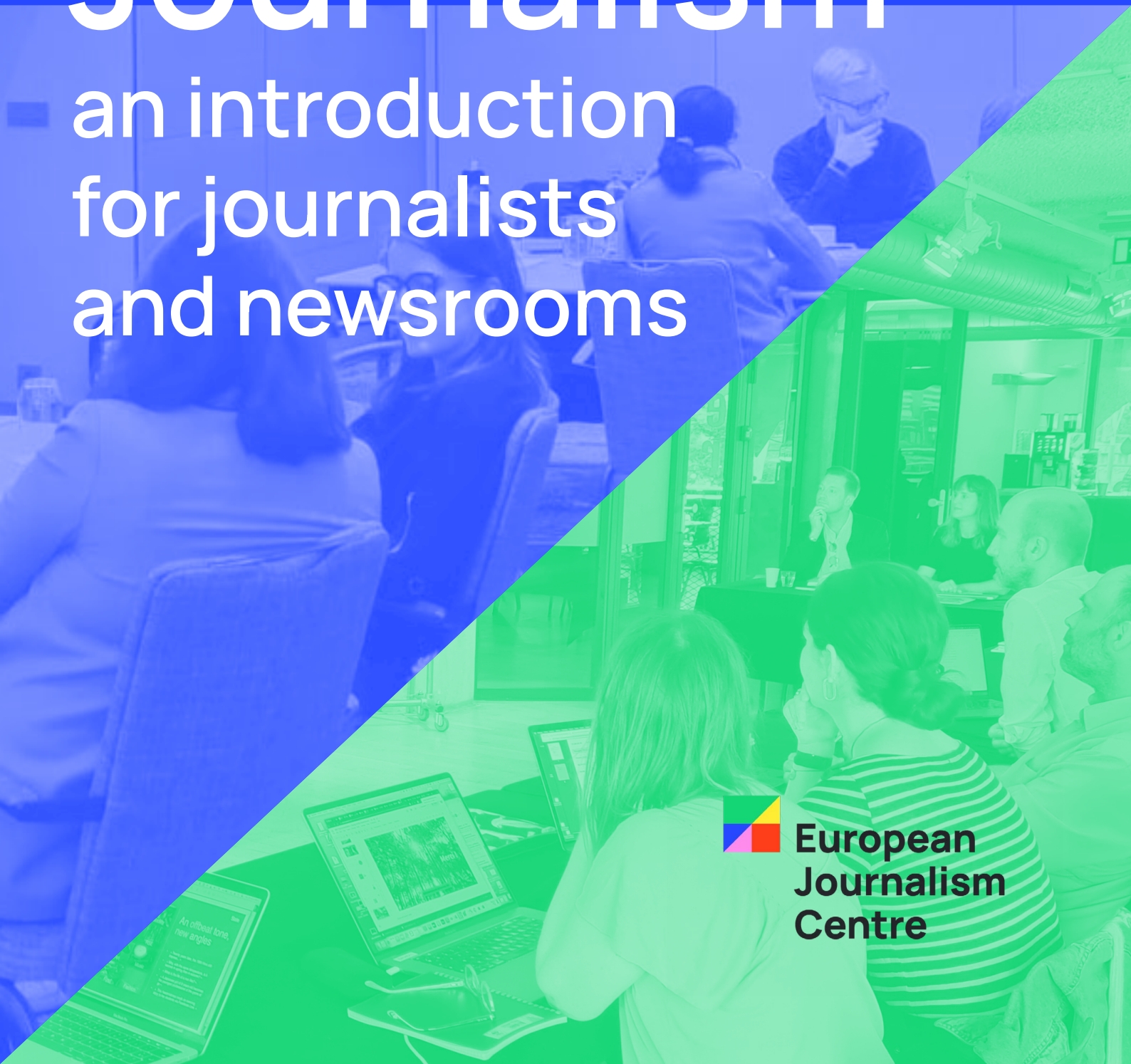
Solutions Journalism

an introduction for journalists and newsrooms



European Journalism Centre



“Addressing problems is important, but equally crucial is showcasing existing solutions. It demonstrates people’s awareness and active efforts to fix the issues, providing inspiration and tools for young readers who may feel the world is doomed.”

Juliette Gerbais,
project assistant
European Journalism Centre



An introduction to Solutions Journalism for journalists and newsrooms

Research shows that many people avoid the news, as they get tired of hearing only about natural disasters, war, crime, suffering etc.
All this negative reporting has an impact on their mood, well-being and their trust in journalism. News-avoiders are more interested in positive or solutions-based journalism and less interested in the big stories of the day.

So there’s an important role to play for the media to counter intentional news avoidance. Editorial teams are able to change news content to make it less negative and more constructive, less opinionated, more fact-based and transparent.

The aim of this more balanced approach to journalism is to underline that consumers are not simply passive victims of the news, but they can engage with answers and collectively create a world in which hope is possible. It replaces their feeling of helplessness and stress with a feeling of belonging and a sense of being able to make a difference in society.

Solutions journalism also strengthens communities, helps them to address their challenges, advances equity, builds trust, increases civic engagement, depolarises public discourse and discovers new sources of revenue.

- **Marjan Tillmans,**
project manager
European journalism centre

What is solutions journalism?

Solutions Journalism investigates and explains, in a critical and clear-eyed way, how people try to solve widely shared problems. While journalists usually define news as “what’s gone wrong,” solutions journalism is leading an effort to expand that definition: responses to problems are also newsworthy. By adding rigorous, evidence-based coverage of solutions, journalists can tell the whole story. To avoid fluffy or overly positive news simplifying the issues covered, Solutions Journalism Network (SJN) recommends using the FOUR PILLARS to ensure a well-balanced coverage of solutions:

1. RESPONSE
Features not just a person or an organisation, but a response to a problem and how it happened

2. INSIGHTS
Seeks to provide insights that can help others respond — not just inspiration

3. EVIDENCE
Provides available evidence - data or qualitative results, looking at effectiveness (or lack thereof) — not just intentions

4. LIMITATIONS
Discusses limitations, a response’s shortcomings and avoids hype

Why it matters

1.
When done well, solutions journalism offers valuable, rigorously reported insights to communities on how to tackle problems.

2.
It can lead to meaningful change, whether that’s prompting a change in discourse or a new direction of discussion relating to a problem; or inspiring action in audiences and decision-makers within communities.

3.
In the 2023 Reuters Institute Digital News Report, 36% of respondents said they avoided news because it can have a negative effect on their mood. News avoiders are more likely to say they are interested in positive or solutions-based journalism and less interested in the big stories of the day.

4.
Younger audiences show a desire for news that provides solutions and not just problems.

5.
Research suggests that audiences prefer, engage more deeply with and are more likely to trust solutions-focused stories than problem-focused reporting.

6.
News avoidance is a problem for the journalism industry and democracy as it affects people’s knowledge of society and their political engagement.



Do’s and don’ts

Where to start:

SJN recommends identifying an issue or question of concern.

If the questions it prompts are “what could be done about this?” or “who is doing a better job handling this problem?” then it could be a good topic for a solutions journalism story. In your research, you might look for new and notable responses to a problem or locations that are dealing with an issue better than others.

Alongside your journalistic judgement of what makes a good story, you’ll also need to ascertain if there’s evidence of the solution’s success, how credible that evidence is and what lessons can be learned from this approach. This can be a useful way to make a story about a specific community relevant to different, outside audiences.

Make sure the solution is genuine: News of solutions to problems can be inspiring, however, make sure to interrogate the solution you’re reporting on to ensure it’s genuine.

Good solutions reporting means looking at limitations too: When reporting on a solution, look at its limitations too. This can be challenging so speak with a range of people involved in the project or initiative. Seek external sources, who can help you assess the solution and its potential, as well as limitations, from an independent perspective.

Be specific: This is important in both defining the problem and solution on which you’re reporting and the context in which it is working. Be precise about what this specific solution addresses and its complexities, as well as where and exactly how it applies.

Avoid advocacy: Solutions journalism isn’t about advocating for a specific response or about proposing a solution that doesn’t yet exist. Good solutions reporting should be nuanced, exploring the solution’s successes and failures, showing where there’s support and scepticism and where there’s more than one response to a problem.

Including the limitations of a solution in your report will also steer you away from advocating for a particular solution above others.

- → Take out the words “inspiring”, “wonderful”, “super”, “unique”, “genius”, and in most cases, “solution”.
- → Tell the audience about the limitations
- → Don’t overclaim or predict the future
- → Briefly paint the full landscape
- → Make your story about the idea behind the programme — the programme is just the illustration
- → Use data



Look backwards as well as forwards: A focus on solutions can often lead to a fixation on the future and how an initiative might change a community or place, or meet a problem. Looking at how people approached problems and introduced solutions in the past can, however, be a rich seam of story ideas.

Don’t ‘silo’ solutions reporting: The solutions journalism approach is applicable to most stories and reporting beats, treating it as something separate might put off editors unfamiliar with the concept. Reframe it as reporting on responses to problems as opposed to finding a positive story.

Look backwards as well as forwards

Internal buy-in: Make sure your editor/colleagues see SoJo as an opportunity rather than a restriction and there is a vast amount of data about the many benefits of solutions journalism, starting with the reason people tune out, and that solutions journalism is an antidote for that.

Hero-worship: Do not celebrate or glorify an individual or organisation. Instead, use characters to talk about systemic change

Magic bullet: Do not celebrate simple, silver-bullet solutions. Problems, and solutions, are complicated, and even the best interventions have limitations or hit obstacles. Instead, examine responses to systemic problems.

Not ‘just an idea’ or theory: Do not base the story just a theory. Instead, look at responses already underway. There must be some evidence and data to back-up the reporting.

Key questions for reporting stories

→What problem is this response addressing?

→In what ways is that response working, and in what ways is it not working? How do we know?



→What parts of the problem aren't addressed by this response?

→What do the critics say?

→What are the barriers to trying it elsewhere?



Some tips from experts



Swati Tarafdar

independent journalist & independent journalism trainer

→Seasoned journalists will keep pushing back on SoJo argumentatively until they are told that watchdog journalism is here to stay and so is SoJo and we do SoJo after a problem has been covered to death - that is, readers are aware of it, and they ask for a solution. Also this video might be useful.

→SoJo is a mindset, it takes a little time to stick to your brain, and there are ways to convert it into your daily workflow in a way that you don't spend weeks on one solutions journalism story. This article might be helpful.

@Swati_Sanyal_T



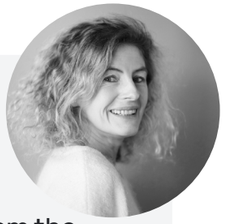
Lola García-Ajofrín

senior reporter at Outriders

→Regarding limitations, they are usually not included because we are afraid that people find our responses very small or not perfect, but if we look at the response as it is, no matter how small it is, the reader will appreciate the honesty, more than a miracle response.

→Instead of searching responses on the Internet, work with a local journalist and observe how local communities are working to respond to something.

@Lolagars



Michèle Foin

co-founder of Collectif Solvo

→Be clear about what problem the solution is responding to right from the beginning of your reporting. This helps to stay focused and is key to tackling the effectiveness of the solution.

→Solution journalism isn't always about a solution that is working. It can also explain why something that was thought to be a good idea didn't work out and the pitfalls to avoid. To be credible, a solution story must show the limitations of the solution. But it is not always easy to identify them. Project leaders often don't want to talk about them, for fear of weakening the credibility of their actions.

→ Those who benefit from them sometimes also think that they will do damage if they point out the problems encountered.

→ Don't forget the process of the solution. The audience must be able to understand the different steps of the project to be able to replicate it.

@SolvoCollectif

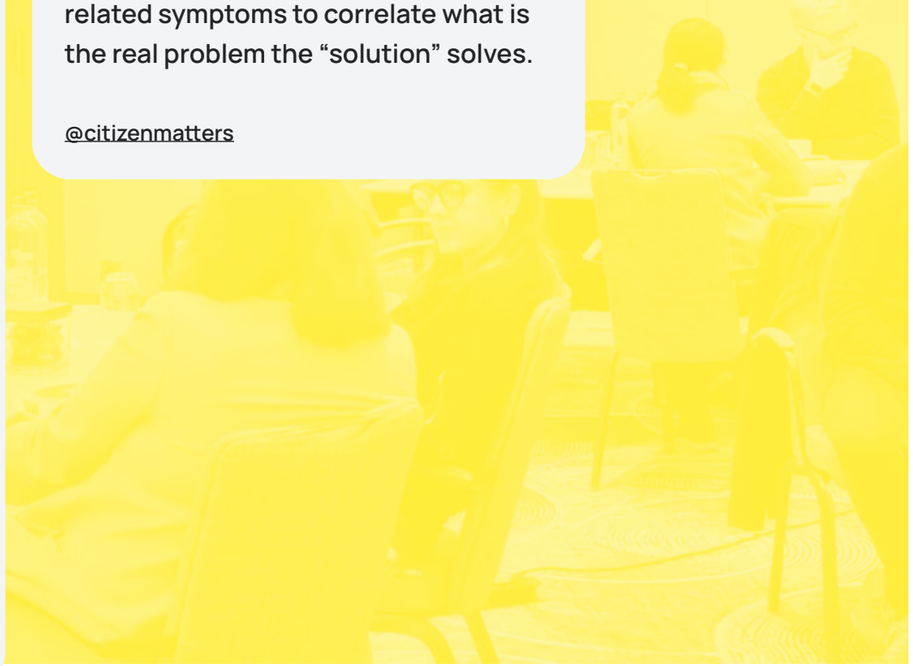


Meera K

co-founded Citizen Matters

→Ensure you frame the problem properly - identify the root cause, and related symptoms to correlate what is the real problem the "solution" solves.

@citizenmatters





Sanne Breimer

media professional

journalism trainer and coach

→Some journalists who aren't familiar with the method yet are still confused by the word 'solution'. I rather explain it as 'response to a problem' from the very beginning.

@SanneBreimer



Marine Mugnier & Delphine Tayac

founders of Collectif Antidotes

→Avoid reporting on an initiative just because you think it's interesting / nice / new... It's important to ask ourselves: why this initiative in particular? Why should I focus on it rather than on another one? What do they do specifically that is worth a report?

→Take time to identify (and much better create a network of) sources / experts / scientists / thinvk tanks / public organisms / NGOs etc. that can guide you to find convincing / robust responses.

@Antidotes_fr

Resources from the Solutions Journalism Network

- → Look at the SJN's Solutions StoryTracker for inspiration. Journalists can submit their published stories to the tracker. If they don't get accepted, you'll get feedback on what aspects of solutions reporting were missing from your story or could be strengthened.
- → Read this short Interview with Tina Rosenberg, co-founder of SJN, who explains in simple words the role of data and other evidence in supporting solutions journalism.
- → How to do SoJo in a time crunch (14 tips)
- → Basic Toolkit
- → SoJo & Data Journalism
- → Integrating SoJo into your Workflow
- → Anatomy of one (short) solutions story



"The primary goal of solutions journalism is not to make people feel good, although it's great impact when that happens.
Its goal is to inform people better."

Nina Fasciaux
Director, Partnerships & Fellowships,
Solutions Journalism Network

About the programme partners

The Solution Journalism Accelerator, launched in 2022, is delivered by the European Journalism Centre (EJC) in partnership with the Solutions Journalism Network and is supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

About the European Journalism Centre

The European Journalism Centre (EJC) foundation is an independent Dutch non-profit based in the city of Maastricht, The Netherlands. We are a Centre for communities, knowledge and collaboration with partners and funders. Reimagining journalism is key.

About the Solutions Journalism Network

SJN is an international non-profit advancing a system-level change in journalism, leading the adoption of solutions journalism rigorous reporting on responses to social problems into the daily news across the world.
Our mission is to transform journalism so that all people have access to news that helps them envision and build a more equitable and sustainable world.

About the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is a non-profit fighting poverty, disease, and inequity around the world. Its mission is to create a world where every person has the opportunity to live a healthy, productive life. It partners with entrepreneurs, companies, and other organisations to create incentives that harness the power of private enterprise to create change for those who need it most.