



THE **SECRET WEAPON** FOR
ANY NEWSROOM THAT
WANTS TO BE NO.1

APRIL 2021

SOLUTIONS
JOURNALISM
NETWORK

“What we’ve unlocked here is a secret weapon for any newsroom that wants to put itself in a No. 1 position.”

— **Andrew Finlayson**, executive vice president, SmithGeiger

Every day newsrooms around the world report on their communities — with a focus on what has gone wrong. This emphasis on problems can shine a light on important issues, but it doesn’t tell the whole story. Every day, people in our communities are working to solve problems. These efforts make the news much less often.

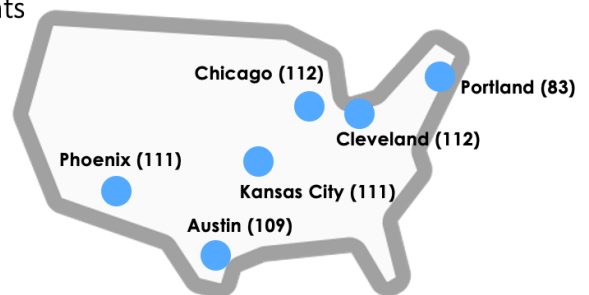
Solutions journalism is an approach that tells the whole story: problems and efforts to solve them.

This paper highlights new research showing that solutions storytelling has key benefits for journalists and news consumers alike. And it offers insights into important concepts powered by solutions journalism.

In September 2020, the media research company SmithGeiger showed people in six U.S. cities TV news stories — both traditional, problem-focused stories and solutions stories covering responses to problems, and interviewed them.

The results? Solutions journalism outperformed the traditional approach on three criteria:

638 total respondents across 6 markets



Interviews took place between **September 10-28, 2020**



47% of 18-to-54-year-olds in these markets qualified as weekly local news TV viewers

More audience appeal: Solutions stories were more interesting, trustworthy, deep and uplifting, and less upsetting.

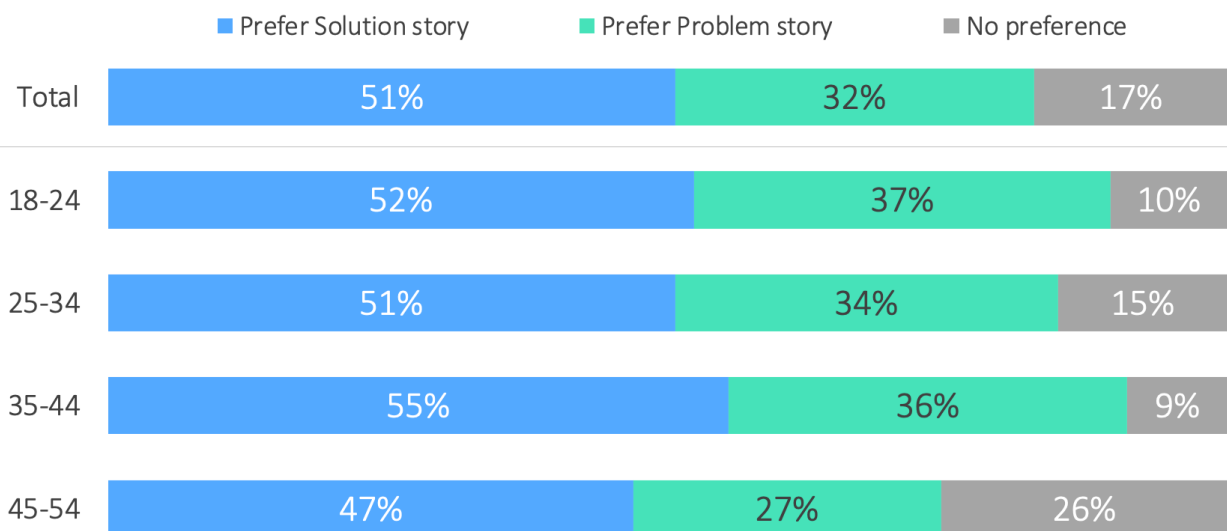
Better ratings: Solutions stories were a reason to watch TV news more often and seek out the stations that told these stories.

Greater impact: Solutions stories changed people’s understanding of issues and inspired them to get involved. They talked to friends and family about these stories.

“This research transcends TV. It speaks to a broader opportunity for journalism to shift itself.”

— **Andrew Finlayson**,
executive vice president, SmithGeiger

Overall Story Preference



Solutions stories are valuable for all platforms. The results apply to all kinds of journalism, not just television. “This research transcends TV. It speaks to a broader opportunity for journalism to shift itself,” said Andrew Finlayson, executive vice president of SmithGeiger. “It’s clear that this is a superior, more resonant form of storytelling.”

Seth Geiger, co-founder and president of SmithGeiger, said: “Once you’re exposed to solutions journalism, you’ve actually unleashed a new set of expectations of how much better local news can be. You could use this data to persuade every newsroom in America that they need to do at least one story every day that has a significant solutions component.”

Even though the solutions stories covered the same subjects as the traditional pieces and identified the same core problems, people saw them very differently. “The problem stories were way more upsetting than the solutions stories, by a significant magnitude,” said Geiger. “By identifying a problem, but not providing the potential way beyond the problem, you’re leaving the viewer or the news consumer with a level of frustration, to the point where they’re really upset. But by finding a path forward...it’s an emotional state of hopefulness and an action state of involvement.”

Solutions Journalism Stories Significantly Outperform Conventional Problem Storytelling in Key Areas

1

Local news consumers respond more favorably to storytelling attributes

- Initial Impression of the story
- Interesting to watch
- Focuses on an important issue
- Trust (controlling for order)
- The overall tone of the story
- The depth of coverage
- Less upsetting
- More uplifting

2

Significant impact on local news choices

- Make a point of watching this station for local news in the future
- Provides a unique perspective
- A refreshing change from other local news stories
- A reason for watching local news more often
- The relevance of the topic

3

Greater efficacy and personal action

- Inspires you to get involved
- Changes your understanding of this issue
- A news story you would talk about with others
- Searching online to learn more about the story
- Overall Impact Index (Q29)



Other findings:

Solutions journalism is journalism for today. News consumers are desperately seeking hope and reassurance, a sense that things can get better. Forty percent of the survey's respondents said it was *essential* for local television stations to cover their communities' problems and solutions. "More so than any time in recent history, this is a moment for solutions," Geiger said. SmithGeiger calls 2021 the "Year of Solutions."

The researchers asked what was missing from the news. One common answer was "positive stories connecting me to my community." But also, audiences identified solutions stories as deeper and more comprehensive — which they greatly preferred; solutions stories scored 12 points higher for "thoughtful" and 10 points higher for "comprehensive" than the traditional stories. The most common response to "what's missing" was that the news doesn't spend enough time on each story. "This is something we would not have seen to this degree pre-pandemic," Geiger said.

Solutions stories transcend differences. "We were in blue states and red states," Geiger said. "We saw very little difference in the reactions to these stories between Democrats and Republicans. These stories transcend partisanship."

They also appealed to men and women, old and young. Across the board, three-quarters of respondents said solutions were important, but the number was even higher among young people. "This is an opportunity to engage a younger audience in local news more effectively than through the pure problem approach," Geiger said.

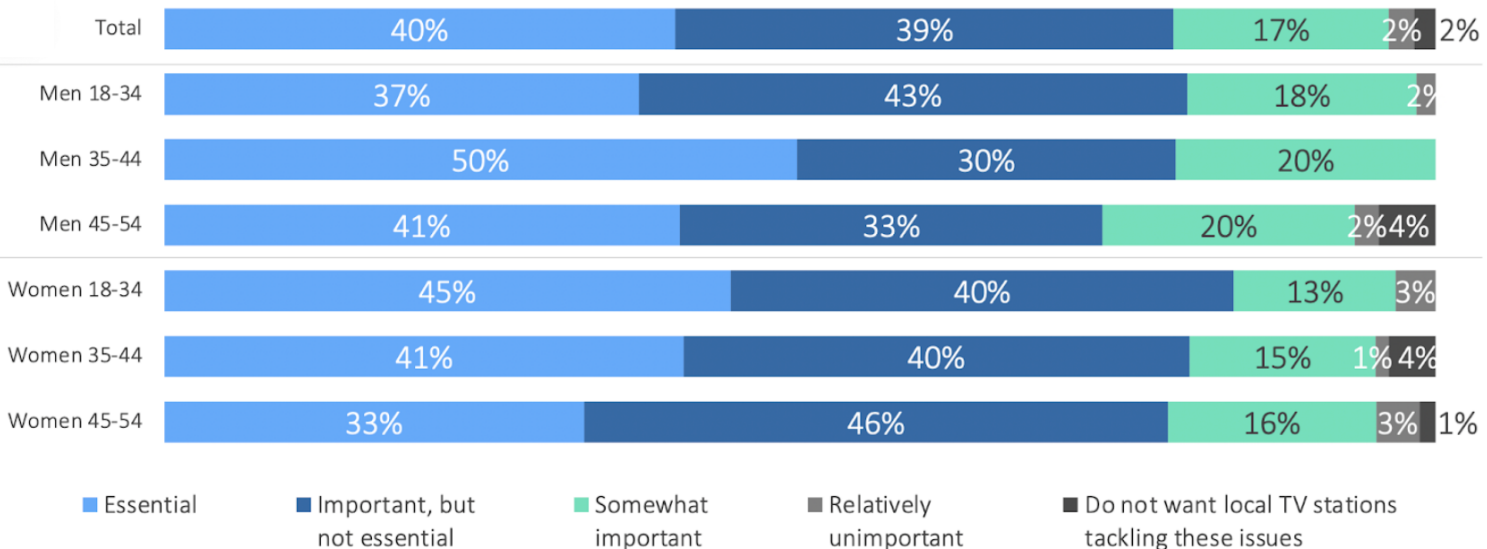
The research also counters the idea — traditional in the news industry — that women are more interested in emotion than in facts and information. The study found the reverse: that even more than men, women want facts and information. They preferred the solutions stories, which they considered deeper and more complete.

Solutions journalism builds trust. Respondents said the most important practice for building trust was “telling the whole story.” They said stories looking at solutions from a variety of angles, with a variety of voices, demonstrated unbiased coverage. News stations seek to build trust by helping audiences solve problems — but with solutions journalism, they can help the whole community solve problems. “This will give a unique advantage to a brand that can truly demonstrate this on a day-in, day-out basis,” Finlayson said.

Solutions journalism empowers audiences. Solutions stories rated 10 points higher at inspiring people to get involved. This personal action by news consumers is what many newsroom brands seek. In one of the highest compliments possible for a newscast, solutions stories were stories that people would talk about with others, Finlayson said.

Solutions journalism distinguishes a newsroom. This combats the commodification of local news. “Solutions actually infuse a meaningful point of differentiation,” Geiger said.

Importance of Local News Programs Identifying Community Problems and Solutions



Solutions stories travel through time... “People would share [a solutions story] and comment on it in a way they might not for other day-of stories,” said Finlayson. “But these stories also have a long shelf life. If we properly place them into digital, people could find them for weeks or months afterwards.”

...And space. Out-of-market stories rarely do as well as local stories, but solutions stories do. People might not want to learn about another city's problems, but they are interested in that city's solutions. This makes it possible to collaborate — to work with other stations and share stories. "It makes it look like you put a national team on a local story, which I think really changes the feel of your reporting as you go forward," said Finlayson.

Solutions stories strengthen accountability. The popularity of out-of-market solutions stories allows journalists to take away the excuses of local officials. If Cleveland finds a solution to a problem, a reporter in Cincinnati can run the story and ask Cincinnati authorities: Why aren't you trying this?

Solutions... weather? It's true that everyone talks about the weather — it's certainly a key reason people watch local news. But since weather forecasts are available everywhere, television weather is going deeper — and weather solutions exist. (It's not true that no one does anything about it!) Finlayson said that if meteorologists are going to talk about the threat of flooding, viewers should also hear about "some of the things that could be done to mitigate it, and some of the work that's being done to address climate change in their community."

Consistency and commitment matter. For people to identify a news organization with solutions, this kind of journalism needs to be labeled, and should be a daily practice. "The lead story could still be breaking news," said Finlayson. "But we've got a lot of long-term problems that are perfectly suited for solutions journalism approaches. We've got the opportunity to do this every day, if we pick the right stories — everything from schools, to crime, to homelessness.

"Any newsroom that invests time in learning this technique, and applies it aggressively and appropriately, will start to reap the benefits — in ratings, long-term brand growth, and impact on the community," said Finlayson. "If you were to think about investing in a brand-new X or Y for a newsroom, the X or Y may not do as much of a difference for your long-term success as having a consistent commitment to solutions journalism."

Geiger summed up the research by saying, "We do a lot of these [studies]. This is about as good as it gets, in terms of defining the efficacy of a particular approach."

To learn more, visit
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SmithGeiger is a media research firm that has carried out more than 4,000 custom research projects.

Solutions Journalism Network is a nonpartisan nonprofit founded in 2013. It works with hundreds of newsrooms and thousands of journalists all over the world to help them do solutions journalism — rigorous reporting on responses to problems.