

Lego Assembly Kit for Teaching Solutions Journalism

This is a list of:

- modules
- key concepts
- in-class lectures and discussions
- class exercises
- homework assignments
- other important points
- resources

...for teaching solutions journalism in a college or university.

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Essential modules

1. What is solutions journalism? And what is it not?
2. How do I use solutions journalism to give reporting more impact and increase audience engagement?
3. How do I produce solutions journalism to the highest journalistic standards — avoiding advocacy, fluff and “good news?”
4. What kinds of stories are right for a solutions approach, and how do I find them?
5. How, specifically, do I practice solutions journalism?

Resources

- Workshop PowerPoint
- Toolkits
- Database of solutions journalism stories
- Video interviews with practitioners
- Course outlines, lesson plans and materials

SECTION 1: WHAT SOLUTIONS JOURNALISM IS — AND WHAT IT IS NOT

Key Concepts:

A definition: Solutions journalism is reporting on a response to a problem — successful, partially successful, or failed — and the associated results, usually with a narrative that seeks to reveal *how* the results were produced and explore what can be learned from the effort. Many ‘good news’ stories are misidentified as solutions journalism. (They are imposters!)

A good solutions story has four key qualities:

- It reports on a response to a problem
- It reports on the evidence available to substantiate success or failure (see below for reporting on early stage ideas where evidence will be limited)
- It discusses the limitations of the response
- It takes a clear-eyed view and avoids reading like a puff piece

In-Class Lecture and Discussion:

- Show good examples of solutions journalism and discuss what makes them successful
- Show *imposters*, discuss why they are imposters, and contrast with good examples
- Explore the question: How do we know it’s solutions journalism? Discuss the four qualities

Other Questions:

- Why does reporting on a response’s limitations and flaws give a story more authority and credibility, not less?
- In the field of journalism, if you report on something that you think is a problem and get it wrong, it’s a misdemeanor. But if you report on something that you think is a solution and get it wrong, it’s a felony. Why?

- Why when reporters seek to cover solutions, do they so often fall into the traps of the imposters?

In-Class Exercises:

- Break into groups by imposter types. Each group analyzes/explains its imposter and how the reporter could have avoided it and shifted the approach (hypothesizing sources or research, if necessary) to turn it into a good example of solutions journalism.
- Choose a current event and brainstorm potential solutions journalism or imposter stories.
- Choose a story idea and list as many kinds of limitations as possible.

Homework Assignments:

- Read a selection of solution and imposter stories. Explain which is which, and why? For the imposters, annotate the stories, showing how and where each story went wrong. Do the same with the solutions stories — annotate them, keeping in mind the the four qualities.
- Write two versions of the same story: one as solutions journalism and one as an imposter. Bonus: include multiple imposter types in one story.

SECTION 2: THE CASE FOR USING SOLUTIONS JOURNALISM

Key Concepts:

Journalism's current *theory of change* is that uncovering problems leads to reform. Proponents of solutions journalism hold that this theory is incomplete. They hypothesize that society often lacks awareness and credible knowledge about how to solve problems, and that this absence limits the skill, imagination and motivation needed for successful reform.

Proponents of solutions journalism also argue that traditional journalism depresses civic participation and drives away audiences. In contrast, they hold that solutions journalism can make journalism more complete, providing a view of the world that is both more faithful to reality *and* more likely to engage and activate audiences.

In-Class Lecture and Discussion:

- Tell the history of how and when journalism adopted its current theory of change.
- Discuss how journalism's current theory of change affects society. What have been the benefits of this approach? The costs? What's missing from traditional coverage? What are the consequences for society?
- Discuss how the addition of solutions journalism influences this theory, touching on both advantages and potential drawbacks. Bonus: What can we glean from research on human behavior in recent decades to inform this theory of change?
- Present and critique real-world examples of solutions journalism's impact.

Other Points:

- Solutions journalism will be seen by some journalists as soft or “not part of our job.”
- There is evidence that, like people, societies need models in order to change.
- The shift from the newspaper to the article/story as unit of consumption, and from the front page to social media as the key mode of discovery, require journalists to rethink the content of the news, not just the platforms.
- Studies have revealed audiences experience news fatigue and “learned helplessness.” (AP’s 2008 study of how young adults consume news.)
- Evidence shows that solutions journalism can increase audience engagement. (Engaging News Project, Seattle Times)
- Solutions journalism is not the opposite of investigative journalism. It can make an investigative series more reader-friendly and high-impact. (Watchdog with sharper teeth.)

In-Class Exercises:

- Students divide into groups and discuss different approaches that have been taken with real investigative series. Bring in examples of a traditional investigative series with no solutions story, one where the “last in a series” is a solutions story, and an example of an investigative series where the solutions stories were integrated into the meat of the series. (Good examples of the last two are ‘Deadly Delays’ or ‘Chronic Crisis,’ by the Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel).
- Students discuss the different approaches and impact achieved and the role the solutions stories played.
- Bonus: Brainstorm social media campaigns to promote these different series. Discuss how they differ.

Homework Assignments:

- Find an example of a story or issue that received traditional journalism coverage that could have benefited from the addition of a solutions story. Explain what that story could have been, how a journalist could have looked for it, and why it would have been a useful addition to the coverage.
- Take an existing traditional story or series and do the reporting to find and outline a solutions angle.

SECTION 3: AVOIDING ADVOCACY, FLUFF AND “GOOD NEWS”**Key Concepts:**

Solutions journalism doesn’t celebrate or advocate any particular response to a problem, it merely reports on a response. It shows what’s happening and what is known about how well it’s working. The response just needs to be one example of an approach; it doesn’t have to be the “best” one. (The best solution rarely exists; and if it did, we wouldn’t know what it was.) A response is anything that can be reported on that reveals an interesting effort to solve a problem. It can be successful, partially successful, or unsuccessful. Writing about the limitations or flaws of a project makes the story more

credible and authoritative, not less. It makes it more useful, too. Specific techniques exist for avoiding advocacy, fluff, and “good news.”

For early stage ideas, there is rarely much evidence to go on. These can be good solutions stories if the reporter is careful not to overclaim, and to tell the reader what is known and what isn't. Reporters can always return to these stories when more evidence comes in. That provides an opportunity to revisit the earlier story and see what actually worked, what didn't, and why.

In-class Lecture and Discussion:

- What is the line between journalism and advocacy? Why is it necessary to report on limitations and flaws?
- What is the difference between celebrating or advocating for something and reporting on something that is happening?
- When and why is an imperfect response to a problem, or even a failed response, worth reporting on?

Other Points:

- Using seemingly small how-to details can bring solutions stories to life (often small things make a big difference and account for different outcomes).
- Presenting the barriers that people face when trying to solve problems, including their failures and disappointments, humanizes them and engages audiences and makes readers interested in and curious about what will happen.
- Characters often provide quotes about their aspirations or beliefs. Over-reliance on these makes for fluff. The reporter's job is to tell the audience what is known and what is still unknown know based on the best available evidence.
- Words to avoid include “lifesaver,” “silver bullet” “the future,” “visionary,” and even, yes, “solution” (unless something is truly proven).
- The real story is about an idea, strategy or model (the particular program is just one illustration).
- Put the program in context by briefly mentioning other relevant responses to the problem.

In-Class Exercises:

- Ask each student to come up with words, phrases or paragraphs that shouldn't be in a solutions story.
- Practice creating context: choose a program to cover, and ask students what other responses should be mentioned in the story to paint the fuller landscape.
- Divide into groups. Each group attempts to write the worst paragraph ever about a response to a problem. Then another group fixes that paragraph to make it credible.

Homework Assignments:

- Students do two versions of a paragraph (or a story pitch): one good journalism and one fluff.

- Students read a good solutions story and rewrite it as advocacy, “good news” or fluff, or find an imposter story in a credible news outlet, and rewrite it as solutions journalism.
- Students report and write an imposter story, then annotate the story to illustrate where they went wrong and how to fix it.

SECTION 4: WHEN TO USE SOLUTIONS JOURNALISM

Key Concepts:

Solutions journalism can be used when the issue is a widely shared problem, because then many people will be trying to solve it — and some of those responses will be newsworthy. Solutions journalism can work at any stage in the evolution of a program or idea, as long as you’re clear with the audience about what we do and don’t know. Story ideas can come from many of your usual sources, if you ask them, “Who’s doing a better job on this?”

Solutions journalism can be used to provide a fresh follow-up angle to news events. But there are times when it may be premature or inappropriate (e.g., immediately following a tragic or heated event, when details are emerging and people are trying to understand the causes, context or larger ramifications.) It may be worth discussing whether solutions journalism is better used to cover issues when they are at a cooler stage in the news life cycle.

In-Class Lecture and Discussion:

- Why is it hard to do a solutions story about a problem that is one-off or sui generis?
- What issues in the news right now might lend themselves to a solutions approach?
- When is it right to look at responses that are very far away or in places very different from your own? What makes a response relevant to your city’s problems?

Other Points:

- Solutions journalism is not right for breaking news, but it can be right for second-day or longer term follow-up stories if the news event is caused by a widespread problem.
- Writing a solutions story about a new idea is different than writing about a program with a longer track record. But both are possible.
- What kinds of evidence can we use? The same kinds we use for traditional stories.
- When looking for a solutions story, start with sources that have an overview and might be able to compare many different responses to a problem and know who’s doing it better.

In-Class Exercises:

- Divide into pairs. One person plays reporter and one editor. The reporter thinks of a story and a piece of evidence that shows it’s a story. The editor can only say: “Is that all you got?” Then the reporter says: “no, there’s also this:....” and cites more

evidence. The editor is only allowed to say “is that all you got?” until she is satisfied the evidence is enough.

- Brainstorm solutions journalism ideas, either known (here’s a program or approach I’d like to cover) or unknown (here’s a problem I’d like to find a response to). Divide into small groups and discuss. Choose one from each group to present to the whole class.
- For each “here’s a problem I’d like to find a response to” idea, discuss how you might start a search for a response.

Homework Assignments:

- Choose a story topic. List 10 real people who could help identify a specific story to cover.
- Find five possible associated solutions stories.
- List issues in the news that might take a solutions journalism approach.

SECTION 5: NUTS AND BOLTS OF SOLUTIONS JOURNALISM

Key Concepts:

Finding a solutions story starts with breaking the problem down into small slices — then looking for a newsworthy response to that small slice.

Traditional journalism emphasis the 5 Ws, but solutions journalism adds an H for “how.” The best structure is often a “howdunnit.” You show characters doing the work — trying, failing, trying again — to tell the story of how the project achieved something others could not. You hold the reader’s interest by generating curiosity about how the ideas are going to fare. Look for positive deviants and work backwards from outcomes.

In-Class Lecture and Discussion:

- Interviewing for solutions journalism.
- How do you create tension when the headline has given away the outcome?
- Different possible structures for solutions journalism stories.
- Finding non-cherry picked examples.
- Examples of useful/not useful data.
- Examples of useful/not useful research.

In-Class Exercises:

- Pair up and have students interview each other. Each pair of students chooses an issue and each one imagines they are directing a response. Take turns interviewing each other to get material for a “howdunnit” solutions story.
- Take a problem and have class break it into small slices. Imagine a story for each one.
- Brainstorm examples of solutions stories about ideas that aren’t “the best solution”
- Take a response to a problem and outline a solutions story using three different structures (such as positive deviant, apples to apples, big new idea, location transformation ongoing program)

Homework Assignments:

- Find stories that use data and research particularly well or badly.
- Write a solutions story based on the in-class interviewing exercise.
- Read several solutions stories with different structures and analyze how each structure works. What other issues or stories might work with that structure?
- Take an issue and write down ten possible small slices.
- Students write a howdunnit about a time when they achieved something difficult.