

## MINING THE INTERSECTION OF DATA JOURNALISM AND SOLUTIONS JOURNALISM

### Lessons from the SJN Webinar on Pursuing Positive Deviants

Data journalism and solutions reporting make great partners, working together to unlock stories on time-tested, successful responses to pressing issues in a community. As a reminder: Solutions Journalism is **rigorous and compelling reporting about responses to social problems**. It's journalism that goes beyond reporting on societal ills and puts a critical investigative lens on potential solutions, highlighting responses with an evidence-based track record of success.

That *evidence-based* record is critical – and that's where data journalism comes in, giving reporters the tools to vet a response and examine measurable evidence of its impact. But data journalism can also help reporters discover places and programs that are doing it better by pointing to **positive deviants** – outliers in data that may be evidence of a response that's working.

It's how Trish Crain of AL.com discovered a school district that was closing the achievement gap in Alabama, and how Julia Belluz of Vox.com saw that California's efforts to save mothers during childbirth was really working. And how we discovered a college that appeared to have made great strides improving its student-retention rate.



- Solutions reporting is great accountability journalism, muting the ability of poor performers to make excuses for their poor performance. Excuses hold little water when you can show other actors who have found successful responses.
- Solutions reporting is great public-service journalism, moving beyond a focus on problems to provide communities with possible paths forward, highlighting carefully vetted policies that might lead to better outcomes.

- And solutions reporting is great sustainable journalism, giving readers and viewers the kind of stories they crave - stories that pair in-depth coverage of problems with equally in-depth and rigorous analysis of responses to those problems.



Successful solutions stories follow our **Four Pillars**:

1. Features not just a person, but a **response** to a problem and how it happened.  
Solutions reporting isn't hero worship. The focus must be on the response and the process of implementing the response.
2. Provides available **evidence** of results.  
Good intentions or crossed fingers aren't enough. There must be a track record of effectiveness.
3. Seeks to provide **insights** that can help others respond.  
Solutions stories are often inspirational – but inspiration isn't enough. There must be insights that help communities looking to replicate the response.
4. Discusses **limitations** and avoids reading like a puff piece.  
Solutions reporting is not advocacy. Rigorous journalism means equal attention to obstacles or limits.



Many solutions stories can be framed with a **traditional "straight news"** format for print or broadcast. But there are other options.

- A data-driven solutions story can be **character-driven**, framed as a profile of a key actor, so long as the focus remains on what the characters are doing – how they're confronting a problem; what systemic changes they implemented – rather than gushing about how saintly or selfless they are for getting involved.

- Rather than focusing on one grand initiative that is moving the needle, a solutions story can be built around multiple **small responses** – and possibly from multiple sources – that collectively appear to be making a difference, with an analysis of how successful each effort has been.
- There can even be a solutions story lurking in the poor performers uncovered in a dataset. **“Instructive failures”** can make for important journalism if an attempted response falls flat or backfires – and allows for an exploration of what others can learn from the failure, and what could have been done differently.



When digging into data and reporting on positive deviants, you can cut off a big slice and look to answer the broad question of who’s doing well or making significant progress, compared to others with the same resources. But you can also take a more-narrow approach if there are data that support a focus on a smaller slice that points to a solutions story.

So it may be that a response has led to better outcomes for a **particular group** of people or has **reduced disparities** among different groups. Data might identify a place that is reaching a **growing number of people** with a proven program. You might focus on a place providing a generally accepted solution **more quickly** or at a **lower cost**. So be open to positive deviants that point to big slices *and* small slices.



Brent Walth a journalism professor at the University of Oregon, has a great take on the relationship between investigative reporting and solutions reporting:

“It’s one thing for watchdog investigative reporters to point out problems, but too often the stories stop right there. Solutions stories do a really good job of describing problems and then move forward. So for us, it was a question of, **one genre looks back, and then stops at the present moment. The other looks at the present moment and suggests what could the future be,** and they seem to fit together.”



With solutions journalism, we do always want to be looking to the future. So with that in mind, here are a few **tips on finding data**:

There is dramatically more data available today than there was a decade ago, or a year ago, or a week ago. That's good news for data journalists, but also can be a little overwhelming. But be aware that Google is a data journalist's friend, and a carefully worded search can often lead to the data a reporter seeks. And with [Google's advanced search](#), results can be limited to only those that link directly to Excel spreadsheets. Also, reporters looking for state or local data provided by governments should know that all states and many larger cities operate open data portals, with links to various datasets.

To help with finding data, here are four resources journalists should know about:

- [Data.gov](#) is the federal government's hub for data compiled by federal agencies, with more than 300,000 datasets.
- The [National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting](#), which is affiliated with Investigative Reporters and Editors, has a library of cleaned datasets, though they have stopped updating many of them. IRE membership is required. Some datasets are free; others come with a fee.
- [ProPublica](#) also has a data store with datasets including those used for the outlet's well-known projects, such as Dollars for Docs. As with NICAR, some datasets are provided at no charge, but others come with a fee.
- Lastly, [Big Local News](#) is a project run by professors at Stanford University and populated in a wiki style by data scientists or journalists or others who have data they want to make available. The offerings are limited, but everything is free.

And here are **tips for analyzing data** that you find:

Parsing the data on college retention rates relied on no advanced spreadsheet skills, requiring only the ability to download the data, apply filters, write a simple math formula, and sort. Some analysis may call for additional spreadsheet skills – but manageable skills. And those are skills SJN can help you acquire. We provide training on the key spreadsheet skills that are most valuable for journalists, so let us know if you'd be interested in attending a session. And we're committed to improving the use of data in solutions reporting. So if you have a solutions story with a data element, we're here to help, whether it's to talk through a possible story at the earliest stages, or when you're deep into data analysis and need some guidance, or any time in between.

And if you want to dive into, or dive back into, the fundamentals of solutions journalism, the [SJN Learning Lab](#) offers multiple training opportunities.



Lastly, as you pursue data stories, remember this sage advice offered during the webinar, and take it as a call to combine data reporting with solutions reporting to produce meaningful journalism:

