

Interview with Kavita Chandran

[00:00:12] **Hugo Balta** Welcome back to Solutions Journalism, new ways of elevating your reporting and engaging audiences. In this module, we are discussing identifying, vetting and reporting solutions stories. Many people who want to do solutions journalism aren't always sure where to begin. Kavita Chandran, journalism trainer and news content advisor based in Singapore, joins us today to help us learn how to cover solutions journalism across different beats. Thank you for joining us, Kavita.

[00:00:43] **Kavita Chandran** My pleasure. Thank you for having me, Hugo.

[00:00:47] **Hugo Balta** Let's start with the conversation by identifying a social problem. A solutions story can be about a problem of any scope -- from a neighborhood effort to a country-wide initiative. The story should be proportioned to the problem it's trying to address. What has been your experience?

[00:01:08] **Kavita Chandran** Yes. So, as you know, I train journalists in Asia and I also train journalism students in Asia. And a lot of our reporting has been focused on problems. I've been a journalist for over 25 years myself, and you know, the phrase "When it bleeds, it leads" used to be something that we are quite used to. But, one of the issues with that is that we are not really teaching people or educating our readers about the whole story. And so, the whole story, of course, contains the actors who are responsible or to be blamed, but it also should contain actors that are trying to fix the problem. So, where do we begin with this? And as part of my training, which is largely focused on Asia, I do focus on asking people firstly to understand that what they are doing is also still an investigative journalism piece, because a lot of journalists come to think of the word "solutions" and they start thinking that it's largely propaganda or PR stuff. But, to set the stage up and to tell them that it's actually a lot more, you're still an investigative journalist, the only thing is instead of investigating a problem, you're actually investigating a solution and holding people who claim to be solution providers accountable for those claims. And in order to move to a society where things work, you need to make the people who are fixers know that someone is watching and holding them accountable. So, once you've set that stage, then comes the question of, "Okay, where do I begin as a journalist?" And that's addressing the question you just asked, Hugo. As part of my training, I do tell people, "Look, you know, let's address what is the problem?" So, we know the problem as a beat reporter, "What is it that you're focusing on?" And then let's do research on what is stuff that's not being covered. So, we narrow it down to "What about, for example, modern slavery or human trafficking? What about that has not been covered in your region, in your country, in your community?" And then you go deeper into it and then do your desktop research and find out who are the candidates who are actually trying to fix these problems. And they could range from you know -- I have a list that I share -- it could be NGOs, it could be civil society organizations in the neighborhood, think tanks and policy experts. It could be academic experts. A lot of times I tell them, you know, people who are retired, who have worked with think tanks, they know a lot about solutions that are happening -- chat with them. They have the time. They'd be willing to share a lot of things with you, a lot of data sets -- and we can discuss data sets later as well -- that point towards solutions that are not being addressed or written by journalists. Startups and innovators. A lot of startups are working on some great stuff. A lot of innovations are happening. Journalists need to get into those networks, attend those conferences and seminars, and just sort of be open to understanding who are the people who are trying to fix these problems. So, there's a kind of list that I talk about and more importantly, read. Read a lot about your beat and what are

other countries doing to address certain problems that are going on. So, that's essentially where we start off to understand what solutions journalism is, to answer your question.

[00:04:55] **Hugo Balta** Yeah. And in a previous module, we discussed the four pillars of solutions journalism, which you've mentioned in your opening remarks. And that's, of course, have to focus on the response. And not just the response particularly in the area where you're working, but making sure you're looking at similar responses in other parts of the country, other parts of the world, that are looking to tackle that same problem and of course, looking at insights, evidence, and the limitations, because as you know, there's a lot to learn from limitations. Now, let's talk about looking for the slices of a problem. Every problem is made up of smaller problems, and it's often difficult to find a solution to the overall problem. But it's easier to find solutions stories about how people are solving those smaller slices. Tell us about the --- for someone that sometimes can feel a little bit of angst because they're trying to look at the bigger picture -- how about looking at the smaller slices?

[00:06:00] **Kavita Chandran** Yeah, and that's a great question, Hugo, because again, it boils down to "Where do I start?" And now that, I'm a journalist, for example, in a smaller community somewhere in Asia or in the United States, "How do I now look at this bigger picture and figure out what to do?" So, I think it's essential, and you use the right word: "slicing." So, this is the broader picture. And let me give you the example of human trafficking and modern slavery, again, because I teach that in this part of the world, along with climate. So, climate and human trafficking are large issues in this part of the world, but they've been written a lot about, it's a huge problem. But if you're a journalist in, say, Kashmir and you want to now figure out, "How do I slice and figure out what is the problem in my community?" So, narrowing it down to a community, breaking it down to various parts of the problem. So, there's trafficking, there's smuggling. "How do I now figure out there's child labor and there's sex slavery?" So, figuring out one part and then saying, "Okay, let me now go to say a village or a province or a municipality, and then figure out what is happening here. Identifying that problem. And then who is trying to fix this?" So, you have taken a broader pie and then you've started slicing it further and going deeper into a community. And I like to say I share some examples of this. So, when I teach this and I teach working journalists with my affiliation with Thomson Reuters Foundation, where we hold courses, and for example, just speaking of Kashmir, there was a journalist from Kashmir in my modern slavery training, and she wanted to write a story on child labor, and she was aware that in the capital Srinagar, closer to the capital, there was a village and there was a problem, a stark problem of, of child slavery issues. So, she set out to find a solution provider. "Is there someone who's trying to help over here and how do they do that?" And she ended up writing a solutions journalism piece in a small village closer to her home where children were being trafficked into and being worked for domestic servitude. So, what she found out was there was an NGO that was trying to help here. And the help they sought was -- through children in that community that were asked to call a certain helpline if they noticed other children that didn't belong to that community. So, it was a small thing for the children to do. They were always outside playing, but they would see suddenly, for example, they were able to save two young girls from domestic servitude because they had never seen these young girls before and they were the same age of the children. So that led to a great solutions journalism piece, which was very widely-read, about a community and what they were doing to solve a broader issue. So, you've gone from a pie and sort of sliced it down. And I think that's really, really important for people to understand that you don't have to keep talking about the broader picture. That becomes your nut graph or your context in your story. But what you need to do is drive home the point by focusing on a particular issue in a particular community, and that's

going to help you grab a reader's attention. And I've got a few more examples that I can share, but it comes down to the point of how are you narrowing it down to a reader to understand that this is a small issue of a larger problem. And now in that story, I'm going to zoom out and still focus on that larger problem for you to understand that every community plays a part in solving that issue.

[00:10:00] **Hugo Balta** And sometimes, it's easier for the reader, the viewer, the listener, to better understand that slice of the problem. It's much more digestible than trying to understand the bigger picture. And again, you know it could be one slice of a larger series of stories that are focusing on the overall issue. Let's continue the theme of the slices, responses that appear to drive better outcomes for one community when compared to other communities with similar challenges is what's called the positive deviant. What's your experience working backward from the evidence instead of the other way around?

[00:10:46] **Kavita Chandran** And so I love it when somebody gets a dataset and says, "Okay, this is an outlier, but it's a positive outlier." And, you know, it's no secret that -- I've been a financial journalist for years -- so it's no secret that business journalists do not, reporters actually don't like large datasets. They don't like analyzing graphics and datasets. And if they do end up turning to it, it's really usually to check if there's a big chunk of data which is showing something negative. Right? But, in that big chunk of data often sits a positive deviant or a positive outlier, so to speak. And this could be a single city, a single state or a single village, like I said, that perhaps has performed better on fixing a certain issue to a larger problem than the others. And that's what a journalist needs to check. "What do they do to become that sort of outperformer?" And there's a graph that I show people as an example, and it's an example of an aquaculture production in Southeast Asia where it clearly shows that four countries, namely in Vietnam, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia, are not advancing in aquaculture production. This is fish farming. And then in that chart is this clear, positive, deviant, you know, a line going straight up and that's Myanmar. And you know, we're talking about a wartorn country, but that's been steadily growing its fish farming over two decades. And if a journalist didn't pick on that and write a story about it and instead wrote a doom and gloom story about how these four countries are still not picking up with fish farming, then you've missed this really great story to tell the world that, despite all the persecution and conflicts in Myanmar, this country actually seems to be doing something fantastic with aquaculture production. So, you know, that's a positive deviant. Another story I would love to share with you, which is again, climate-related and it's a positive deviant piece, is from Bangladesh. And this is a story that two data journalists started working on for six months. And what they were doing was they were looking at death tolls resulting from climate disasters in various countries around the world. And Bangladesh is known to have one of the most climate-devastated, one of the most climate-devastated countries. And they noticed that Bangladesh had reduced its death count significantly over the years. And this is a country that had one of the worst cyclones, which killed nearly half a million people in 1970 with a huge cyclone. And so, they dug deep into, "What is it that Bangladesh is doing right?" And it was just something as simple as an early detection, a warning system with targeted text messages to people. Interestingly, they also found that a bunch of women in the community were volunteering to, you know, to let people know much earlier on about a significant weather pattern change that would occur, and a cyclone is coming. So, this is very important for journalists to understand that to find information that could be valuable to people everywhere, you need to look at positive deviants, not just all the negative stuff that comes around. And of course, there's a few things that one should look for in datasets, namely, what has been the change over time? So, when you start looking at that kind of a dataset, you might find someone that's actually done something incredibly well compared to others. "And how has

this community done versus another community?" "Is there an improved outcome in a particular area and what have they done differently?" So, just thinking out of the box here and looking at something that's completely different vis-a-vis all the negative that we've been reading, we are also then able to do, you know, audience engagement better.

[00:15:07] **Hugo Balta** And that's a wonderful pair of examples. And I agree with you. I think sometimes journalists don't do enough to look at the data and let the data tell the story. I think there's a lot of information. You know, numbers never lie. And so, there's a lot of information that could be collected and then the journalists let the data dictate which way the story is going to go or an area of the story. Sometimes journalists shy away from solutions journalism because of the word solutions, and sometimes they shy away because they identify a solution, whether it's an outlier or not. Now, the most important thing, of course, is to be transparent about what you're finding. Finally, I'd like to talk to you about leveraging solutions journalism to build trust with audiences, increase engagement and loyalty, and drive impact and accountability. In the face of today's common views on the trustworthiness of the media, a solutions journalism-approach "has the potential to rebuild lost credibility and interest from the readers and viewers and listeners." What are your thoughts about solutions journalism in engaging and rebuilding trust with media?

[00:16:29] **Kavita Chandran** A great question again. And I think that's exactly why we are trying to push this kind of journalism to journalists. Firstly, important for them to understand that, like as I mentioned earlier, people are not reading your news. People are not interested. And there's a term that's been coined called "news fatigue" by the Reuters Institute. A lot more people are actually avoiding news. And one of the reasons for avoiding news is there's just too much negativity. Right. So, there's a whole dataset that, Reuters Institute puts out a digital report every year, and the latest one talks about news fatigue, talks about the common reasons for news avoidance, which includes, "It puts me in a negative mood. I don't want to read news" to another spectrum where people say, "Well, it leads to arguments at home and I don't want it" and that the news is untrustworthy, it's biased. Also, most importantly, people are saying "There is nothing I can do about this information." And I think that's really a very important point for everyone to understand that if folks are losing trust in what you're reporting or what you're writing, and no one's reading, then your stories are just, you know, ending up in, as I say, the dark holes of cyberspace and you're making you happy. But guess what? Nobody seems to be reading it. So, what can you do to build that trust again? And people understand that they need a complete view of the society. And I think when you cover just from problems but not responses, you are omitting something and not being fair to the people who are actually trying to fix things. So, essentially your report then is not looking at all sides. You know, we always tell journalists to look at two sides, you know, "Have you spoken to everybody?" What about the people who are actually bringing about a change to fix things? And if nobody's reading it, then, you know, you're just talking endlessly about the problem and not building that trust. So, I think going back to your question about trust and audience engagement, it's when you do solutions journalism, you're essentially providing very important points for people to consider because if something is broken, you need to tell people how to fix it. And if there are people who are trying to fix it, you're not being fair by misleading the public by not talking about those issues. So, it also informs readers about how can they apply their own talents to better address social problems. Coming back to, you know, the sense of helplessness that people that the Reuters Institute talked about that people feel. And, you know, so one way to do is, yes, you're spotlighting harmful things. But another thing is, are you also spotlighting helpful things? And that's very, very important. And journalists have the power to do that. So, you know, talking about the entire story is most important. We also have data from Solutions Journalism

Network that shows that when they compared, you know, they took a few respondents, I believe it was about 750 respondents, and they give them stories that were solutions-oriented and non-solutions-oriented. And clearly the response from the audience who read these stories was they are going to put more of these stories, solutions-based stories on social media. They're going to forward that to people. They're going to read more of this from this publication. And there was a level of engagement that you don't see on problem-related stories. And what does that mean? That means more people are going to go into that website, more people are going to read such stories, thereby driving audience engagement, thereby driving revenue because advertisers might want to go in there as well. So, is it good? Is it a win-win? It is because even for, you know, dying publications and newsrooms that need to figure out how to bring about revenue, this is another good way of doing that. And of course, it also essentially improves a journalist's understanding of society. I think regular exposure to just problem areas has turned us all into very cynical beings. And it's important to now start looking at something that's more holistic in the sense that you're not being unfair and covering, you know, covering solutions with an investigative hat on.

[00:21:24] **Hugo Balta** Certainly. And I think as you've mentioned, mass media is inundated with problem-focused stories. Often the argument is "That's what's driving the numbers," right? "That's what's driving the ratings." But, as you've mentioned, the Solutions Journalism Network has collected data that shows that solutions journalism does work in regards to engagement and in regards to improving viewership, readership, listenership. And it's also, as you've mentioned, the public is fatigued. It just becomes background noise when the stories out of newsrooms are so focused on negativity. And I think what we're looking for is to better inform the populace. Right? Yes, of course, talk about the problems, but don't stop short of discussing what the solutions are. And yes, of course, people want to feel comfortable, right? They want to avoid arguments. But I think that it's important to engage in discussion AND debate. Of course, being respectful, because it's in the debate where new ideas are born, innovation is born. And so, I think it's very important to continue to focus on the solutions to the social problems that plague so many parts of our planet, different parts of society. This is "Solutions journalism: New ways of elevating your reporting and engaging audiences." Kavita Chandran, journalism trainer and news content advisor based in Singapore, helped us better understand identifying, vetting and reporting solutions stories. Kavita, thank you so much for joining us. Thank you for sharing your insights.

[00:23:22] **Kavita Chandran** It's my pleasure. Thank you for having me, Hugo.