

Finding & Vetting Solutions Stories

Hi, and welcome to module two of Solutions Journalism. Ways of elevating your reporting and engaging audiences. I hope you enjoyed our first week. Now we're moving into the part of the course where we're headed to more specifics, and I'm looking forward to hearing your thoughts in the online forum. At this stage, you probably found the butt of a compelling story, but how do you know if it's any good? Many people who want to do solutions journalism aren't always sure where to begin. So, let's start by finding and vetting solutions stories beginning with some key points to keep in mind.

First, follow the rules of good journalism. Try to find many distinct perspectives when reporting a story. Interview people who do not have a vested interest in the outcome of the intervention. Think about where your sources get their funding. Start with the experts who have an overview when looking for a solution story. They can compare many different responses to a problem. And who's doing it better? Don't look for perfection. It just doesn't exist. You don't need the perfect response to a problem. You don't know what that is and no one will believe you anyway. Instead, find a response that's effective, and there may be many to choose from and tell the audience what we know and don't know about how well the program works. Solutions Journalism is enterprise reporting. It's not a way to cover breaking news, but it can be used as a follow up to a breaking news story. If the underlining issue is a widely shared problem, a problem is widely shared, then many different people are trying to solve it. And some of those responses will be more successful or newsworthy than others. The judgment needed to identify a good solution story is similar to the judgment needed to identify a good problem story.

What happened and how do we know it happened? The difference is in the perceived consequences of getting it wrong. In journalism. Saying something is a problem and getting it wrong is a misdemeanor. Saying something is working and getting it wrong. Now that's a felony. Overly credulous is one of the worst things you can call a journalist. But how do you avoid it? Well, don't over claim, don't imply the problem is solved. It probably isn't. Don't announce that this is the best solution. You can't really know that and don't predict it will last because it might well not limit yourself to reporting the news. There's something going on. And there. And here's what the evidence says. As with the traditional story, evidence is just data. It can also be found in the interviews, shoe leather reporting all the ways journalists gather information. No solution is perfect. Make sure you report on its limitations and struggles. Such caution is protective. You don't have to worry about looking like an advocate. If you don't make claims. If the solution falls apart and a few months later you don't look gullible because you simply covered what was happening at the time. A solution to story can be about a problem of any scope from a neighborhood effort to a country wide initiative. The story should be proportional to the problem it's trying to address. Solution stories can happen at any point in the life of a program. If there's very little evidence of success, you're going to need to justify to the audience why you're writing about it anyway.

In the first of this week's readings, less lecturing, more doing new approach for AP classes, the piece takes a look at a story type called Experiment in Progress. In some cases, reporters have an opportunity to cover an ongoing program that has clear pros and cons. This type of story has usually a bit more data and evidence behind it compared to the big new idea structure. Now, the second reading is a good example of the story type Big new idea, many solutions-oriented pieces that explore big, innovative ideas open with a taste of what the specific program offers. This is also what Chaka Khan Tyree has done in the multimedia piece. For some, prenatal care is a community affair. The story

challenges traditional notions of prenatal care. Now, look, sometimes the big new idea can be daunting. So, look for smaller slices. Every problem is made up of lots of smaller problems. It's often difficult to find a solution to the overall problem. Say, for example. Poverty or energy security. But it's easier to find solutions, stories about how people are solving those smaller slices, things like job training, housing programs, smart street lights.

Choose two small slices of a problem in your own area and look for who's doing a better job tackling it. Don't forget to get opposing views. It's very important in a solution story to include informed skeptics listening to and incorporating different points of view, especially when a topic that's relatively unproven will give your reporting more weight. And look for the positive deviants. Who's doing better than the others with the same resources? This may mean who's top ranking or near it in a database or who's performing better than expected. Positive deviants are great because they provide readymade justification for why you're choosing this particular story.

You're working backwards from the evidence instead of the other way around, and they save time. You can just concentrate on how it happened. These guidelines are also liberating. You don't have to try to rank and compare solutions to find the most successful one. You are free to write about solutions that are only partly successful or even unsuccessful as long as it's an interesting or important failure. And you can explain the audience why you're covering it. Hey, you're just looking for a good story. In the next video, we'll hear from Kavita Chandran, a journalist trainer and news content advisor from Singapore, who will help us choose the small slice of a problem and how to look for who's doing a better job of tackling it. See you in the forums.